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# The Child in the Church?

**Peter Adam.**

The *Child in the Church* is a document produced by the British Council of Churches which attempts to provoke a 'radical reassessment' of the place of children in the local church.<sup>1</sup>

It is important to note the restricted area of the Report's concern. It has to do with the place of the child in the church, and not in the school, nor in society. But the value of its contribution even in this small area of concern is severely limited by some significant weaknesses in its argument.

These weaknesses can be best exposed by asking four questions of the Report, each of which is concerned with an aspect of central importance to its contribution. This is to criticise the Report in its own terms, and thus reply to its contribution to the on-going debate.<sup>2</sup>

## Why is the Child in the Church?

The Report asserts that children do have a place in the church. It claims that this right is not adequately expressed by attendance at Sunday-school, and that it has to be thought out in response to modern ideas on education, theology, and child-development. The material for a 'Theology of Childhood' is presented in Chapter Three.

The significance of Childhood is not found in the sentiment of romantic idealisation (para. 31), nor do children have a place in the Kingdom because of their feelings or 'child-like intuitions' (para. 33). Jesus thought that they are in the Kingdom because they are objectively weak and helpless (para. 33).<sup>3</sup>

It is important to point out that this exegesis of Mark 10:13-16 ('... to such belongs the Kingdom of God... - '... receive the Kingdom of God like a child...') while defensible, cannot be accepted without question.<sup>4</sup> And the place of children in the Kingdom is not automatically illuminating as to their place in church. These interpretations may be correct, but they cannot be accepted so blandly.

Further, it is contradictory on the one hand to assert that children are in the Kingdom because of their objective helplessness, and on the other hand to assert their trustful dependence. The latter reintroduces the child-like intuitions rejected earlier in the same paragraph (para. 33)!

Children are of value, and thus ought to be in the church, according to

the Report, not only because they are members of the Kingdom, but also because 'the childhood of Jesus does confer on human childhood infinite worth' (para. 37). To claim that children are of value because Jesus was a child may be acceptable as a pious sentiment, but it will hardly wash as a theological principle. The over-40s are also (presumably) of infinite worth, and so (undoubtedly) are women; but their worth cannot be demonstrated by this argument, for Christ is not classifiable in either of those categories.<sup>5</sup> The value of children, and their place in the church, cannot be demonstrated by this argument.

If these two arguments for the place of children in the church are unsatisfactory, then real danger lies in the third argument. For the Report claims that the value of children in the church lies in their role as instances or patterns. 'The Lord of the Church sets them in the midst of the Church . . . not as objects of benevolence, nor even as recipients of instruction, but in the last analysis as patterns of discipleship' (para. 43). And 'Jesus set a child in the midst not as one to be taught but as a teacher.' (p. iv, The Foreword).

This analysis of the place of the child in the church is not only inadequate but also dangerous. It is a mark of the naivety of the Report that it does not see the difficulties let alone the dangers of this point of view.

This claim that children have a place in the church so they can provide patterns of discipleship must be criticised as follows:

Firstly, it is an adult-centred view. For children are of importance in that they are patterns for the benefit of adults. This does not do justice to children, however helpful it may be to adults.

Secondly, their value is seen as functional and not integral. This 'justification by works' (i.e. the work of being a pattern of helpfulness to adults) is dangerous. Any 'functional' view of the right to a place in the church denies grace. Membership of the church is not by ability or function but by the gift of God; and this is given in grace, not achieved by works, however valuable.

Thirdly, some children are more competent and independent than others. Are independent children of less usefulness as examples of helplessness than others, and so of less value? Has the independent child no place in the church?

Fourthly, as has been commented in another context, dogs often prove fine examples of absolute dependence. Yet their place in the church is not thereby assured.

Fifthly, to claim that helpless childhood is a pattern of discipleship does not do justice to discipleship. For there is more to discipleship than helplessness, and children are hardly able to exhibit that whole-hearted

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obedience which is illustrated in the Gospel narratives. Helplessness is only one aspect of the required response, and so they can only be of very limited value as patterns of discipleship.

For these reasons, the argument that children have a place in the church because of their value as patterns of discipleship is unsatisfactory. The right of any man, woman or child to be a member of the church is a gift of God. It lies in their redemption by Christ, and in God's declaration of his grace in adoption into his family. To assert the place of children in the church on the basis of their function or usefulness is not only wrong, but is also dangerous, in that it devalues them, and treats them as of less inherent value than adults.

So the place of the child in the church is a precarious one. It is argued from inadequately considered exegesis, and from a misuse of the significance of the childhood of Christ. The Report's view of the child is adult-centred. The child is an aid for the sanctification of the adult, and his value is thus dependent on his character conforming to type. He is in the church on the basis of his function. This is to degrade the child into a symbol. Children as human beings are of greater significance than that.

