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# The Spiritual Nature of Children and God's Irrevocable Connection with Each One

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## Introduction

Gospel passages where Jesus is in the company of children express the very heart of the Christian gospel. Jesus said simply, "Look at these little ones, these children. They ARE the Kingdom of God in your midst."[2] He chastised any who would keep children from him. Hans-Ruedi Weber offers a powerful treatment of Mark 10:13–16, in *Jesus and the Children*. Weber's conclusion is that the "very

[1] See www.United.edu and www.BlessingCenter.org.

[2] Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 29.

core of the Gospel is revealed" in Jesus' actions and words related to this incident. The original Aramaic must therefore have said, "To these and other such children belong the Kingdom of God." . . . At that very moment, the children (were revealed as) the greatest gift possible, the Kingdom of God, which is both a present and future reality. Jesus intended to teach (the adults) about the gratuitous love of God, assured to the children in Jesus' prophetic words and action, (which) turns upside down both the Greek and Jewish classifications (of importance). Children receive preeminence, if human realities are considered from the point of view of God's Kingdom.[3]

Grounding a respect for children as inestimably valuable to God and welcoming them as fully participating members of our families, congregations and communities is soundly biblical and it is in the Gospels that one finds the importance of children explicitly stated. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is a way of providing spiritual nurture understanding Jesus' words in the gospels to be descriptive of spiritual nurture with children, which stresses the blessings of inner strength and God's presence in each person's life. It builds upon God's connection with each human being and the child's acceptance of the truth of his or her connection with God. In this form of nurture, spirituality formation begins with the youngest children in the midst of congregations, families, and other communities of faith, focused upon "going alongside" each child supporting continued and deepened connections with God, as she or he grows in relationship with God and others. The nurture of spiritual formation based upon God's original blessing of God's creation, articulates particular aspects of spiritual nurture which are believed to be necessary for the fruitful engagement one with another and with others. Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture practices develop increasing intimacy with God, individual realizations of the interior strength with which each has been blessed and deeper connection with all of God's creatures and creation.

There are three basic ways of looking at children, out of which are formed adult thoughts about and interactions with them and, by extension, with all ages:

3 Ibid., 19–20.

1. Children are born into sin and have a bent toward evil–adults do TO children.
2. Children are born unformed clay or blank slates–adults do FOR children, molding them.
3. Children are born holy, in the image of God with unfolding potential as well as immediate revelatory standing–adults do WITH children; walking alongside them as they develop into all God has in store for them; delighting in learning from them as well as teaching them.

The development of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture (BBSN) drew upon work of scholars, educators, parents and others. It appreciates and includes the insights of children and teens. BBSN asserts that children are imbued with innate spiritual strength. When assisted in identifying, claiming and strengthening their own spirits, they are able to maintain their connection with God throughout life. Practitioners of BBSN believe that children can discover, with God's help, in relationship with caring adults who walk with them on their journey through life, how they can best thrive, cope and, when needed, heal. This becomes especially important in traumatic times and during crisis, as they grow to become the children, teenagers, and adults God has called them to be.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture affirms the holiness of children and all people. Understood this way, holiness means that each person is born in the image of God, with a natural and instinctual spiritual connection with God. This connection provides the basis for growth in faith and life, in healing and in the ability to solve problems; is a means of maintaining and heightening self-esteem, without which we cannot truly care for others; when nurtured and encouraged, flourishes throughout childhood, adolescence and into adulthood.

Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture recognizes that: children accept God's relationship with them and theirs with God; caring adults can help children identify their experiences of God and encourage each child's religious potential, by participating with them, learning from them, providing them with opportunities to grow as children of God; by encouraging their spiritual capacity, adults help children identify, claim and strengthen their spirit, their relationship with God and their ability to live lives of love. This spirituality also provides the basis for healing, coping and thriving in everyday life.

A key component of BBSN is Holy Listening. Through the process of Holy Listening children, as well as those of all ages, are enabled to express the things they believe about God, to explore and

make spiritual sense of what is happening in their lives, to use their own spiritual strength to work through problems, and learn to trust their inner selves, knowing that God is present with them. In addition, they grow in their connectedness with those around them, in their capacity to pray for others, and in their abilities to lead loving, compassionate lives.

In 2001, Dr. Walter Brueggemann, after preaching a sermon based on Jeremiah 17:5-11, shared the following prayer:

> God of all our times: We have known since the day of our birth that our primal task is to grow to basic trust in you, to rely on you in every circumstance, to know that you would return when you are away, to trust that in your absence you will soon be present, to be assured that your silence bespeaks attentiveness and not neglect, to know that in your abiding faithfulness, all will be well and all will be well.[4]

Those who know Eric Erikson's *Childhood and Society* hear the echo, consciously or unconsciously intended, of the first task of life in Erikson's developmental schemata: Basic Trust vs. Basic Mistrust.[5] In Brueggemann's prayer the fear/assurance pattern of the newborn infant and parental care is heard. His phrase 'to grow to basic trust' affirmed, along with Erickson, that if the first task was reasonably well negotiated, the foundation was laid and the growth continued. If the first task was reasonably well cared for, then the journey continued on 'good legs.'

The Jeremiah passage with which Brueggemann worked, contrasted the state of blessedness/cursedness of they who trust in God or in human strength only. The one who trusted in God was like a 'tree planted by the water, that sends out its roots by the stream.'[6] This again was an image of growth well begun and nourished in a state of blessedness where trust was first learned in parental arms and care and was seen, as appropriate, to be the primal task of those growing in faith.

As is spoken in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture with children, to each by name:

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4 Walter Brueggemann, *Awed to Heaven, Rooted to Earth* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 47.

5 Eric Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1950), 247–251.

6 Jeremiah 17:8.

God loves you
God created you for God's own
God is with you
God blesses you.[7]

Kathleen Norris defines spirituality and the presence of the Holy Spirit in each person's life in this way, "A spiritual life is not something we begin to lead or to cultivate in our children, after analyzing every book in the Bible, or resolving to be do-gooders, or even deciding we believe in God. Spirit is our life's breath… Spirituality is not something we need to pump into our children, as though it were nitrous oxide at the dentist's. Like oxygen, it is freely available to each of us at every moment of life. Spirit is in every breath we draw and so is spiritual nurture."

> Melanie, dropped her bike on the ground and ran to her mother, as she was getting into the driver's seat of the family car. Tired from a long day, Jeanne sighed as she leaned out of the door, expecting to have an argument about who was and who was not going to the store. "Mommy, here," said Melanie, handing her mother a silver streamer from her handlebars. "Here is a blessing for you, Mommy."

According to the editors of *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World's Religions*, the working definition of spirituality which guided their book was: "Spirituality is the intrinsic human capacity for self-transcendence in which the individual participates in the sacred-something greater than the self. It propels the search for connectedness, meaning, purpose, and ethical responsibility. It is experienced, formed, shaped, and expressed through a wide range of religious narratives, beliefs, and practices, and is shaped by many influences in family, community, culture, and nature."[8]

According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, "We meet as human beings who have much in common: a heart, a face, a voice, the presence of a soul, fear, hope, the ability to trust, a capacity for compassion and understanding the kinship of being human."[9]

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7 Donald Rogers, "To Grow in Basic Trust," *The Blessing Center*, 2005, www.BlessingCenter.org (accessed April 2006); used with permission.

8 Yust, et al., eds., *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality*, 8.

9 Myers, *Young Children and Spirituality*, 59.

Heschel captures the nature of the spiritual nurture of children. His statement is a doorway into the arenas of poetry and prayer where one must move in order to develop a useable definition of this work with young ones: The spiritual nurture of children is the process which occurs when one or more children and one or more supportive older persons meet as human kin and enter into the "secret of childhood" as voiced in Maria Montessori's prayer, "Help us, O God, to enter into the secret of childhood, so that we may know, love and serve the child in accordance with the laws of thy justice and following thy holy will."[10]

To understand and practice Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture, the following simple but profound affirmations must be accepted. Children are of inestimable value to God and therefore must be among the highest priority for adults. This kind of spiritual nurture understands holiness as connectedness, wholeness, sanctification, spirituality, grace. In the holiness of children, the kingdom of God is manifest. Spiritual nurture is best practiced in community, defined by the high quality of relationships developed within the family, the church, the caregiving organization. It is foundational to the spiritual growth of children and also of those adults who live and work with and learn from children. Sabbath is a way of living which places importance on being present, experiencing the goodness of God's creation, growing in connection with that creation and with all others who are also of infinite worth to God. (Holy) Listening is the act in which God is present, the one listened to is enabled to grow more whole and the listener too, may be transformed in this encounter by being wholly present for the other. Worship is the work of all God's people. Prayer, as an act of worship, connects one with God and with others. Blessing is the affirmation that God is present; that God has given the receiver the strength and enabling vitality to grow in wholeness, throughout life, no matter what comes along the way.

The following section of this article will articulate each of these understandings and ground them in scripture, as well as theology and church history.

10 Gobbi, *Listening to God with Children*, vii.

**Children are of inestimable value to God and therefore must be among the highest priority for the adult koinonia.**

Children were cherished members of the Jewish community around the time of Jesus birth. Even so, Jesus made statements about children which were of a radical nature. Jesus was raised in a stratified agrarian socio-economic system, which had been in place for 200 years, a system where subsistence and need were the identifying marks for most of the members of the culture. Rome ruled not only Palestine, but most of the thriving region ringing the Mediterranean Sea. Romans along this stretch of the fertile crescent, along with their Jewish lackeys, of which much of the religious establishment was a part, made up no more than ten percent of the population. The vast majority of people, adult and children, were in the underclass, always a day (or drought) away from slipping into the very bottom, from which the dispossessed, itinerants, day laborers and beggars struggled to stay alive. Most Jews were part of the peasant class, village-based people who owned two to four acres of land, from which they scratched a living. Peasants did not move up the social ladder to join the small number of people who comprised the ruling, merchant and priestly classes. Mobility was downward with artisans beneath the peasants, followed by the "unclean" and "expendable." Jesus' family, most believe, were members of the artisan class, five percent of the male population, who were carpenters, fishermen and masons.[11]

Jesus was raised in the middle of Jewish village life by parents who thoroughly taught him the precepts of his religion. Rural life among the people of Nazareth, though hard, was close knit. Children grew up among the adults, learning alongside them. They were taught mostly at home. There was little biblical material related to family life during this time, so it was necessary to go to extra-biblical writings to better understand the world in which Jesus grew up. The Bible did tell an important story of Jesus going with his extended family to Jerusalem at the age of twelve for the festival of Passover. While there, he left his family to study with the Temple rabbis, causing his parents no end of grief until he was found.[12]

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11 Ibid.

12 Luke 2:41.

Jesus' ancestors, the Hebrews, a tribal and often dispersed people, coalesced into Judaism with the rebuilding of the Temple in around 500 BCE. It was at this time that the Jewish scriptures were compiled. In the law and history, stories and poetry, songs and prayers there can be discerned care for and valuing of children. Traditionally it was thought that children's worth lay solely in their ability to carry on the family lineage. Newer research indicated that Semitic tribes valued their children and the Hebrews stood out among these people by their commitment to the children in their midst. In an article written by Kohler and Philipson, it was noted that, "In the domestic life of the ancient Hebrews the mutual respect existing between parents and children was a marked feature. . . it was of first importance with the Hebrews, as is evident from the frequent mention of the duties toward parents."[13]

Stories of children as highly desired gifts from God were found throughout the Old Testament. Roy Zuck pointed out that the "Bible includes hundreds, even thousands, of references to children and related subjects." [14]Children in the Old Testament were, as the Psalmist says in Psalm 139, known before birth and empowered to live out their calls from God while yet very young.

