



Do not stop them...

Children and the Gospels

Introduction

The challenge of understanding Jesus' attitude to children

- At first glance there is little other than the usual saccharine message to expound
- But at closer examination Jesus attitude to children is radical and unsettling – as with a lot of his life and teaching.
- Insights from Bunge, esp Judith Gundry and John T Carroll

Children in the Graeco-Roman and Ancient Near Eastern World

One of the key issues for understanding all New Testament examples about children is to understand the backdrop against which these famous passages are to be understood.

- In Graeco-Roman Society children were considered to be of little value or importance – even the word for them is neuter

‘Among first-century Greeks and Romans there was considerable pessimism about the child on account of his or her smallness, underdevelopment, and resulting vulnerability, as well as ignorance, capriciousness, and irrationality, qualities that were to be set aside through rigorous education and harsh discipline’ J Gundry in M. Bunge *Child in the Bible*, pp. 162-163

‘The thing itself cannot be praised only its potential’ Cicero *De Republica* 137.3

- This type of view can be found reflected in some New Testament texts which assume children are growing into adulthood (cf 1 Cor 14.20; Hebrew 5.13-14)

Against this somewhat bleak background Hebrew thought seems positive in comparison

- children were valued as a gift from God (Ps 127.3)
- and treasured as the repository of the faith (Deut 4.9)
- but were still seen as works in need of completion....

This contrasts with parts of our own culture which seems to treat children as mini adults.

Jesus' dissolving and re-establishing of familial bonds

Mark 3:33 - 4:1 ³³ And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

One of the key things to recognise about Jesus is that his message was shocking in more ways than we expect

- the more positive attitude to children that comes from Jewish culture is coupled with an emphasis on the significance of family life
- Jesus, on more than one occasion, proposed that family life is dissolved in the Kingdom into a new set of non-biological relationships

The disciples attempt to prevent the children (Mark)

Mark 10:14-16 ¹⁴ But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." ¹⁶ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

This is one of the key passages for understanding Jesus' attitude to children – but not for the reasons normally given!

- What is the problem with most of the pictures of Jesus with children?
- The striking feature in this passage is verse 16 – it is often suggested that Jesus was taking on role of High priest here – on day of atonement children were blessed
- Judith Gundry notices the odd addition of the Greek word for take in his arms – it is a surprisingly maternal word – suggests a realignment of family relationships. In some ways parallel to

Luke 13:34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!

Also significant is the timing of this event

- Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem – which the disciples understand as being his messianic revelation – and for the first and only time they try to prevent someone coming to Jesus.
- Key question here is what does ‘as a little child mean’ – around this issue is powerlessness and exclusion

Power in the Kingdom

Luke 9:46-48 ⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest."

Partially connected to the previous passage is the issue of power in the Kingdom – the Kingdom is to be found most among those who are outcast and powerless....like children.

Children and the Glorious vision of the Kingdom

Matthew 11:16-17 ¹⁶ "But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, ¹⁷ 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn. (also Luke 7.32)

A striking passage that lies behind New Testament texts is Zechariah 8.5 which speaks of a vision of God's peace that includes children playing in the streets

- Many scholars are agreed that this lies behind this Matthean passage

Questions for Base Groups

- Does any part of Jesus' attitude towards children stand out to you as being particularly important?
- If our churches were to take seriously Jesus' teaching on and attitude to children – what changes might we expect to see?



For Further Reading

Bakke, O M. *When Children Became People: The Birth of Childhood in Early Christianity*. Augsburg Fortress, 2005.

Balch. *Early Christian Families in Context: An Interdisciplinary Dialogue*. Illustrated edition. William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2003.

Barton, Stephen C. *Life Together: Family, Sexuality and Community in the New Testament and Today*. New edition. T.& T.Clark Ltd, 2005.

Bunge, Marcia. *The Child in Christian Thought and Practice*. William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2001.

Bunge, Marcia J., Terence E. Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa. *The Child in the Bible*. William B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2008.

Moxnes, Halvor. *Constructing Early Christian Families: Family as Social Reality and Metaphor*. 1st ed. Routledge, 1997.