**What is the status of Nurture as an educational exercise?**

In spite of this rather unpromising basis for the place of children in the church, the Report has a firm suggestion as to the church's responsibility to them. This is expressed in 'nurture', a key word in the Report.

The Report is at pains to distinguish Christian nurture from secular education on the one hand, and from instruction and indoctrination on the other.<sup>6</sup>

This is of course an area in which there is considerable controversy. It is important to remember that the Report is dealing with nurture in the context of the church, and not in open society, and so avoids the serious difficulties raised by a discussion of Christian education in that wider context (para. 51).

Christian nurture is most clearly understood in contrast to secular education, instruction, and indoctrination.

'Secular education' aims to build up independence and autonomy (para 50).

'Instruction' is a content-centred, authoritative 'telling' which passes on knowledge and skills (para 52).

'Indoctrination' attempts to secure conformity by denying personhood and avoiding contrary evidence and argument (para. 53).

'Nurture', claims the Report, 'occupies a middle position between closed and authoritative instruction on the one hand, in which the past is simply reduplicated, and open, enquiring education on the other' (para. 57).

The method is to give the child a past, but to leave the future open (para. 62). It is to pass on not the painting but the paint-box (para. 63). The material is given, the final product unknown.

The aim here is to avoid the extremes of secular education on the one hand, and indoctrination on the other. But the mean between the extremes, the middle way, is an elusive entity. It is arguable that the Report has failed to find it, and has thus entered even more dangerous waters.

For if the children who have been 'nurtured' are really open to the future, if the course of their 'maturity' cannot be predicted, then the process is distinguishable from 'secular education'. The children will develop 'independence', and an 'autonomy as persons' which may involve a complete reworking of the 'past' which has been given them in nurture. There will then be no recognisable continuity with the 'past' of Christian tradition. If Christian tradition is thus disposable, it ought to be admitted, and 'nurture' can then be replaced by 'secular education'.

If, on the other hand, 'nurture' is expected to produce a recognisable continuum if the giving of a 'past' does in some way determine a future, then 'nurture' becomes a subtle form of 'indoctrination'. This would not be as open and honest as 'instruction', nor as obvious as the style of 'indoctrination' rejected in the Report, but nevertheless 'indoctrination'. An 'indoctrination' more dangerous because more subtle, and more effective because not acknowledged.

Some form of indoctrination is unavoidable. The Report admits that even 'secular education' is not really neutral (para. 50). For the selection of information, approach to problems, and style of discussion are all determinative of the future. Some kind of indoctrination is unavoidable.

It then becomes a matter of deciding which style of indoctrination does least harm and most good. It is obvious that the indoctrination which deprives people of independent thought, and which will not allow discussion of contrary evidence or of alternative views cannot be countenanced. It is also obvious that the subtle indoctrination which determines results by its input of approach, experiences, or information, under the guise of open education is similarly reprehensible. The only honest possibility is that of some kind of 'instruction'. This would involve the communication of styles and truths, and an approach which was honest and open about its presuppositions and hopes, and which allowed debate and contrary opinion. For it is better to be honest about the presuppositions which support the educational exercise, and this open approach would evidence a greater respect for those being educated.

'Nurture' then, is either indistinguishable from secular education (if the future really is open) or a subtle form of indoctrination (if some

recognisable continuum is expected). The evidence of the Report on this question is contradictory, but perhaps the latter is more likely to be the case.<sup>7</sup>

The aim of the Report to find a middle way is not realised, though it is asserted. This is a serious fault in a document which puts such emphasis on this key concept of 'nurture'. And the product of this failure is the more dangerous because it claims to be a success. But if the aim of 'nurture' is suspect educationally, so is its exegetical basis and theological use.

**What are the dangers of Nurture as a theological exercise?**

It is a feature of the 'contribution to the ongoing-debate' approach that it selects a key concept (in this case 'nurture') as its contribution. The problems of this determinative-principle approach are predictable the use of doubtful exegesis to support a preconceived notion, and the inappropriate pre-eminence of one idea to the neglect of concepts which are its necessary complements.<sup>8</sup>

The use of doubtful exegesis is a regrettable feature of this Report. One reason for it is a mistake in method of interpretation of the New Testament material. The Report pursues a monochrome understanding of the nurture language of birth, growth and childhood in the Gospels and Epistles. There is more variety and subtlety in the New Testament than is evidenced in the Report. It is a mistake to extrapolate from the meaning of one pericope to understand the rest of the New Testament material. The 'like a child' idea of Mark 10:15 is not determinative of the meaning of all references to children.<sup>9</sup>

An example of this error in interpretation can be cited. 'The child symbolises an equally valid aspect of the tradition. It is always youthful, growing and being renewed. So we read that the adult, if he would enter into the Kingdom of God, must be "born again" (John 3:5) and become "like a little child" (Mark 10:15) . . .' (para. 67).