The book of Acts and the letters were the first New Testament books written. They said little about children, but within the context of particular scriptures could be found an acceptance of the importance of children in the structure of the families within the early New Testament church. The first generations of Christians were primarily Jewish and those who were Gentiles joined a very Jewish church, with all its customs and mores. Children and slaves, as well as adults, were a part of each household and when the patriarch became a Christian, the whole family was baptized with him.[15]

While most of Paul's uses of the word child/children referred to those young in the faith, the references to child/children, by non-Pauline authors, were used both to refer to real children and also as metaphors. James taught the members of his Christian community to

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13 Kaufman Kohler and David Philipson, "Blessing Of Children," *Jewish Encyclopedia*, www.JewishEncyclopedia.com/articles/3368-blessing-of-children (accessed Feb. 25, 2012).

14 Roy Zuck, *Precious In His Sight* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 13.

15 Acts 10.

care for the widows and orphans (James 1:27). The three letters of John all contained loving, gentle references to children, and at least some of these were clear allusions to the young in years.

The surrounding Greco-Roman society had a much more utilitarian approach to children. Free male citizens were thought to possess *logos*, or rational thought. This was considered to be the most desirable quality for a human being. It was believed that slaves, children and barbarians had none and as such were thought of as worthless.

Roman law decreed fathers as absolute heads of their families and children as property to be owned or disowned as he desired. "There is no doubt that children were treated in a very rough way, and relatively many of them were exposed to what we today would call violence and sexual abuse."[16]

Plato (428/427–348/347 B.C.E.), one of the most prestigious thinkers of his day, whose imprimatur is found today in logic, philosophy and religion, called children "marginal actors" and "wax tablets" referring to them as malleable because of their lack of *logos*/intelligence. [17] This understanding of children, held by those in power over the Jewish community, influenced early Christian leaders, even though their worldviews had been formed within the culture of Judaism.

As the New Testament church was being established, a discussion began about the role of celibacy in church leaders. With the ascendancy of Paul's argument that celibacy was of a higher, more virtuous order than sexual activity, and marriage should be the lesser road taken, an implicit devaluing of children, as products of sexual intercourse, got a foothold among the thinkers and other leaders in the nascent movement.

It was in the Gospel writings on the life and teachings of Jesus that were found the most compelling and also counter-cultural (within the context of the authors' times and also for today) valuing of children as emblematic of the Kingdom of God, as bearers of the image of God, as representative of all who were (and are) on the margins of society. It was also within these stories that the children,

16 Bakke, *When Children Became People*, 54.

17 Ibid., 8.

who were taught, also became the teachers of the ways of Rabbi Jesus.

It is worth noting the contrast between the great importance of children in Jesus' ministry, and the earlier writings in the New Testament, as one keeps in mind both the historical worth of children in Jewish culture and the surrounding Greco-Roman world where children were considered of little more value than the dog on the street. Here again, both in Jesus' high regard for children and in the Gospel writers inclusion of children in their narratives, are illustrations of the sweeping nature of Jesus' ideas, his claims upon people and the radical vision of the Gospels' authors.

Jesus neither romanticized nor demonized children; his view of them was practical and realistic, as pointed out in Weber's exegesis of the story of the children's conflict while at play, in Matthew 11:16–19 and Luke 7:31–35.[18] Jesus claimed for children the role of teachers, rather than solely taught, in his words to adults about "becoming like a child" in Matthew 18:3, Mark 10:16, Luke 18:15–17[19].

He extended radical hospitality to children, as representatives of the most oppressed and marginalized. The consummate story of Jesus welcoming the children told in Matthew 19:13–15, Mark 10:13–16 and Luke 18:15–17 has been immortalized in syrupy, romantic pictures. The real children of his day were not the clean, sweet, well-fed little ones pictured in such Sunday School art. The children of the Gospels, these unique gifts of God, were likely to have been the ragged, dirty, ill-kempt youngest of the many insignificant people in Palestine. These stories, which mirrored one another, pointed out the nature of the upside down Kingdom about which Jesus spoke. They came in the midst of a continuing narrative, moving ever more quickly toward Jerusalem. Crowds of people surrounded Jesus all the time, as he preached and taught, healed and argued with those who came his way. At times he was tired and overwhelmed by the press of people. Yet when the disciples attempted to keep children away from him, Jesus was indignant, meaning his response was "from much grief," a very strong word used only seldom in the New Testament and here alone, as a response of Jesus.

18 Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 5.

19 Ibid., chapter 3.

While there appears to have been no deliberate effort to keep children at the edges of the new Christian faith, the words of Jesus about children and the stories of children in the Gospels, never took even a peripheral role in the development of the doctrines of the church. The compelling nature of the dangers facing the early church, perceived as threatening its survival, along with controversies over fledgling doctrine, were all-consuming. Other than in considerations related to baptism, children mostly disappeared from the teaching and writing of the leadership. Councils were held, the basic confessions of traditional Christianity were adopted, heretics were exposed and within a few hundred years, the centralization of power and standardization of what comprised acceptable belief in the Church were completed.

Within the theology being developed by the early church fathers, there *were* writings consistent with the Gospels and a high view of God's love and providential care for creation, which could be interpreted as sympathetic to children and accepting of their importance, as other than future adults. Aristides of Athens, a second-century apologist, thought it important and striking enough to point out that Christians valued their children and considered them gifts of God.

Of particular interest were these words of Iraenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, writing in the late second century:

> Jesus came to save all through his own person, all, that is, that through him are reborn to God; infants, children, adolescents, young and old…. He was made an infant for infants, sanctifying infancy, a child among children, sanctifying childhood.[20]

O.M. Bakke noted that Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Shepherd of Hermas used children as metaphors for behaviors adults should adopt. According to him, "Although Clement (a third-century Church Father) paints a picture of the child that emphasizes qualities fitting his program of transforming people into what he considered the proper understanding of Christian life, the very fact that he uses children as positive paradigms is striking."[21]

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20 Miles, *The Word Made Flesh*, 33.

21 Bakke, When Children Became People.

Other influential men, such as Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate Bible, a contemporary of Augustine (354–430 C.E.), associated children with "shame and sorrow," because procreation had to take place in order for them to come into being. Continuing to advance Paul's understanding of the better way to grow a church, he saw celibacy as a purer route to the love of God.[22] Along with an almost universal adoption in the church of Augustine's idea of original sin, the increasing elevation of the celibate life, as being closer to God, led to a continuing depreciation of childhood and children, and a unceasing decline in any consideration of their value to church life.

Augustine of Hippo's writings had and still have an enormous impact on the theology of the Christian church. Some of his profound words could be applied to people of all ages, and result in gratitude to God for God's bounteous grace and mercy. But his work on sin, which grew at least as much out of a misreading of Paul in Romans 5:12[23] as it did from his desperate need to be freed from his licentious past, has done incalculable damage to children in and out of the church.

From an early Hebrew family and tribe orientation, the Christian Church, as it is primarily understood today, adapted to and adopted the values of the predominate surrounding culture which reached a pinnacle with Charlemagne. A rigid authoritarian stress on feudal hierarchy, which further separated the rulers from the ruled, was used to "win the world for Christ." There were winners and losers in politics and religion and power used religion for its own purposes. These forces worked against any theological development which would have included an orientation toward Jesus' thoughtful and careful consideration of children (or any on the margins of society).

While there was no space here to explore any further the differences in theological processes in the Eastern and Western churches, it seems clear that an Eastern understanding of Christian faith may be more open to children's wisdom and thought than that of the west, where language and abstract cognition continue to be necessities for faith development among most.

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22 Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come*, 149.

23 Andrew Sung Park, *The Wounded Heart of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 78.

According to theologian Andrew Park, "the predominant view of the Eastern Church denies the theory of original sin and universal guilt…They affirm the relatively free and spontaneous will of humans."[24] Might it be possible that children would have been welcomed into the church universal if the strengths of both eastern and western liturgy and theology had been available throughout history to God's people, in the Christian church?

Christian theology developed as all theology does, out of the need to make sense of the world, God and humanity's place in creation and in relationship to God; and usually, out of a need to make a particular point, to defend an idea, to grind an axe. History, until very recently was only recorded by those in power. Within, behind and next to the predominant views of history and theology there were and are other streams of thought. It was there that some nuggets of understanding about and valuing of children were found. These threads anchored Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture to the historic Abrahamic faiths and wove through Christian history and theological development.

Jan Amos Comenius, ignored by some of the classic treatises on the history of the Christian Church, has a theology chair named for him at the University of Prague. Comenius (1592–1670) was best known in Europe during his life for his education reforms . . . seen as a result of his faith and theology . . . education was in essence a pastoral calling. It was the process by which people could be trained to see beyond the apparent chaos of the world and discover the underlying harmony of God's universe.[25] Comenius "saw all truth as God's truth, and believed education included the understanding God had given man through three areas: human reasoning, nature and Scripture. He saw God's wisdom as the final goal of education."[26] "Infants are given us as a mirror in which we may behold humility, gentleness, benign goodness, harmony, and other Christian virtues. The Lord himself declares 'Except ye be converted, and become as

24 Park, *The Wounded Heart of God*, 79.

25 Jan Amos Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart*. Translation and Introduction by Howard Louthan and Andrea Sterk. (New York: Classics of Western Spirituality: Paulist Press, 1997), 26.

26 Ibid., 24.

little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven.' Since God thus wills that children be our preceptors, we owe them the most diligent attention."[27]

The Reformation, which changed and split the Western church, began long before Martin Luther posted his theses upon the door of the Wittenburg Church. This act was emblematic of the battle for the hearts and minds of Christianity; it colored the continuing development of theology and doctrine, as the Church marched forward (and sometimes backward) through time. Never again though was the normative thinking funneled through the lens of a particular understanding of the faith, as it was at the height of the power of the Roman Catholic Church in the late Middle Ages. Lutherans were joined by Calvinists and shortly after that by the Anabaptists as thoughts diverged, doctrines and churches formed and dissolved. All the ferment and discussion, argument and theological development took place beyond the ken of children. The youngest ones in the churches were taught to memorize the catechisms of the faith and to be obedient, as were all those without power within the churches and surrounding societies.

Yet, still, as before, within, under and around the predominate ideas of those whose names are best known today, were kernels of understanding related to children and their preferential place in God's world. Even from the mouths of some who excoriated adults for their sinful nature and lectured them on their responsibility for conquering the devil within their children; from some who taught the utter depravity of humankind, there were gentle words of appreciation for and acceptance of children.

