
Child Liberation Theology

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A child is born into the world entirely dependent upon others for care. An infant searches with the eyes to seek and attend to faces of those who will care and respond. A child's healthy development hinges on the capacity to place basic trust in trustworthy caretakers. A child received into a trustworthy, caring environment receives the emotional and spiritual conditions necessary for wholesome psychological development throughout the remainder of life.

Children are oriented toward trusting not only parents or guardians but also have the capacity to develop faith in God. Children listen to songs and stories about God's loving kindness with an intuition to trust God's own care and accompaniment throughout life. A child's capacity to develop faith in God through the work of the Holy Spirit belongs to the spiritual nature of human beings. Just as a child needs basic trust from caregivers in order to thrive, the child is blessed by having spiritual trust in God as the One who provides the ultimate foundation for the trustworthiness of being at home in the world.¹

When caregivers prove incapable or negligent in fulfilling the needs of the child, healthy development is interrupted. Depending on the nature of that failure, there may be long-term, even irreversible, consequences that negatively affect well-being for life.² The untrustworthiness of the primary nurturers also can carry over to undermine ability to trust in God, stunting spiritual development as well.³

When children are harmed, they respond to the trauma through the full range of emotional expressions belonging to the human. These emotions, however, may be suppressed by their caregivers, who may react to the child with intimidating and harmful emotions, words, and touch, including corporal punishment or

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physical abuse.

One form of expression that transcends the capacity of young children is their inability to put their experiences into writing. At least in part, this may help to account for the relative absence of literature exploring a child liberation theology. Two of the earliest references to "child liberation theology" are from authors who write from the perspective of those responding to the reality of the abuse of children.

Janet Pais in her path-breaking book, *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse*, devotes a foundational chapter to the shape of child liberation theology:

The case of children as an oppressed group is unique. Children do not have the education or the resources necessary to speak for themselves or, having spoken, to effect any change. In fact, their plight is worse than a lack of education or resources. An outstanding feature of their oppression is that their feelings and perceptions of reality are often denied; abused children are often denied the ability to know what is happening to them or that it could possibly be any other way.⁴

Pais describes the innate powerlessness of the child and the limited range of "actions" available to children who suffer abuse: "conforming to adult wishes, running away, dropping out, suicide, substance abuse, behavior problems, and mental illness, tend not to liberate children, but rather to make their oppression worse."⁵

1. See generally, Christian Smith with Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York, N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2005).

2. Vincent J. Felitti & Robert F. Anda, "The Relationship of Adverse Childhood Experiences to Adult Medical Disease, Psychiatric Disorders and Sexual Behavior: Implications for Healthcare," in *The Impact of Early Life Trauma on Health and Disease: The Hidden Epidemic*, eds. Ruthe A. Lanius, Eric Vermeten, & Clare Pain (Cambridge Medicine, 2010).

3. Donald F. Walker, et al., "Addressing Religious and Spiritual Issues in Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavior Therapy with Children and Adolescents," *Professional Psychology: Research & Practice* 41 (2010).

4. Janet Pais, *Suffer the Children: A Theology of Liberation by a Victim of Child Abuse* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1971), 16.

5. Pais, 17.

With reference to Pais, Ryan Stollar argues that the bracketing out of children's suffering is a consequence of "adultism": "the viewing of theological concepts from the vantage point of adults rather than the vantage point of children."⁶ He poses a series of critical questions about the failure of liberation theologies to assume the perspective of children by articulating their concerns:

In the same way that faith communities ought to fight against classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia in these other spheres, how can faith communities work together to dismantle systematic prejudice and discrimination against children not only within, but also without, the church?

How has adultism pervaded our other, non-faith communities, including our ethical, social, political, and philosophical spheres?

How have our theological concepts been grounded in a *child/adult binary* — namely, that childhood and adulthood are two separate stages, the former of which involves being less than fully human and the latter of which implies full humanity?

How do we elevate the voices of children themselves? And how do we learn to — and encourage others to — engage those voices as more than simply 'childish' beliefs or thoughts?⁷

These two authors contrast the situation of abused children to the suffering of other oppressed groups, who have articulated particular forms of liberation theology: "Children are inherently disadvantaged. They form the one group whose liberation can never change this. As long as a child is a child, she or he will never have access to power or resources equal to adults."⁸

The method of liberation theologies consists of five elements: 1) identification with particular forms of oppression and suffering, 2) prophetic critique of that condition, 3) social analysis of the causes of oppression and suffering, 4) biblical and theological engagement to address that suffering and overcome that oppression, and 5) advocacy of structural change toward a greater approximation of justice. While major forms of liberation theology have been developed from many particular vantage points of oppression and suffering—Latin American liberation theology, black liberation theologies, feminist theologies, womanist theologies, Latina/o and *mujerista* theologies, Native American liberation theologies, LGBTQ+ liberation theologies, and ecojustice theologies—the distinctive perspective of children has been notably underrepresented.