This is not good exegesis. For John 3:5 is not about becoming like children; it is about birth, not about childhood, and it is about the activity of God, and not about the activity of man. And the Report has previously indicated that Mark 10:15 is about the objective weakness and helplessness of children, and not, as is here suggested, about their qualities of youthfulness, and capacity for growth and renewal.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, to be 'children of God' (1 John 3:2, para. 56) in the thought of 1 John does not imply that the unrevealed future may see adulthood, for that would be to take the role of God the Father. To be children of God in 1 John is to have been born of God, to have believed that Jesus is the Christ, and consequence of it is to do right and to avoid sin.<sup>11</sup> The simile of child-

hood is not used in a child-adult context of thought.

It is not that the assertion of the Report on the role of children in the church is in itself wrong. But it is sad that its argument is based on such doubtful exegesis.

The other fault which ensues when one aspect of truth is stressed is that complementary aspects are undervalued. These complementary aspects may be basic to an adequate view of the whole. It is the weakness of the 'contribution' approach that they can be neglected, and that the important and difficult task of integration of the various aspects can be avoided. So, for example, the idea of 'nurture', in the sense of giving people a past and leaving the future open is seen to exclude the idea of making 'copies' of adult Christians (paras 59,62), of reduplicating or repeating one generation in the next (para. 59). While the idea of 'imitation' can be understood in a way which is restrictive of maturity, it still plays an important role in human growth and development. The idea of people providing patterns of behaviour is found in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 11:1, Philipians 3:17, 1 Thessalonians 1:6, 2:14, 1 Timothy 1:16, 4:12, Titus 2:7, Hebrews 11), in Christian tradition, and also in this Report, for children are set in the church as 'patterns of discipleship' (para. 43).

Similarly, the idea of Christ as pattern or example is found in the New Testament (John 13:15, Ephesians 5:2, Philipians 2:5, Hebrews 12:2, 1 Peter 2:21, 1 John 2:6) and in Christian tradition. It is presumably incompatible when the idea of 'nurture' because it is prescriptive of a definite 'future'. Certainly the pattern of the child Jesus as mild, obedient, and good as prescriptive for today's children is rejected by the Report (para. 37).

It is not clear how the Report would be able to integrate this 'imitation' tradition with 'nurture'. If the support of 'nurture' necessarily means the neglect of this tradition, then that ought to be stated, and the implications ought to be faced.

It is odd if the development of a theology of childhood excludes the idea of imitation, for Christian tradition includes the notion of the children of God following the example of their Father (Matthew 5:44-48, Luke 6: 32-36, Ephesians 5:1, 1 John 3:10).

The 'contribution' approach rejects some aspects of the truth; others it ignores, with a similarly unsatisfactory result.

For the idea of 'nurture' concentrates on the idea of growth as a gradual development (as it is based on the human analogy), and therefore has an optimistic view of continuity and improvement. Other aspects of Christian life include repentance, conversion, and the flesh-spirit battle. These connote discontinuity and radical change. Radical change is needed because men are,

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by nature, 'children of wrath' (Ephesians 2:3, and context).

There are of course other models of growth than the human or animal, which include aspects of discontinuity. The seed must be buried in the ground and die before it can bear fruit (John 12:24). This paradigm of growth by death is an equally valid picture of Christian experience (Luke 9:24), and is needed to complement the growth-development concept of the Report. For to neglect the radical evil that is in children is to fail to take childhood seriously. It is to deny the humanity of children.<sup>12</sup>

So the use the Report makes of 'nurture' as a theological concept is unsatisfactory, because it causes an interpretation of the New Testament material which is indefensible according to the historical-critical method of exegesis, and because complementary aspects of Christian maturity are rejected or ignored.

The last question has to do with the Report's attitude to the resource material needed for Christian nurture.

### What role has the Bible in Nurture?

The Report makes a conscious effort to maintain a connection with the tradition of the church. It is concerned to give a 'past' in 'nurture', even if not a future. And that 'past' includes Bible, church history, and church tradition.

However no part of the tradition is regulative or prescriptive for the present. For example, 'to use the Bible . . . as if is *prescribed* particular ways of Christian living, would be to instruct or even indoctrinate, not to "nurture"' (para. 76). It is not clear which criteria are used by the Report to discern what parts of the tradition are acceptable.