In Calvin's defense of Infant Baptism discourse, he reminded his readers of Jesus words in Matthew 19:14, "for of such is the Kingdom of Heaven" and follows with, "And thereupon he attests his will by his act when, embracing them, he commends them with his prayers and blessing to his Father . . . how much more precious shall we regard baptism, by which we attest that infants are contained within

27 Comenius, *The Labyrinth of the World*, 62.

God's covenant, . . . by which Christ himself present declares both that they are his and are sanctified by him?"[28]

Other theologians of the late Reformation could evidence in their writings a deep concern for the child. John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, encouraged parents to carefully instruct their children in religious faith. While childless himself, he was influenced by his mother, Susanna and possibly too, by Nikolaus Zinzendorf, a bishop of the Moravian Church, who was visited by Wesley. Zinzendorf valued childhood play and gave children the freedom to act like children.

One of the earliest theologians of the Enlightenment, Friedrich Schleirmacher, (1768–1834), believed in the education of the whole child and had a very positive view of children and childhood in general. He wrote in his *Aphorisms on Pedagogy*, "Being a child should not prevent becoming an adult; becoming an adult should not prevent being a child."[29] With the inception of formal Christian Education in the late 1700s, credited to Robert Raikes, in England, a movement began which eventually would come to focus upon the educational needs of all children, from the perspective of the child's development and needs. In its earliest stages though, Sunday Schools were begun for the purpose of supporting the economic well-being of those in power in the cities during the Industrial Revolution. Christian Education Sunday Schools came into being shortly before the Great Awakening Revival Movement of the early nineteenth century and worked hand in glove with the revivalists. Converting the heathen and saving them from the depths of eternal hell, whether they were adults who had never heard of Jesus Christ or children of tender years, this was the aim of the revival preachers of the time.

The stress on child evangelism prodded a courageous American theologian Horace Bushnell (1802–1876) to take a stance in opposition to the idea that children were doomed without a conversion experience. He spoke out about Christian nurture as a daily practice, taking place in families, and creating an understanding, "That the child is to grow up a Christian, and never know himself as

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[28] John Calvin, *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book IV*, ed. John T. McNeill, (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 1325.

[29] Bunge, The Child in Christian Thought, 349.

being otherwise."[30] Bushnell's respect for children and the process of Christian formation has had an enduring impact upon Christian Education and those involved in educating children, particularly in the mainline churches.

In *Welcoming Children*, Mercer argued that Neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth (b. 1886), affirmed the importance of children, as children. She noted that in his *Church Dogmatics*, Volume III, Part IV, pages 278–79, he says, Christ "wills to call his little brothers and sisters…. And in practice this means that parents are challenged to see their children from the divine standpoint." Barth, highly esteemed by many mainline protestant adherents, included in his theological understanding that children were capable of direct encounter with the divine.[31]

Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian of the early twentieth century, who once traveled in the United States visiting with seminary students. In Chicago, he sat at a bar late one night, smoking a cigar and sipping whiskey, with a small group of students. When asked to state his most important theological idea, he answered, "Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so."[32]

Lesser known to many Protestant professionals in the field of Christian Formation was Karl Rahner, a Roman Catholic, German theologian, who sought to recover insights of Thomas Aquinas that had been distorted by those who interpreted his work. Mercer states that his work, as Aquinas', contains a "strong sense of the mystery of God and of all human existence."[33] He wrote copiously following Vatican II, becoming its primary voice. Some of his writings were particularly focused upon childhood. The eighth volume of his twenty-three book series, published in 1971, *Theological Investigations*, includes an essay entitled, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood." Rahner understood that children have an innate connection with mystery and the divine and in this essay he explored childhood, out of his understanding of time.

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30 Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1861; repr., Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994), 10 (page references are to the reprint edition).

31 Mercer, Welcoming Children, 139.

32 Thomas B. Martin, narrative conversation, used with permission, 2006.

33 Mercer, Welcoming Children, 150.

> Childhood does not constitute past time…. childhood itself has a direct relationship with God.… It must be the case that childhood is valuable in itself, that it is to be discovered anew in the ineffable future which is coming to meet us.[34]

Hans-Ruedi Weber's book, *Jesus and the Children*, published in 1974, was written to give explicit attention, biblically and theologically, to the meaning of Jesus' teachings related to children, as those young in years. His work, as well as Rahner's, has had a profound effect upon the current study of children and theology.

### Holiness is connectedness, wholeness, sanctification, spirituality, grace.

In the holiness of children, the kingdom of God is manifest. In holiness each one is born. Persons also become holy; connected to God and growing in God. Understanding and affirming the holiness of children means acknowledging the imago Dei, the image of God in which each person is made and accepting this holiness as a "divine spark" embodied within each person throughout life. Seeing the image of God in others means relationships change, interactions are challenged, lives transformed. Knowing children as holy does not mean they are perfect or incapable of sin. It means recognizing each person as a God-bearer.[35] In the midst of the process of becoming involved in a world beset by sin and evil, it also means acknowledging that God's grace has had an encompassing redemptive effect, and that means including all, even to the "least of these."

One of the insights of Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is that people are born "holy," connected to God, called by God, precious to God. This does not mean pure; rather it is the holiness of being created "*imago Dei*," in the image of God.

### Holiness is a characteristic of God in creation.

The concept is woven from Genesis through Revelation. Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel spoke of holiness in his work *No Religion is an Island.* He wrote, "A person is not just a specimen of the species called homo sapiens. He is all of humanity in one . . . the human is the

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[34] Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood," in *Theological Investigations, vol. 8* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1971), 35–37; quoted in Mercer, 150, footnote, 281.

[35] Kenda Creasy Dean and Ron Foster, *The Godbearing Life* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1998), 17.

disclosure of the divine…Many things on this earth are precious, some are holy, humanity is the holiest of holy."[36]

The *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* defined holiness, as derived from the Greek *hagios* (set apart), as "the devotion and purity of life associated with Christian discipleship . . ." Christian holiness was labeled also as sanctification.[37] Children, in their innate connection with God, bring into life a promising holiness, which can be encouraged and practiced. This holiness can be a model of practice for adults and other older people, in which transparency and compassion, playfulness and passion are affirmed and returned to children in developmentally appropriate ways.

"Holiness" often referred to characteristics of God shown through God's activity on behalf of (sometimes in punishment of) and through the Hebrew nation. Moses' and Miriam's songs of triumph in Exodus 15 wove praises and celebrated the holiness attributes of Yahweh. It was because of God's holiness that God's people were to be holy also. In Isaiah 62, the redeemed of the Lord were called a Holy People:

> Say to daughter Zion, "See, your salvation comes; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him." They shall be called, "The Holy People, The Redeemed of the Lord"; and you shall be called, "Sought Out, A City Not Forsaken" (Isaiah 62:11b–12).

The apocryphal Wisdom of Solomon 7:24–27, included the following description of wisdom bearers, implying inborn holiness:

> For wisdom is more mobile than any motion; because of her pureness she pervades and penetrates all things. For she is a breath of the power of God, and a pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty; therefore nothing defiled gains entrance into her. For she is a reflection of eternal light, a spotless mirror of the working of God, and an image of his goodness. Though she is but one, she can do all things, and while remaining in herself, she renews all things; in every generation she passes into holy souls and makes them friends of God, and prophets.

Turning to the New Testament, the word "holiness" was found only once in the Gospels, in Luke 1:75, as Zechariah spoke of the holiness of the redeemed people of the covenant. This use is

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36 Abraham Joshua Heschel, *No Religion is an Island* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 8.

37 Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 130.

specifically related to the people of Israel. Otherwise, "holy" was connected with the Spirit of God.[38] In the letters, "holy" was used to denote a new way of life in Christ, characterized, for example, in Colossians 3:12–17:

> As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

To be without blemish, a saint, was the expectation of the author of 1 Peter when using the word holy (*hagios)* for those who were members of the church, "Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'" (1 Peter 1:14–16). Peter's words were thought provoking because they referenced real children. If the leaders of the new religious movement had been adept at squatting down, looking children in the eye and seeing things from their vantage point, Christianity might have developed as a champion of children, rather than accused throughout the centuries as responsible for some of the worst of abuses against them.

As the church grew in numbers, and was fiercely oppressed during the first three centuries after Christ's death and resurrection, it also faced internal conflicts over interpretation of the Bible and biblical witness. Creeds were written and Councils convened. Both the Nicene (381 C.E.) and the Apostles' (eighth century) creeds included the phrase "the holy, catholic Church," in which "holy" meant belonging to God.[39]

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38 The term Holy Spirit is used especially in John's Gospel. The New Testament Church made little of the idea, until the fourth century when the creeds of the church began to emphasize the Holy Ghost/Spirit. A theological understanding of the Holy Spirit, as the breath of God present in each new creation made in God's image, can be consistent with a belief in the holiness of children.

39 *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: The Office of the General Assembly, 1999), 6.

The Apostle's Creed, first developed around 180 C.E., was a refutation of Marcion, a Christian living in Rome. Marcion, who believed in a God of goodness, love and mercy, rejected the Old Testament, into which he read a God of wrath and punishment. Not only were the anti-Jewish and Old Testament beliefs of Marcion rightly rejected, unfortunately so were his understandings of God. Marcion and his opponents were examples of ways the Bible was used and misused throughout its history. Often the unholy alliance of power and the church worked to raise particular theologies to the forefront while others were shunted aside or even worse, declared heresies.

Those who studied the Bible came to it with at least implicit biblical theologies. For reasons outside of the scope of this paper, theologies focused upon adult sin and separation from God, atonement and salvation, were the primary lens' through which much western church doctrine was formulated. Because of the arguments made by St. Paul and Augustine of Hippo about the universality of sin and sinfulness, primarily as manifested in adults, an understanding of the sinful nature of human beings, brought into the world in each new birth (original sin), became an almost universal belief in western Christianity.

The doctrine of original sin affected the writings, the art, the liturgy, the child rearing practices of Christianity from early in its development. The Holy God of love, grace and goodness found in the Old and New Testaments, gradually was overtaken by the Holy God of wrath, judgment and punishment. Jesus, at first understood as Savior because of his life and resurrection, became the atoning Christ, God's child, sacrificed for the sake of an otherwise doomed creation.[40]

Personal holiness, rather than having the potential to flow naturally from "*imago Dei*," too often became a response based upon fear of retribution by this God who did not hesitate to sacrifice His only begotten son. Infant baptism was practiced as the only way to

[40] Rita Nakashima Brock, a Disciples of Christ minister and founding Co-Director of *Faith Voices for the Common Good*, in a speech delivered to Ohio Council of Churches, January 23, 2005, Columbus, Ohio, pointed out that the earliest images of Jesus focused upon his incarnation, his acts of ministry with people and his resurrection. It was not until the tenth century that art regularly showed Jesus as suffering or dead.

protect those imbued with original sin from eternal life in hell. The catechesis of children, who could have been encouraged in holiness, was instead aimed at breaking their spirits, spirits assumed, based on Paul and Augustine's theology of desperation, to be evil at their core.

Eventually, influenced by the widespread popularity of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile,* and supported by late 18th century family ideals, a new era began in the history of children, especially in the western world. Especially for those with the means to do so, children, seen as inherently good, were enjoyed in families linked by bonds of affection.

In 1847, renowned Christian Educator pastor and theologian, Horace Bushnell published a little book entitled *Discourses on Christian Nurture*. Though he did not identify "holiness" as inherent in children or the desired outcome of discipleship, respect for children and their connectedness with their Holy God was central to his work. He understood the importance of nurture, of mutual teaching and learning, acknowledging their inherent value. In opposition to those who believed that young children had no ability to comprehend the holy, were fatally flawed and in need of conversion, Bushnell often cited the following scriptures: "And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord; and great shall be the peace of thy children" (Isaiah 54:13 King James Version) and "Fathers, do not make your children angry, but raise them with the training and teaching of the Lord" (Ephesians 6:4, *New Contemporary Version*).

Scholars like Friedrich Schleirmacher (1768–1834), whose roots were in Moravian pietism, understood the relationship between head and heart and named religion as a feeling of absolute dependence. While he did not consider theology from the point of view of children or their holiness, his wholistic approach to religion left room for young ones. His theology, which included the subjectivity of faith, influenced Rudolph Otto (1869–1937), a later scholar whose ideas were also broad enough to include children. A German Protestant theologian, he published *The Idea of the Holy* in 1917. Otto, trained in biblical languages, was aware of the various connotations of Hebrew, Greek and Latin words for "holy" and "holiness." He embraced an understanding which extended beyond what which could be intellectually analyzed and explained. According to Anderson, he "coined the word numinous to describe the peculiar character of the

religious object's impact upon the believer."[41] His use of the words "*mysterium tremendum*," a way of speaking about God, illustrated childhood experience of God's Holy presence. Otto believed that the core of religious experience was non-rational. In was within this sphere that Otto, as well as children, lived comfortably with, "a sense of awe, majesty, and energy."[42]

*Community, defined by the quality of relationships developed within it, is foundational. Community*, out of which enduring relationships form, is defined as belonging. According to David Jensen community is relationship, an exhibition of the *imago Dei.*[43] Community is hospitality, where nurture occurs and relationships are nourished. Hospitality is integral to a healthy community where all are welcome. This *koinonia* community is foundational to the spiritual growth of children and also of those adults who live and work with and learn from children. Trusted adults and safe places are critical for children, both those whose home life includes these and particularly for those who desperately need security, safe touch, wholesome boundaries, a place to be themselves.

The Kindergarten children were a close knit group because their teachers made caring, compassion, and cooperation high priorities in the classroom. Tammy was mildly autistic and also subject to petit mal seizures. All year a pall of discomfort would descend upon the class when Tammy, quietly and non-disruptively, would "go away" for awhile, even as she sat in her seat. The little girl was a valued member of the community and the other children desired that she be fully present with them.

To be a community, "a group of people living in the same locality ... having common interests ... and forming a distinct segment of society" is known too, as koinonia, a Greek term meaning "fellowship" or "communion with," used particularly when speaking of the early Christian communities which sprang up in the years after Jesus' resurrection.[44] This kind of community was spoken of, for

41 Anderson, and Diesslin, *A Journey Through Christian Theology*, 163–166.

42 *Christian Word Book*, 144.

43 Jensen, Graced Vulnerability, 32.

44 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., s.v. "community."

example in Philemon, verse 17, when Paul asked the church to welcome Onesimus, as they would Paul himself.

In Deuteronomy, it is said of the king to be appointed as leader of the Israelites:

> he shall have a copy of this law ... it shall remain with him ... so he may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes, neither exalting himself above other members of the community nor turning aside from the commandment (Deuteronomy 17:18–20).

The voices of various communities, over long periods of time, made up the disparate orally transmitted laws, stories, histories, worship elements, and poetry, of the Hebrew Testament. Around the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple (515 B.C.E.), after Cyrus' release of the Hebrews from Babylonian captivity, these materials were gathered into the body of scripture known to Christians as the Old Testament.[45] Communities were sustained and strengthened by their transmitted culture, experienced, read and heard.

The stories of the Old Testament witnessed to the communal nature of the Jewish faith. God covenanted with Abram, calling him to leave his home and travel with his family to a far country. In Genesis 17, God spoke to Abram, "As for me, this is my covenant with you . . . No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations . . . As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations." (from Genesis 17:4–9) This covenant of God with the Hebrew people was not abrogated even though time and again the Hebrews were forced off their land into widespread dispersion. At the time the Babylonians were besieging Jerusalem (around 588 B.C.E.), the prophet Jeremiah prophesied about God's future for God's people, when the "New Community" would be established.

This often exiled community of men and women and children were enabled to continue to be the "Israelites" by following communal guidelines and rituals such as those found in the Ten Commandments and the Levitical laws. Thus, though dispersed across the Middle East, some retained their particularity and did not become

45 Bernard Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 510.

fully subsumed in the cultures where they found themselves; they remained communities.

In Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands, Johanna Bos noted that by chapter four in the book of Ruth, the two women who had made for themselves a small isolated family upon arriving in Moab, were now surrounded by community. "There is the community of the past, called on by the witnesses at the city gate (7–12); there is the community of the present, made up of those at the gate and the women around Naomi (13–17), and, finally, the last words of the story and the genealogy point to the community of the future."[46] The characters in the story lived in various states of community where self care went hand in hand with concern for others, and where the community provided the support and strength needed in times of travail.

The Israelite peoples evolved into the Jews who practiced Judaism, with tradition and ritual central to their identity. Children participated in the religious life of the family and community. By Jesus' time the festivals of the Jewish people served to bring them into relationship with other Jews, not only in the family and geographic community, but in disparate places. Going to Jerusalem was a way of reminding the followers of YHWH that they were made up of God's chosen people from all over the ancient world. It was an opportunity to share the distinctive stories and celebrations, worship and food of a peculiar people, living in a hostile and alien world. It was a practice of the community, in which children were expected to participate from their youngest years. Jesus, who grew up in the agrarian Jewish subculture, most likely was influenced little in childhood by the surrounding urban, individualistic Greco-Roman world of the area's rulers. His education and upbringing were thoroughly Jewish and scripture attests to his participation in the Passover Festival at the age of twelve.[47]

Later Jesus went to John for baptism, not in private but as part of a community event where many of the followers of John were gathered. As his ministry developed Jesus stretched the boundaries of

46 Johanna Bos, *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands* (New York: General Board of Global Ministries, undated), 38.

47 Luke 2.

community and family. He lived in a communal culture, but one which was very stratified. Romans had become to a great extent, in the midst of the Greco-Roman culture, a utilitarian people. The community was made up of those who were useful to the ruling class. At times this understanding of usefulness became so extreme that infanticide was widely practiced. Jewish communitarian culture was more welcoming of children and accepting of others, as long as they practiced their belief in Yahweh in accordance with custom. But, there were vast numbers of people who were outsiders, including lepers, the lame and blind and others called unclean. The Samaritans, though practicing a form of Judaism based on most of the same tenets as the Jews of the time, were looked down upon and not accepted.

Into the community which grew and flourished around Rabbi Jesus, were invited all those who were unwanted in any surrounding culture, Roman, Greek or Jewish. Children, included as representatives of God's kingdom, were often the most marginalized of the people on the edges of society and Jesus' inclusion of children, therefore also meant a welcome for all the others who were less than useful, less than pure. In his ministry, practiced within a particular gathered community, but excluding none from the surrounding cultures, Jesus practiced a radically hospitable restatement of what it meant to be a New Covenant Community.

In the message and activity of Jesus, was an alternative social vision, a community shaped not by the ethos and politics of purity, but by that of compassion. There was something boundary shattering about the imitatio Dei (imitate God) that stood at the center of Jesus' message and activity, "Be compassionate as God is compassionate. Whereas purity divides and excludes, compassion unites and includes. For Jesus, compassion had a radical sociopolitical meaning. In his teaching and table fellowship, and in the shape of his movement, the purity system was subverted and an alternative social vision affirmed. The politics of purity were replaced by a politics of compassion."[48]

As years passed, the Christian Church became an institution, with creeds, confessions, doctrine. Some of the earliest doctrines of the church inferred the importance of children as part of the life of the Christian community. Irenaeus (140–200 C.E.) made an obscure

48 Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time* (New York: Harpers, 1994), 51.

reference to infant baptism in his defense of the faith, Against Heresies. Though no direct references to the baptism of infants had been made before 185 C.E., by the sixth century infant baptism had become the common practice because of an almost universal acceptance of Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Parents and others desired to see to it that the young were saved from consignment to hell.

Discussing the development of beliefs about initiation into the Christian faith and the Body of Christ, James White writes, in A Brief History of Christian Worship, "Initiation followed two quite different trajectories in East and West . . . In the East, initiation was held together at all costs as a single occasion. Our oldest text for the Byzantine rite is the Barberini Euchologian from about 790. But it is redolent of the language of John Chrysostom himself, linking it to the late fourth century. It contains prayers for naming infants on the eighth day after birth. Then on the fortieth day they are ritually made a catechumen and exorcised, water is blessed as is oil, candidates are anointed with the oil of gladness, baptized, and they receive anointing with the sign of the cross and the words 'the seal of the gift of the Holy Spirit.' Then the Eucharist begins and the newly baptized receive communion . . . The whole process varied little whatever the age . . . The pattern of the West was far less consistent. It is a story of slow but irreversible division of the process of initiation into three occasions . . . the 1566 Catechism of Trent (states) 'Until children shall have attained the age of reason, its [confirmation] administration is inexpedient. If not, therefore to be postponed to the age of twelve, it is more proper to defer this Sacrament at least to that of seven years. All Protestant groups that retained confirmation inherited the same expectations."[49]

In practice, the Protestant church, especially as part of its reaction to the excesses of the Roman Catholic institution, became more and more word oriented, with the Word preached and the sacrament rigidly administered, becoming the primary locus for community life. Many Christian communities became less and less welcoming for children in worship (though they continued to be present) and therefore less sustaining of their needs.

49 James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 80.

There continued to be theologians whose focus was upon the formation of the youngest Christians in the midst of the community of faith. An early example was Comenius, introduced in an earlier section of these papers, who put great value on children and upon their education. His understanding of the nurture of children, which included schools for them, was inclusive of family, schools and the church as communities, in which to rear the followers of Jesus. Catechisms were developed after the Reformation for the purpose of instructing older children and new adult converts in the faith. The Westminster Shorter Catechism, for example, included questions which presupposed that children were a part of the community of faith.

While it may be tempting to make broad sweeping statements about the exclusion or inclusion of children in the community of faith, that would do an injustice to the realities of the "church" in different times and circumstances. The community of faith, the Body of Christ, had always existed in the midst of rapidly changing society, in the East, in Europe and in America. In truth, it had never been a unified Body. The cultural norms of the Middle East, of Rome, of England differed. City and farm upbringing, education and the lack of, times of health and prosperity, of disease and war, affected families and children and the ways in which children were understood. Yet we know that theological battles being waged far from the kitchen hearth impacted childrearing practices.

They, too, were linked to the changing understandings of women. According to the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, the Enlightenment brought with it some transformation of the position of women. "As women rose to consideration, their children accompanied them. Once treated as little adults incapable of fulfilling their adult obligation, they came to be regarded as complete personalities in their own right."[50] Rousseau, influenced as he had been by Comenius' work, was the architect of this new understanding of children which influenced Europe and America. Children often accompanied their parents in evangelizing tenement dwellers. They were among the

50 John McManners, ed., *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 297–298.

worshippers at revivals and they were by their mothers' sides at the new Missionary Societies which began in the 1800s.