Of particular interest for consideration is the role attributed to the Bible, which is a part of the tradition often regarded as regulative for the present.

The Report gives two reasons why the Bible, which it claims is basic, is an important part of the tradition. The first is that it contains a record of events of our Lord's life and of the early church. The second is that it gives access to the experience of believers of other generations (paras. 74,75).

While these may be true descriptions of part of the function of the Bible, it is a scarcely adequate view of its status. For it places it on the level of the Apocrypha, and of secular historians. And the study of church history enables the modern man to enter into the experience of believers in other generations. So the Report does not have a high view of the status of the Bible.

This view of the Bible puts it on the same level as the rest of the tradition of the church. And for the Report, this is not to assert its

authority, for the past may not dictate to the future. The Bible, as the rest of tradition, is treated as resource-material.

To use a document as resource-material is to address questions to it. But documents from other ages not only provide answers but also address questions to this age. A document must be allowed to speak in its own terms if it is to be taken seriously. For example, the Acts of the Apostles may be used as resource-material for travel around the Mediterranean, but that use of it does not come to terms with the message of the book.<sup>13</sup>

The Report gives no reason for rejecting that past and present tradition of the church which has understood the Bible to be the Word of God. The Bible does *prescribe*, and to understand it in this way is not to misuse it (despite para. 76).

The 'prescriptive' use of the Bible is rejected by the Report as being 'instruction' or 'indoctrination', and not 'nurture'. But the Bible can function as an authority in a creative and open way: it need not consist in 'repeating biblical phrases and statements' (para. 76). Christian history gives evidence of a simplistic use of the Bible, but it also gives evidence of a subtlety of exegesis and application of the Biblical text which cannot be adequately described in terms of the activity of a repetitious parrot. The Report does not take into account the quality of this tradition, and so can easily dispense with any idea of Biblical authority.

Although it devotes a chapter to the role of the Bible in Christian nurture, the Report's conclusions are hardly satisfactory even under its own charter of considering the contribution of church tradition to the discussions of today.

### Conclusion.

The discussion of the paper around these four questions has attempted to expose the weaknesses of the Report in the areas of its theology of childhood, its use of 'nurture' as an educational and theological principle, and its attitude to tradition, especially Scripture.

These criticisms are not intended to suggest that there is nothing of value in the Report. As a perceptive critique of the present state of children in the church it contains a considerable amount of interesting material. And its suggestions for the future ought to be considered seriously.

For the place of children in the church does need serious consideration — membership of Sunday School is not enough. The vision of the family as the primary nurturing group is exciting, and it was good to read in this context of the proposed support of parents by the church, in their task of nurture. The Report was realistic in facing the special needs of children in the church who come from non-Christian homes. It was encouraging to read of the

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standard and quality of local Christian fellowship envisaged to support a programme of nurture transcending the barriers of age and family, while also finding expression within the family group.

The Report is rather less successful as a document outlining an educational future than as a critique of the present situation. For it is not clear how the educational aim of the Report for 'nurture' could be achieved. It would turn out to be either 'secular education' or a subtle form of 'indoctrination'. 'Instruction' seems the more honest and open possibility, and also more in line with the Biblical tradition.

The cynic could observe that the Report treats children as teaching-aids ('patterns of discipleship') and the Bible and tradition as Resource-material. A higher regard for children and for the Bible is needed. If children are mature enough to receive a past in nurture, then they are capable of repentance and obedience to Christ. The Bible does address the modern church, and ought to be allowed to correct and reform it.

The theological contribution of the Report is as suspect as its educational rationale. While the exegetical contribution of Mark 9:33-37, 10:13-16 can be seen to provide an important corrective to the church's attitude to children, it will hardly do the work that the Report intends for it.

It is then perhaps the 'key concept-contribution' approach which is mentality is the cause of much of the trouble. This document provides a clear example of the dangers inherent in this approach which is so popular in academic and church circles today. The attractiveness of this approach today lies in its openness, its anti-dogmatic attitude, and its desire to ask questions, rather than to provide confident answers.

The dangers of this style of approach are similar to those found in *The Child in the Church*. For the promulgation of one idea as a 'helpful insight' soon becomes the declaration of a 'key concept'. Exegesis is forced to provide support. Either the key concept word is traced through Scripture with no regard to context and meaning, or it is claimed that the concept is 'there,' even if not mentioned. As the concept is pursued, viewpoints which are necessary as complements or correctives are rejected or ignored. The job of binding the concept into the coherent and systematic whole is avoided, and there is a consequent lack of contact with reality.