The separation of children from full incorporation in the community of faith was both a recent occurrence and less than a universal reality in the Christian faith. For example, many Roman Catholics communities continue to celebrate their Catholicism, as parishes and households. Children, from their earliest years, in Bushnell's words, "know themselves as no other," than Roman Catholic. Patrick's words, which follow, illustrate this sense of knowing oneself from an early age as a part of a particular group of Christians.

> Patrick, who was just three, sat in Chapel and listened to the leader say, "Jesus might have gotten mad sometimes at his brothers and sisters." He raised his hand and commented, "Jesus didn't have any brothers or sisters. The children in his village were just called that." Patrick had already absorbed a Roman Catholic understanding of his faith, which taught that Jesus' mother remained a virgin and those called his family comprised the village in which he grew up.

Strange as it may seem, as the needs of children became better understood in the last 150 years, there was been a disconcerting rise in the separation of children (and youth) from the practicing community of faith. It might have been expected that the church as Body of Christ would have embraced this new knowledge and, as koinonia community, wholeheartedly adapted its life to be inclusive of all. Instead, more and more often worship became an adult hour; stewardship no longer a family-wide practice, mission and service were age segregated, study relegated to children as a way to keep them occupied during worship.

Yet some continued to look at community in a way which included all. *Koinonia community*, according to Emil Brunner, "signifies a common participation, a togetherness, a community life," as the Body of Christ, which is "the fellowship of Jesus Christ," (from 1 Cor. 1:9)[51] Steven Doughty, in *Discovering Community: A Meditation on Community in Christ*, wrote that in Christian Community "my own stage in life meets the stages of so many others both older and younger than I, and it is where I at last can pause in my

51 Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 10.

business and see the stunning beauty of all the stages of life God has made."[52]

In *Welcoming Children*, Mercer states, "The Spirit brings faith not merely as an individual phenomenon but as the Spirit of God works in and through communities to engender children's faith. Such learning happens through children's participation with and apprenticeship in the church as a community of practice, whose ways of believing and acting in the world both reflect and produce its alternative identity. The same Spirit is similarly at work to engender the wider community's growth in faith through the participation of its children."[53] How else, Horace Bushnell might have asked, would a child grow up to know herself/himself as no other than a Christian, if she/he never was a part of the radical hospitality of the koinonia community of Christ? It is good to remembers Paul's words which include all, young and older: "Peace be to the whole community, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 6:23).

**Sabbath as a way of living, honors a cycle of renewal in creation, in communities and in individual lives.**

Sabbath can be described as sacred space, silence, quiet, time to simply BE. Sabbath life is trust, faith and a creative hopefulness which works toward wholeness and restoration. We are called to a quality of living that reflects the injunctions, if not the particulars, of being conscious of God and God's blessings and of being concerned that others, particularly the marginalized in any culture, might enjoy the same awareness, gratitude and shalom. This is a call to 'the good life'—a life variously described as one of peace, fullness of relationships, respect for others, and remembering God. Children naturally live lives synchronous with Sabbath. This Sabbath sense is socialized out of them as they become more and more inculcated into today's culture.

Honoring Sabbath has an ancient history in Judaism and Christianity, being first found in Genesis 2:1-4:

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52 Stephen V. Doughty, *Discovering Community: A Meditation on Community in Christ* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1999), 167.

53 Mercer, *Welcoming Children*, 180.

> Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.

There were various intentions for Sabbath as a particular time of rest stressed in the Old Testament. When honoring the Sabbath became codified in the Ten Commandments, the example of a day modeled after God's rest remained prominent. During the exodus, observing the Sabbath day had become a part of what it meant to be a member of the Hebrew nation. The people wandering in the wilderness were prohibited from collecting manna on the seventh day, "with the implication that the Sabbath is to draw a boundary around the acquisitive urge."[54]

The Ten Commandments found in both Exodus and Deuteronomy reflected both implications of Sabbath: 1) Remember God and keep the Sabbath and 2) Keep the Sabbath and remember God.[55] Theologian, Dr. Donald McKim noted that the Hebrew, "*Shabbat*" means time set apart for worship and rest. The Hebrew people, as they came to be a unified nation, adopted the idea of a regular Sabbath observance, a practice referred to first in Numbers 28:9–10; then later in Ezekiel 46:4, 12 and Isaiah 66:23.

Sabbath, the sign of the covenant God had made with Moses, was one of the identifiable marks of the followers of Yahweh, from the time of the Babylonian exile.[56] When Cyrus allowed Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple, he assigned Nehemiah to govern Jerusalem. According to Gottwald, when Nehemiah took over, the city was unfortified, thinly populated and lacking in piety. The governor compelled strict Sabbath observances to counteract a

54 *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed., s.v. "Sabbath."

55 One might fruitfully explore this commandment further, for it introduces justice for the marginalized, which includes children.

56 Barry L. Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1999), 536.

prevailing ethic of agricultural and commercial work taking place seven days a week.[57]

Sabbath, while best known for its association with the seventh day of the week, was also used in the Old Testament to refer to festivals and to the seventh year, where the land was to lie fallow (Leviticus 25:1–7).[58] Many of the festivals noted in the Old Testament became a part of the codified religion of the Jews during the time of Nehemiah. It was fortunate for the children of this time that Nehemiah brought reforms to Jerusalem, in line with the Judaism which had developed in the Babylonian and Persian exile, for some of those reforms benefited the impoverished peoples who were losing their children because of massive debt.[59]

Beginning in the Maccabean period, increasingly strict regulations about honoring the sacred nature of the Sabbath, plus concern about its desecration, came to hold a prominent place in the theology of traditional Jews, who resisted those desiring a Hellenization of the faith, especially the Temple leadership. By the time Jesus was growing up, Sabbath observance had too often become an act of limitation rather than freedom. It was to those who applied the law as a cudgel rather than a cool cloth that he spoke sternly and with whom he had heated arguments. Jesus and the Pharisees were often at odds because of Jesus' understanding that the day was to bring healing and wholeness to people, not further their privation.[60]

The most child friendly understanding of Sabbath, as a part of Jesus' tradition, was that of festival celebration and of rest. For on *Shabbat*, with work being left undone, the children were able to play and enjoy the company of older people, who were relieved for twenty-four hours of the regular responsibilities of daily life. Festivals provided opportunities for families to travel and to concentrate on celebrations of their faith.

It is also easy to imagine the delight of children following Jesus through their villages or city streets, as he claimed the Sabbath day for

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57 Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 433.

58 *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 281.

59 Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 433.

60 McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*.

the kingdom of God. The model of ministry presented in the Gospels as the way of Jesus, was one of Sabbath living each day. Jesus was not pictured as hurrying or constantly working; though the crowds pressed around him with their needs, he took himself off to a mountain to pray. He listened to those who spoke with him, engaging in dialogue and caring conversation. He was a keen observer and he had time for the children. The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* notes that Sabbath in the Gospels "is a day which fittingly frames the re-creative work of God's kingdom as Jesus heals and brings wholeness to human brokenness. The idea of Sabbath as a day set apart for religious activity rather than daily work is assumed in all these references."[61]

The New Testament church's approach to Sabbath time revolved around the gathering of the faithful for breaking bread, sharing scripture and doing good deeds. Children, as part of the household of the faithful, were included in Sabbath observances.

As the church became an institution of power and authority over the common people, some Christians were called to live apart from the world, in order to dedicate themselves to their relationship with God. Daily Sabbath-keeping became an activity of the monastery, where adults lived; though in some cases orphaned children were a part of the community. Ordinary Christians honored church law by attending mass, but there was little underlying sense of Sabbath-living for those who worked every day to provide for themselves and their families. A sense of Sabbath rest and respect for God's good creation seemed missing also from the upper classes, whose privilege could have led to a use of time synchronous with that of creation and in touch with God's presence.

Somewhere around 1200 C.E. the labyrinth in Chartres Cathedral was built near Paris, France. The labyrinth took the place of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and was also walked for repentance; it could well have served as sacred recreation for children who were brought to daily mass by their pious caregivers. Sabbath keeping, as a day set aside for worship, continued, but most written sources focused upon rule keeping and rigidity, rather than Sabbath as holy practice, proclaiming freedom and the love of God.

61 *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, 748.

Since the reformation, "Christian practice has been to observe Sunday as a day for worship in celebration of Christ's resurrection."[62] Among the writings of the theologians of the Reformation were affirmations of Sabbath as a way to keep the law and a day of worship, it was also a way of life.

Jan Amos Comenius (b. 1592), introduced earlier, was known as the father of universal education. A Bishop of the Brethren/Moravian church, at the time of the Reformation, he wrote many books including *School of Infancy*. In this text, he set out the necessary instructional components for children's first six years. Though nothing was said specifically about the atmosphere of the household in which children were being reared, it was clear from his words about instruction, that time and attention, listening and modeling for children, were critical. Modeling took time and the practice of 'presence', both of which were important aspects of paying attention and characteristic of Sabbath life.

Unfortunately, understanding and practicing a Sabbath way of life continued to diminish over time. The Industrial Revolution and the mechanizing of society, along with the influence of the Puritans in England and then in America, worked to detract from the grace and gift of living according to God's rhythm of time. Robert Raikes' Sunday School movement, begun in England, took the one nonworking day children had, a day for doing whatever they liked, for resting and re-creation, and made Sunday yet another long day under the watchful eye of adults, as they were being schooled in basic skills and the Christian faith. Honoring Sabbath came to be equated, for most people, with keeping certain rules.

By the mid-twentieth century, there two camps of Christians seemed to have emerged in this country, the "observant" and "non-observant." Children of those for whom Sabbath-keeping was part of the family and congregation's culture; whether as a way of life, or even as a day of worship and non-activity, tended to remember this time fondly, offering stories related to "the cold mashed potatoes we ate"[63] and the clandestine games made up while sitting quietly in Grandmother's parlor. Others, members of more liberal

62 McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms.*

63 William Kyle, interview by author, October 1997, verbal narrative.

congregations, shared tales of Sunday rides in the car or walks in the park with family. These were the fortunate ones, for other children, poor and rich alike, whose Sundays were like every other day of the week, full of busyness and individualized activity, missed out on the formative and sacred nature of Sabbath times.

*Holy Listening is mindfulness; being fully present one to another, understanding that God is equally at hand.* It is holy conversation, three-way with both a horizontal and vertical dimension. Listening is also understanding, affirmation, indirect communication; it is symbolic. Holy Listening consists of more than being polite. It is being reverently attuned to what the other is saying, listening with the whole being and with the knowledge that God is at hand. Holy Listening can be modeled by adults for children, who easily pick up this way of attending to each other, of showing compassion and caring.

It was the summer before Katy began Kindergarten. She was home one afternoon with her mother, in the sunny kitchen making cookies together when Katy stopped dipping out oatmeal raisin dough and said, "Shhh, Mommy, listen."

Her mother replied, "What, Katy?"

"Shhh, listen, Mommy!" the child insisted.

"What am I listening to?" asked Mom, stopping her busyness also.

"If you are quiet and listen, you can hear God talking to us."

In 1 Kings 19, Elijah stood in the entrance of a cave, having experienced wind, earthquake and fire, yet finding that God was not in the great and strong wind nor in the mighty earthquake. Neither was God in the fire. The LORD was in the still, small voice that came to Elijah as he stood at the mouth of that cave. God reminded Elijah that he was not alone. It was the same with all of humankind; God left no one all alone, for God was present when all else and all others seemed to have vanished.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (Deut. 6:4 NIV). In Deuteronomy, Israel was beseeched, commanded, cautioned over and over. Often the writer used "Hear" to introduce the admonitions of Yahweh, the Covenantal God. Deuteronomy, the last book of the Old Testament Torah, was written as though it recorded the words of Moses to the Israelites, but was actually a much later

book. It was said by Boadt to be a call to a return to "covenant love between Yahweh and the people"[64] and could be called the book of the "ear." For the ancient Hebrews the ear was a synonym for the heart, the mind; it was an organ of cognition. In Deuteronomy, Israel was admonished over and over to hear the words of God and to listen with heart and soul, as well as ear. Deuteronomy offered hope, reminding the people of God's unfailing love. It called for an equal return by the Hebrew people to the commitment of love God had made with Israel. Though not called a process of Holy Listening, of careful listening for God, with and to others, the idea occurred time and again.

The Shema was repeated three times in the Torah.[65] It was a foundational creedal statement for the Jewish people. Shema, translated from the Hebrew "לארשי עמש," meant "hear" and the full text properly comprised a repetition of a statement of belief for Judaism.[66] "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."

Two direct commands to "listen" were given to children in Proverbs, who were learning the precepts of God. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible included 280 instances where "listen" and nineteen times "listening" were used, from Genesis to Revelation. The primary focus was on listening and hearing as ways of learning to follow God and forewarning for what would happen to those who did not listen.

Yet listening was also an act of prayer and a way of deepening spiritual understanding. The Psalms, the poetry and songbook of the Old Testament, often spoke of hearing the voice of God, listening for God, asking God to listen, for example, "I call upon you, for you will

64 Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 350–351.

65 Deuteronomy 6:4 9, 11:13–21, Numbers 15:37–41.

66 *Judaism 101*, "Prayers," www.JewFAQ.org/prayer/shema.htm (accessed June 10, 2006).

answer me, O God; incline your ear to me, hear my words" (Psalm 17:6).

According to the Dictionary of Biblical Imagery, "unlike other ancient religions that sought revelation through the eye and through visions, biblical people primarily sought revelation through the ear and hearing."[67] Jesus' words, "Let anyone with ears listen!" were repeated in Mark 4:9, Matthew 11:15 and again in Luke 14:35. The great Rabbi Jesus, who held the Shema in his heart, called the people to listen with their hearts to his words. In Matthew 13:15, the author quoted Jesus as saying one reason he spoke in parables, "For this people's heart has grown dull, and their ears are hard of hearing, and they have shut their eyes; so that they might not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and understand with their heart and turn—and I would heal them."

Jesus was clearly a listener to God and to others. According to the Gospel writers, there were times that he went away to be alone and pray. The reader does not know what happened during his times alone with God, yet it is reasonable to assume that Jesus sought communion with God, that he was quiet and listened for the "still, small voice" he knew, which would give him the blessings of strength and courage and endurance. While the scriptures do not say "Jesus listened to the people," he clearly did just that. Intently, with full attention, he heard beyond the words of those who came to him. One needs to be aware all the time, when seeking to know Jesus and his ministries, that he was a Jew. For his people hearing was a serious matter, encompassing the whole self in attention and response.[68] In the Gospel of John 5:24, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life."

As the nascent church was coming into being, Luke spoke of Lydia, in Acts 16:14. She was, he wrote, already a "worshiper of God." Through her listening, her heart was opened to the words of Paul, which led to her baptism as a new follower of Jesus. In 2 Timothy 2, Timothy, a young leader of the Jesus movement was reminded that the faithful "are to avoid wrangling over words, which

67 *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "ear, hearing" 223.

68 Alan Richardson, editor, *Theological Word Book of the Bible* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 104.

does no good but only ruins those who are listening."[69] In other words, listening to those who were tearing each other down also had the effect of destroying growth in faith, for observers and also for the ones speaking. To truly listen was to hear behind and beneath the words themselves.

What happened to the importance of listening, found in scripture? Books on the history and theology of the Christian Church are mostly silent about this. Understanding then is critical when working with ideas which have vanished 2000 years after the church came into being. Robert L. Wilken writes, "Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God . . . Who was this Jesus? The earliest testimonies to Jesus arise out of the charismatic and enthusiastic religious fervor provoked by the Resurrection. Events were moving fast, and Jesus' followers did their thinking on the run-or more accurately, while doing other things. Early Christian beliefs do not arise out of theological enclaves; they were formed in disputes between Christians and their adversaries, in the setting of a cultic meal, while explaining their convictions to a new convert, or in telling tales about Jesus to the young. Christian beliefs grew out of situations in life (Sitz im Leben) in which early Christians regularly found themselves. There were no set beliefs agreed upon by all; nor were there any ground rules on how to determine what to say or think or do . . . They had to make up their own minds as they understood their own situation and the memories they brought with them."[70]

The Christian Church, its doctrine and creeds, its institutions and divisions were in flux since the beginning. It was helpful to find what was missing from the recordings of church history and the reflections of theologians, as well as what was found. This short reflection upon the role of "listening" for Christianity did not begin to uncover the richness of the various strands of tradition grounded in scripture. So what follows are a few examples of people and movements where listening was most likely given credence and also where there was room for the ears and souls of children.

Origen of Alexandria, (185–254 C.E.) was considered one of

69 2 Timothy 2:14b.

70 Robert Wilken, *The Myth of Christian Beginnings* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday and Company, 1961), 164–65.

the greatest of all Christian theologians. His On First Principles was written during a time of oppression; when doctrine was beginning to be formulated, though, as noted above, no consensus existed among the various church leaders and people.[71] Origen was an early proponent of universalism "the eventual restoration of all souls to a state of dynamic perfection in proximity to the godhead." Origen reflected upon "receiving little children" in Mark and Luke and accepted Jesus' words as pointing to real children.[72] He spoke little of listening other than, for example, in his arguments found in Contra Celsus, where Origen argued that the Greek writer should have listened more clearly to the words of Moses, Elijah and other Old Testament voices. Yet, in even engaging Celsus, Origen gave an illustration of careful listening to another's voice. More than a thousand years later, Origen's thought became important in the Enlightenment for those thinkers who found in scripture and the early church fathers grounding in God's love.

During the Middle Ages, Christian mysticism flourished. Intellectual understanding and abstract thought took a secondary role to the "experience of union with God by the bond of love that is beyond human power to attain and that brings a sense of direct knowledge of and fellowship with God centered in Jesus Christ."[73] Dominican monk Meister Eckhart's (1260–1328 C.E.) legacy continued to have an impact as people sought to understand God's relationship with humankind and individuals and each one's relationship to God. Eckhart's metaphor for describing this relationship was "God's ground and my ground is the same ground."[74] Defined as "grunt" in The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart, metaphor's "function is . . . pragmatic . . . meant to transform, or overturn, ordinary limited forms of consciousness through the process of making the inner meaning of the metaphor

71 *The Internet Encyclopedia Of Philosophy*, "Origen," www.IEP.utm.edu/o/origen.htm (accessed June 9, 2006).

72 Origen of Alexandria, "Origen's Commentary," *19 The Parallel Passages in Mark and Luke. Anti-Nicene Father, vol I*, www.Sacred-Texts.com/chr/ecf/009/0090460.htm (accessed June 9, 2006).

73 McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*, 181.

74 Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart: The Man from Whom God Hid Nothing* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2001) 38.

one's own in everyday life."[75]

Parallel developments of this understanding were found in the hesychast movement which grew out of Eastern Christianity and Symeon's[76] writings on his direct conscious experience of the Holy Spirit. As noted earlier in this paper, Eastern Christianity acknowledged only three theologians. Symeon was one.[77] The following is a quote from St. Symeon on Spirituality, "Do not say that it is impossible to receive the Spirit of God. Do not say that it is possible to be made whole without Him. Do not say that one can possess Him without knowing it. Do not say that God does not manifest Himself to man. Do not say that men cannot perceive the divine light, or that it is impossible in this age! Never is it found to be impossible, my friends. On the contrary, it is entirely possible when one desires it" (Hymn 27, 125–132).[78]

Adult mystical experience of God, through direct apprehension, is akin to the way children know the divine. Because of their inability to think abstractly and their openness to imaginative thought, children and the mystics of medieval times have much in common.

Toward the end of the Reformation Era, Pierre duMoulin, a French Calvinist spoke of Christ as "our eternal friend; and it is a law of friendship that friends support each other." Holy Listening implies friendship and commitment and support, like that of duMoulin's friendship in Christ, friendship through Christ.

The other strong Reformation movement became the Lutheran Church. The Pietist response to Lutheran orthodoxy, under the leadership of Johan Arndt (1555– 1621), changed justification to sanctification and opened the door for new interaction between believer and Jesus Christ and between believers in Christ. Sanctification was understood as Christ's indwelling which brought the faithful person to a life of holiness; a life progressively conformed

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75 Ibid., 38.

76 Kallistos Ware, "Eastern Christendom," *The Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, ed. John McManners (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 147–49.

77 Of him is said, "He is one of three great Fathers whom the Orthodox Church has granted the title of 'Theologian', because he is one of a few, in the history of Christianity, to 'know' God. St. Symeon was born in Galatia in Paphlagonia (Asia Minor) in 949 AD. *Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Australia*, "St. Symeon the New Theologian," http://home.it.net.au/~jgrapsas/pages/symeon.htm (accessed June 10, 2006).

78 Ibid.

to the will of God. Images sometimes illustrated unarticulated ideas, as in 1827, when the Quaker artist Edward Hicks rendered Isaiah's "peaceable kingdom" as an attentive girl among the beasts of creation.[79]

The Society of Friends, better known as Quakers, originated in 1668. They stressed "Inner Light" as superior to scripture and church tradition, "A sense of the divine and the direct working of God in the soul."[80] Silence was an important aspect of corporate worship, as members sat in "holy expectation before the Lord." The classic pattern of worship began with listening silence, until a member of the congregation was moved to speak. This was an intergenerational practice continuing in some Quaker communions today. When one was nudged by God to offer a word, all others listened. Children were taught until the 1970's the practice of listening for God and to each other through books prepared especially for them.

During the Enlightenment there was a return to Protestant spirituality and to demythologizing the Bible, which was both blessing and curse. In the *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, it was said of Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), that he systematized liberal thinking of the day and "the necessity of qualifying all doctrine by the paramount assertion that God is love; the rule of interpreting all scripture in the light of God's nature and not as a quarry of information, even about spiritual things, the acceptance of the limitation of our knowledge of God to what is morally necessary—light enough to live by."[81] By the end of the century Schleiermacher (1768–1834) had defined the human relationship to God, as "our response to God's saving love, the feeling of 'absolute dependence.'"[82]

Yet even within the openness of liberal thought there was little attention given directly to "listening" as spiritual practice. Only very recently, in the last 50 years or so, was there a return to "listening" and it came from the discipline of counseling. The journal *Pastoral Psychology*, vol. 15, number 141, February 1964, had an article on

79 McManners, *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, 388.

80 *Oxford Dictionary of Christianity*, s.v. "Society of Friends.," 529.