So in this Report, 'nurture' is pursued unswervingly into dangerous exegetical territory, and complementary truths (e.g. the validity of 'imitation') are ignored. It would have been better if the theological strengths and weaknesses of 'nurture' had been faced, and its role in a theology of education identified. For 'nurture' may provide a valid insight. But if it is to be so vigorously pursued that other ideas are precluded, then it might well be

considered to have become an inappropriate controlling factor. A sense of reality is only preserved if a coherent picture is presented. It is perhaps for this reason that the Report is not convincing in its attitude to children, to the function of authority in the church, and in its expectations of 'nurture'.

It is then perhaps the 'key concept-contribution' approach which is the basis of the problems of the Report.

*The Child in the Church*, though perceptive and instructive in its comments, is of limited value as an educational and theological document. This paper is intended as a reply which will help forward that on-going debate to which the Report is committed, and that renewal in the life of the church which it desires.

#### Footnotes.

1. *The Child in the Church* is the report of a Working Party sponsored by the Consultative Group on Ministry among Children of the British Council of Churches. Date and place of publication are not given. The purpose of the Report is outlined in the Preface by Harry Morton, General Secretary of the British Council of Churches, and in the Foreword by John Gibbs, the Bishop of Bradwell and Chairman of the Working Party.
2. Most of the material of this article was originally prepared for a paper given in January 1977 at St John's College, Durham, to a group which meets to discuss current educational issues under the leadership of the Reverend Anthony Herbert, Vicar of St Cuthbert's Durham. I am grateful to the group, and especially Mr Herbert, for their encouragement and helpful suggestions. They of course bear no responsibility for the views expressed in this article.
3. It must be assumed that only young children are covered by the intention of the Report. The age-group intended is not disclosed. The cover picture is of a young child.
4. The Report is at pains to criticise unintelligent and uncritical use of the Bible by others (paras. 3 and 84). 'To such belongs the Kingdom' could mean 'to these children and those like them' or 'to those like these children'. And 'receive the Kingdom of God like a child' could mean 'receive it as a child is received' (sc. as a gift of God) or 'receive it as a child receives it.' This latter could refer to the child's simple acceptance, faith, dependence or (more likely) helplessness. See commentaries *in loc.*, especially C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to Mark*, (Cambridge University Press, 1963) and W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, (Marshall Morgan and Scott, 1974), and *Biblical Studies*, ed. J.R. McKay and J.F. Miller, art. 'The Child as Model Recipient' E. Best, Collins 1976. Matthew 18:4 infers the humility of the child.

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5. One is reminded of Iranaeus' claim that Christ experienced the whole of human life, including old age. 'He therefore passed through every age, becoming an infant for infants, thus sanctifying infants; a child for children, thus sanctifying those who are of this age, being at the same time made to them an example of piety, righteousness and submission; a youth for youths, becoming an example to youths, and thus sanctifying them for the Lord. So likewise he was an old man for old men, that he might be a perfect Master for all, not merely as respects the setting forth of the truth, but also as regards age, sanctifying at the same time the aged also, and becoming an example to them likewise.' (Adv. Haer. 11, XXII 4.)  
It is instructive to note the similarities and contrasts between this and the theology of the Report.
6. Chapter 4: 'An Understanding of Christian Nurture'.
7. For it is Christ who is still being formed in us (para. 61). This does suggest some continuity, though it might be considered that the meaning of Christ would change. This would suggest an interpretation of Galatians 4:19 hard to support from the context of thought in the Epistle on the unchangeable gospel as revealed to Paul.
8. Overemphasis of one concept is destructive of the order and balance needed in Christian theology and practice. The inappropriate use of good ideas is as productive of error as is the use of bad ideas. Misuse is abuse.
9. This comment assumes that the main interpretation the Report gives to this text is correct. The exegesis of this verse is discussed above.
10. In addition, in the same paragraph of the Report, Isaac's question of Abraham (Genesis 22:7) is cited as an example of the contribution of a child. Genesis 21:20,21, would suggest that Isaac was not a child at this time.
11. 1 John 2:28,29, 3:9,10, 5:1,2,18. Being 'born of God' and being 'children of God' are linked in the thought of 1 John.
12. This comment on the importance of the assertion of the sinfulness of children should be related to the comments above on their place in the church. Children have a right to be members of the church, not because of their function as patterns but because they are sinners redeemed by Christ. Their presence in the church is on the same basis as that of adults. The question of their faith or lack of faith belongs to another area of discussion.
13. cf. C. F. Evans *'Is Holy Scripture Christian?'* S.C.M. Press, 1971, p. 42.