81 McManners, *Oxford Illustrated History of Christianity*, 283.

82 Ibid.

listening as a technique of pastoral care. The suggestions were applicable to the particular ministry of pastoral care, but also to the full ministry of care and compassion in the church as a whole. "To listen—really listen—one must be able to concentrate, to accept the speaker, to be unfailingly honest and transparently real, and be willing to enter an experience from which he, the listener, may not return unchanged."[83]

Particularly in western society, the pace and speed of the world is such that Holy Listening is an out of the ordinary act not generally encouraged by the theology of the Christian Church, nor by its life together.

**Worship, a way of being more than a weekly act, is the work of all God's people, at all times, in all places.**

Worship is the work of God's people, both grown and young. Composed of numerous elements, worship draws people of all ages toward each other and God. Of critical importance is ritual**,** a counted-upon movement through and in time. It echoes Sabbath in sacred space, silence, singing, quiet, thanksgiving. Words and actions, song, poetry, and liturgy are repeated again and again so it becomes part of the child, the community, the relational aspect of the time together.

Prayer comes naturally to children. The job of adults is to encourage their praying, to provide them with opportunities and ways to pray, to learn from them about talking to God, to say "Yes!" to each child's connection to God. Children easily adopt an attitude of thankful prayer. As they are affirmed in this practice, the young ones, and the adults with them, are reassured that this is a gift from God, a gift from the one who knows now, as of old, how life works best.

Further elements of worship space and time include, serenity, which is especially important in worship which is designed to elicit wonder and awe; the things of the faith learned with a consciousness of God's presence; space, recognized as sacred and affirming all space as sacred, created by God; a candle, which when lighted acknowledges God's presence; blessing which occurs each time people come together for worship.

83 Don Rogers, "A Note on the Technique of Listening," *Pastoral Psychology* 15, no. 141 (February 1964).

Hayley is seven. An active child, she squirms throughout worship. Except, that is, when music plays and the people stand to sing. Then she is transformed. The child, usually dressed in a swirly skirt, slips out of her pew and begins to move to the music. She dances as David did, praising God, unrestrained and full of life. She is in the process of healing from an abusive home situation with each step.

The act of worshipping God too often became entombed in the wall of churches, relegated to a particular hour of the week. Yet from the beginning of time human beings worshipped that which is greater than humanity. From the beginning of life, people were compelled by awe and reverence to worship.

Worship, the work of the people, as old as time, transcended religious affiliation. Jewish and Christian worship practices were grounded in the Bible. From Genesis, acts of worship were carried out, beginning with our mythic ancestors Adam and Eve who lived in perfect harmony with God, in the Garden of Eden. Their sons, Cain and Abel, made sacrifices to the LORD. In Genesis 4:26, formal acts of community worship were mentioned: "At that time people began to invoke the name of the Lord."

Even before humankind began to worship, creation worshipped. Walter Brueggeman, in his interpretation of the book of Genesis commented, "The time pattern of the liturgy (there was evening and morning . . . God saw that it was good) itself comments upon the good order of the created world under the serene order of God."[84]

When seeking room for children in worship, threads continue to be found which wind back into antiquity. In Genesis and Exodus the people were admonished to worship God wherever God had appeared. One may assume that meant the people, all the people, whether wandering in the desert, or settled in Canaan. Eventually these sanctuaries syncretistically adopted local pagan religious practices and during King Josiah's reign, (640–609 B.C.E.), worship was declared a national act, not one of a tribe or family and was to be offered only in Jerusalem (II Kings 23:8). Synagogues and prayerful worship came into being to satisfy the religious longings of people

84 Brueggemann, Genesis, Interpretation, 30.

who could not get to the Temple.

As illustrated above, the conception of worship developed and changed through the course of biblical times. In Jesus' day, there were opposing forces in the religious leadership, with some understanding worship as a ritual of sacrifice, while others, especially those who adopted the teachings of the prophet Jeremiah, conceiving of worship as spiritual service to God. In addition, the traditions and rituals of the Pharisees and the centrality of the Temple, with its combination of commerce and worship illustrated some of the tensions present in the Jewish community during Jesus' ministry.

The annual festivals of Passover, Weeks and Ingathering were part of the national worship of the Jewish people. As noted earlier children were expected to be a part of these festivals. Music continued to be a part of worship, with the song and poetry of the Psalms included in synagogue and Temple worship. Because of the appeal to the emotions made by music, it would have been another aspect of worship that drew the children.

In Matthew 21:15, the children's shouts of praise in the Temple, "Hosanna to the Son of David" were an act of worship. Gospel stories of exuberant crowds welcoming Jesus in Jerusalem, with waving palms and cloaks spread along the road, highlight another worshipful time in which children were probably visible and could have had a leadership role. It is easy to see them dancing along, singing and shouting with excitement. While they may have had no better understanding of Jesus' role in salvation history than any others, the children would have, at these moments, been representing the Kingdom of God on earth.

While the religious leaders were busy keeping people, including all the marginalized, the group to which most children belonged, out of the Temple and away from the ritual and traditions of the faith, Jesus was turning the tables, literally and figuratively. For example, his understanding of table fellowship included the most outcast of outcasts and therefore it is not out of the realm of possibility that children may have taken part in the rituals of breaking bread, with Jesus and later with older people in the house churches of the followers of Jesus.

In the time of the New Testament writings, children would have been baptized along with the adults in the converting Jewish or

Gentile household. It can be supposed that this practice continued for many years, as Christianity came into being and the church was heavily oppressed by the rulers of the times. Jesus, an observant Jew, had transformed the landscape of class and culture and along with that worship and rule keeping. His first followers were joined to the cult through that process of baptism, which signaled at least for converts of Paul, "an extra-ordinarily thoroughgoing re-socialization, in which the sect was intended to become virtually the primary group for its members, supplanting all other loyalties."[85]

The new Church celebrated the Lord's Supper in the context of a meal, until late New Testament times (see Jude, verse 12). Jewish habits of the practice of time probably continued to influence the Christian communities; with daily prayer, a weekly focus on Sabbath and yearly festival celebrations. Leadership, music, preaching and architecture began to develop clearly as Christian. With more and more worship life taking place in the churches, children would have found their richest food in the festivals of the church along with continuing traditions and rituals of family life.

Following Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 C.E., Christianity became the state's religion. Most of the material written about worship during these times was silent about children, except upon the subject of infant baptism. The baptism of babies became a battle ground and Tertullian railed against it in his *On Baptism*, written about 200 C.E. Theological developments, many attributed to Augustine's thought on original sin, which grew out of Paul's "desperate" theology, served to make infant baptism a normal practice in the Christian church, though, for a millennium.

Augustine was also greatly responsible, positively, for the inclusion of children in the Eucharist. Along with his argument for original sin and the necessity of infant baptism he also wrote, "Christ's flesh, which was given for the life of the world, was also given for the life of the little ones, and if they have not eaten the flesh of the Son of Man, they will not have life either.'"[86] Children

85 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 56-63; quoted in James F. White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15.

86 Jerome, *Epistle*, 107.7; quoted in O.M Bakke, *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 2005) 250.

therefore continued to be able to see and hear, taste and touch, in worship.

John Chrysostom, patriarch of Constantinople, stressed parental responsibility in forming children to live a life consistent with Christian ideals. He assumed families would attend church together. Bakke noted that this fact was attested to in a number of sources from the mid-third to the end of the sixth century; with the family remaining the primary context in which children would receive Christian teaching, as separate from worship. He wrote that there were a few sources which spoke of children singing specific liturgical responses, acting as members of choirs and serving as lectors.[87] They also often had special roles to play in prayer, since young children were believed to be innocent and closer to God than older persons, therefore their prayers more efficacious.

Worship in the earliest New Testament churches was essentially domestic, in that it included whole households and was most often held in the homes of wealthy members. According to the article "Children and Worship" in the *New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, "the shift from 'domestic' to 'public' worship in the early Christian centuries did not basically disturb the inherited situation." Children remained a part of the worshipping community until the Reformation sowed the first seeds of the separation of children. There was a shift in emphasis in worship to intellectual exposition of the scriptures, where sermons went for an hour or more, and prayers became didactic and lengthy, uttered by clergy, without room for the participation of the congregation. In addition, there was a concomitant concern that the congregation learn and understand, through this form of worship, which led to fewer ways for children to be fully part of the worshipping congregation.

> Yet where the Reformation posed questions most acutely (especially about the need to put worship emphasis on the 'word') it also provided the apparently satisfactory answers. Without ceasing to be public, worship again became domestic. The church became a community of families, with each *paterfamilias* a high priest presiding over daily family worship.[88]

87 Ibid.

88 J.G. Davies, ed., "Children and Worship," in *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, 161.

The industrial revolution, for families in the cities and for those whose male parent traveled to the city for work, had a lasting impact on the family and the ability of families to be the domestic church. Eventually the local congregation became the place where the spiritual life of the child was to be nurtured and worship to be attended. At this same time the success of the Sunday School movement meant that children's needs were being assessed educationally rather than liturgically. Developmental psychology also came into prominence. Both led to greater and greater separation of children from careful incorporation into the worship life of the church.

Yet also by the mid-twentieth century, Baptism became a focus for those who sought to understand the Sacrament in new ways. Even though Baptism for the remission of sins remained strongly linked to the baptism of the young, another strand of thought was reclaimed from scripture and history; that which stressed the sacrament as symbolic of God's gift of grace and the congregation's welcome of a new member of the church family. Elizabeth Caldwell wrote,

> The sacrament of baptism marks an important day in the life of a child, the child's family, and the child's family of faith gathered in worship. Another journey of faith has begun, and all who are there, all who witness the welcome with water, are partners with this child as she or he grows in faith. The nature of the household of faith has been changed forever because a new one has been welcomed, and this child shall lead them.[89]

Author Neville Clark asked probing questions about the theology of worship and liturgy; one of which was particularly pertinent to BBSN. "If corporate worship engages the deep places of the heart and lures and menaces the human will, on what grounds should the children of the church be debarred from exposure to that engagement or denied the possibility of appropriate responses to its claim?" [90] He asserts, the child "must be able to come not as an intruder in a strange land with an alien tongue but as an heir claiming an inheritance the contours of which have been long familiar and hauntingly experienced."[91]

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89 Caldwell, *Come Unto Me*, 31.

90 *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, 162.

91 Ibid., 163.

**Blessing is the affirmation of God's presence.**

Blessing**,** is both encouragement and pronouncement; it is God's gift of enabling vitality. In The Interpreter's series, *Genesis* volume, Walter Brueggemann wrote that the creation narrative was a statement about the blessing God had ordained into the processes of human life. He said, "The delight in the goodness and blessing of life is asserted against the view that life is neutral or hostile and that God is an outsider to it all."[92]

The blessings of God are given to each person and each one is nourished by a regular reminder of this. Naming, creating, calling, loving, and presence are components of blessing, which, though extended by one person to another during Chapel time, is not a blessing of the leader, but of God.

Blessing is also God's gift of enabling vitality. Though many and varied, the definition of blessing which best fits the work of those in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture is that of Walter Brueggemann. He understands the creation narrative as a statement about the blessing God has ordained into the processes of life. "The delight in the goodness and blessing of life is asserted against the view that life is neutral or hostile and that God is an outsider to it all."[93]

The first blessing of humankind came in Genesis 1:28. God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Walter Brueggemann's interpretation of this was that God, in this blessing, "provides the enabling vitality."[94] This "enabling vitality," the presence of God throughout life, provides for each person, the ability to take the next step, to make it another hour, to grow in faith, to become more and more closely aligned to God's desires for that person's life and for the kingdom of heaven on earth.

This definition of "blessing" is consistent too with the work done by Claus Westermann. He gave full consideration of the biblical approaches to "blessing" in a book entitled *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, translated from the German by Keith Crim.

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92 Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 36-38.

93 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 36-38.

94 Ibid., 38.

Blessing meant a lot of things in the Bible. Both the way the word was used in the original text and the theological orientations of those who wrote about "blessing" affected the considerations of "blessing." It is not possible to completely explore the word in this paper. Over the years, "blessing" came to be understood by some in the Christian tradition as a less than important biblical concept and/or one which had been hijacked by the proponents of the prosperity gospel. Therefore it did not even appear in some recent theological and exegetical works. *The Christian Word Book*, published by Abingdon Press in 1968 does not include a reference to "blessing" and the *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, published in 1996 has "see curse" next to the word "blessing." That ended its consideration, other than cursorily under a discussion of "curse." Yet God's blessing of humanity and humankind's return praise of thanksgiving was integral to the scriptures which formed Jesus and continue to form and inform people today. The "circle of blessing is completed when man blesses God . . . it is reciprocated by the Church's response: 'Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ' (see 2 Cor. 1:3 and Rev. 7:12)."[95]

The *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, noted: "The Bible abounds in pictures of blessing–blessing sought, blessing promised, blessing conferred, blessing received."[96] While people often pronounced a wish for God's blessing to be upon others; blessing was always and ultimately from God. The Bible differentiated the way toward "blessing" from acts that led away and the referenced article indicated that the things that made for blessedness ranged from the physical to the spiritual, from the earthy to the heavenly.

In the New Testament, blessing became less a thing of substance and more a spiritual state for those who belonged to God's kingdom; "a chosen nation is no longer the locus of God's blessing, but individual believers are."[97]An assumption that the New Testament scriptures related to blessing, especially in the Gospels (see the Beatitudes), referred to heaven was read back into the scriptures from later theology. Jesus may just as well have been bringing a Hebrew

95 Richardson, *Theological Works of the Bible*, 33.

96 *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s.v. "blessing."

97 Ibid.

understanding of community, speaking corporately rather than to individuals.

Walter Brueggemann wrote in his commentary on Genesis, that blessing was mentioned in the creation narrative; used of living creatures (1:22), of human creatures (1:28), of the Sabbath (2:3), and "the world itself is the vehicle for the blessings God has ordained in it as an abiding characteristic."[98]

Claus Westermann, in *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church*, said this about blessing. "When the Bible speaks of God's contact with mankind, his/her blessing is there alongside his deliverance."[99] When the nation of Israel changed from a nomadic to a settled life, one saw that "the God who saves is the one who comes; the one who blesses is the one who is present."[100] Genesis and Deuteronomy were concerned with the concept of blessing bestowed by God upon God's people. The words *bless* and *blessing* occured more frequently in these two books than anywhere else in the Old Testament. To help explain blessing, Westermann referred to the writings of Johannes Pedersen. Part of Pedersen's understanding of blessing was tied into the Hebrew *nephesh* "soul," which expressed a person's total state of being alive. "This vital power, without which no living being can exist, the Israelites called *berākhāh,* 'blessing.'"[101] Vitality equaled blessing and blessing manifested itself in differing ways. The usual meaning for blessing in Genesis and the Old Testament was associated with fertility and the survival of the family. Abraham's promise from God was that his descendants would be multiplied as were the stars of heaven. Another Hebrew word used for blessing was *shālōm*. While *berākhāh*—blessing was vertical and passed from generation to generation, *shālōm*—blessing was horizontal, the well-being of the community.[102]

Blessing was significant in the act of worship for Israel. When the newly built temple was dedicated in Jerusalem, the first act

98 Brueggemann, *Genesis*, 36–37.

99 Claus Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadeplphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 4.

100 Ibid., 8.

101 Ibid., 18.

102 Ibid., 29

performed in it was a blessing of the king on the people ... Westermann quoted Signund Mowinckel on that significance of blessing: "The purpose of the cult is to secure blessing for the community and for the individual."[103] The pagan neighbors of Israel also used their temples as the source of blessing for their people and land. The uniqueness of Israelite worship consisted in the fact that for it, history, in which God dealt with God's people, played a decisive role.[104]

There was no doubt that the bestowal of blessing was important to the Israelites and this blessing was related to God's activity as the one who blesses.[105] The priestly blessing, found in Numbers, continued from its origin with Aaron and his sons, from the worship of ancient Israel, the postexilic temple, synagogue worship, through the early Christian church into continued worship practice today.[106] Westermann identified four distinctive features of the blessing offered in worship.[107] These were considered in developing the understanding of blessing used in Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture:

> God is the initiator of blessing, even though it occurs through the action of a human being.
>
> Blessing involves both word and rite.
>
> Blessing evolves from God's friendly approach to those to whom the blessing is offered. Its meaning is discovered in the contexts that present God's actions of bestowing blessing.
>
> The appropriate place for blessing is at the end of worship when the community is dismissed. The blessing goes with those who receive it, out into their lives in the world.

Westermann also explores work done by other scholars on the gospel texts where Jesus blesses the children. He concludes that the authors of the synoptics regarded Jesus' blessing of the children to need no justification because it was part of Jewish traditional practice. Jesus blessed children which indicated Jesus' activity was not limited to adults, though their growth and maturing was central to his teaching.

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103 Ibid., 35.

104 Ibid., 36.

105 Ibid., 36.

106 Ibid., 45.

107 Ibid., 43.

Westermann notes, "That is precisely what blessing means—growth, and maturing, the health and well-being of children."[108]

Though Westermann presented the most complete exegetical work on blessing which is available in English, continued growth in understanding 'blessing' through the history of Judeo-Christian culture occurs when other sources are consulted. Blessing was used liturgically before Holy Communion by the end of the fourth century, as an "encouragement and preparation."[109] According to the *New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* the rite was omitted by Rome from around 500 C.E. and does not exist at all in any Reformed denominations. A blessing at the end of the eucharist had become common by the end of the Middle Ages; most likely "derived from the blessing by the bishop of his flock as he went out (see Westermann)."[110] This blessing has been retained in the churches which grew out of the reformation with the exception of the Zwinglians.[111]

Matthew Fox, author of *Original Blessing,* reminded readers that the theology of "original blessing" was much older than the newer concept of original sin. "The fall/redemption theory is not nearly as ancient as is the creation-centered one. The former goes back to Augustine (354–430 A.D.) . . . The creation-centered tradition traces its roots to the ninth century B.C., with the very first author of the Bible, the Yahwist or J source, to Psalms and wisdom books, to much of the prophets, to Jesus . . . "[112] He described "the Universe itself, blessed and graced," as "the proper starting point for spirituality."[113] Along with Brueggemann, Fox asserted, "The God of the Covenant is the God of the Blessing,"[114] promising wholeness, abundance and good things to God's people. In his description of each new life, Fox exclaimed, "We enter a broken and torn and sinful world—that is for

108 Ibid., 84-85.

109 *The New Westminster Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, s.v. "blessing."

110 Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible*.

111 Ibid.

112 Matthew Fox, *Original Blessing* (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1983), 11.

113 Ibid., 26.

114 Ibid., 45.

sure. But we do not enter as blotches on existence, as sinful creatures, we burst into the world as 'original blessings.'"[115]

Judaism has retained its respect for ritual and the power of offering God's blessings. In an article entitled "Blessing of Children," Kohler and Philipson discussed the background of a Sabbath blessing of children, noting that while no one knows how old the custom is, it was first found to be mentioned in Brautspiegel written by Moses Henochs in 1602. They go on to say that by the seventeenth century the custom was a regular part of Jewish life.[116] Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a respected Jewish theologian, often was quoted as saying, "Just to be is a blessing; just to live is holy."[117] In the simplicity of his theology, is a reminder that life itself is a blessing and those who have been given life, are blessed.

The blessing of children through a Service of Dedication, in worship, became a common act in Baptist and other Protestant churches which practiced believer baptism. The Episcopal and Roman Catholic churches continue to include blessing prayers and litanies for corporate and household worship time. These, as well as Jewish blessings for home and school, faithfully retain the underlying understanding that while people may invoke a blessing, it is God who blesses.

And so we come around to where we began, with the original blessing of God's enabling vitality, given to each person. Jurgen Moltmann connected blessedness and children in his book, *In the End—The Beginning*, "Children are close to the kingdom of God not because they have characteristics which adults have lost—innocence, perhaps, or purity, or naivety. It is rather that the kingdom of God is close to them because God loves them, embraces them and blesses them. Anyone who experiences the nearness of the living God in the fellowship of Jesus becomes like a child: life is born again and begins afresh."[118]

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115 Ibid., 47.

116 Kohler and Philipson, *Jewishencyclopedia.com*.

117 "Abraham J. Heschel Quotes," http://thinkexist.com/quotes/Abraham_J._Heschel (accessed June 18, 2007).

118 Moltmann, *In the End*, 14.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, a few words are in order about Clark Williamson's *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology*. This book is a reminder that "blessing" is not about individuals, it is about transformation, about community, about working with God to be a provisional exhibition of the Kingdom of God. Williamson wrote about the importance of memory, story, and connectedness in creating a communion of blessing and wellbeing: "The church was created by the Holy Spirit, the giver of life and well-being." He spoke of this communion of love and blessing, the church, as movement of "companions on the way."[119]

A way back from the devastation wrought by adult humankind upon itself and the rest of creation may be found, in small ways, within Blessing Based Spiritual Nurture and the foundations upon which the practices rest. Children, born in holiness, imbued with *imago Dei*, accepted as the original blessings they are, carefully nurtured within communal Sabbath-lives, by those doing Holy Listening; when offered times of worship, prayer and blessings, may be enabled to grow strong and whole, strengthening their connection with God, with creation, with one another.

Rubem Alves, contemporary theologian, in *Tomorrow's Child*, wrote, "The world of play lives by forgetting. The long-held presuppositions never become a law of human behavior . . . the future can be created according to the shape love takes in the imagination. It is along these lines, I believe, that we must understand Jesus' admonition that 'unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.' . . . he wanted to open the present for the future . . . Thus, when he says that we must become like children, he is not praising helplessness. He is inviting us to join the game of freedom and creativity, preconditions of human wholeness and social rebirth. Dance, celebration, and joy, the substance of the heavenly 'sabbath'—the day when productivity is forbidden and all is play; in this is the future . . . Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."[120]

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119 Clark A. Williamson, *Way of Blessing, Way of Life: A Christian Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999), 240.

120 Rubem Alves, *Tomorrow's Child*, 99–101.

Alves presents a compelling picture of and argument for the ultimate importance of Jesus' teachings regarding the youngest people. Children, when nurtured, loved and supported, model the kingdom at play with God, from the time they awake until their prayers are said and they settle into the night, resting in the arms of the Spirit.

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