Child liberation theology deserves its own rightful place as a

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central, if not primary, vantage point for engaging in the method of liberation theology. The suffering and oppression of children cries out for advocacy, insofar as the experiences of childhood mark and mar their very identity and being for the remainder of life. As the church, operating as the body of Christ, seeks to address the root causes of social disease and disorder, its praxis will focus intentionally on those issues that affect the lives of children as an urgent priority.

Here we focus on four themes that address central concerns holding children in bondage. Each has extensive consequences for their well-being not only in childhood but throughout their entire lives: freedom from material deprivation, freedom from neglect, freedom from corporal punishment and physical abuse, and freedom from sexual abuse.

Freedom from material deprivation

Children remain the most vulnerable victims of endemic poverty globally and domestically. Among the factors that affect children directly are malnutrition, unavailability of clean water, inadequate sanitation, poor hygiene, lack of medical care, disease (especially childhood diseases preventable through immunization), infant mortality, and environmental degradation. The disparity of wealth across the globe results in a concatenation of economic forces that has established infrastructure that serves economic elites at the expense of sufficiency for children and their families, especially women.

Other forms of liberation theology, especially those originating in Latin America, have analyzed the devastating effects of poverty.⁹ Here we focus only on central impacts upon children.

Bread for the World statistics are compelling:

Every year, 2.6 million children die as a result of hunger-related causes. In the U.S., nearly 16 million children — one in five — live in households that struggle to put food on the table. Even short-term episodes of hunger can cause lasting damage to a child's development. Hunger puts children at risk of a range of cognitive, behavioral, emotional, and physical problems.¹⁰

6. Ryan Stollar, "Towards a Child Liberation Theology," <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistparenting/2016/04/towards-a-child-liberation-theology/> Accessed 26 December 2017.

7. Stollar, "Towards a Child Liberation Theology."

8. Pais, 17.

9. Cf. Craig L. Nessan, *The Vitality of Liberation Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2012), Chapter One, 1–13.

10. This and the following quote from Bread for the World, "Who Experiences Hunger," <http://www.bread.org/who-experiences-hunger> Accessed 28 December 2017.

Because children are entirely dependent upon adults for their well-being, they suffer high risks from hunger. Moreover, their rapidly growing bodies are exceptionally vulnerable to all the lasting effects caused by hunger.

Roger Thurow documents how the first 1,000 days of life are crucial for child development through case studies from four diverse settings across the world: Uganda, India, Guatemala, and the United States (Chicago). The failure to provide adequate nutrition for children, and therefore also for their mothers during pregnancy, results in one of every five children in the world suffering from stunting, about 170 million children in total.

A child who is severely stunted is sentenced to a life of underachievement: diminished performance in school, lower productivity and wages in the workplace, more health problems throughout life, and a greater propensity for chronic illnesses such as diabetes and heart disease as an adult. And that life sentence is most often rendered by the time a child is two. For stunting is largely the result of a debilitating mix of poor nutrition, unclean environment, and lack of caregiver stimulation during the 1,000 days.¹¹

While the diagnosis for treating the problem of child development in the first 1,000 days from pregnancy to the second birthday might appear to be obvious, the on-the-ground challenges in equipping women to be able to act on best practices in prenatal and early childhood care are enormous. In the settings Thurow examines, he finds that even in those contexts where concerted efforts have been made to educate about nutritious diet (including vitamin supplements), immunizations, hygiene, sanitation, and child development, the obstacles to implementation are formidable.

The availability and especially the cost of purchasing fruits, vegetables, sources of protein, and vitamin supplements to provide the micronutrients necessary for healthy development are beyond the means of poor people. The accessibility to, adequacy of, and cost of pre-natal care, including what is needed for home hygiene and sanitation measures, make recommended practices unavailable to poor people. These realities, coupled with the actual birthing conditions for many poor mothers, make the first day “the most perilous day of life.” Each year, 1 million babies die within 24 hours of their birth.¹²

The living conditions of poor people also increases the risks to children in their first two years. Gender discrimination against girls in many societies places them at greater risk for stunting and infant mortality. While breast feeding provides the best possible nutrients to babies, incentives from corporations to substitute expensive formula (often promoted through birthing hospitals) and the demands of daily life dissuade many mothers from following the best instruction. The World Bank finds that, “child mortality

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is about fifteen times greater in lower-income countries than in rich-world countries, and maternal mortality is nearly thirty times higher. Almost all of those deaths are preventable.”¹³

Thurow draws this stunning conclusion:

If we want to shape the future, to truly improve the world, we have 1,000 days to do it, mother by mother, child by child. For what happens in those 1,000 days through pregnancy to the second birthday determines to a large extent the course of a child’s life—his or her ability to grow, learn, work, succeed—and, by extension, the long-term health, stability, and prosperity of the society in which that child lives.¹⁴

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Freedom from neglect

In this context we formally distinguish child neglect from physical or sexual child abuse:

Child neglect is defined as a type of maltreatment related to the failure to provide needed, age-appropriate care. Unlike physical and sexual abuse, neglect is usually typified by an ongoing pattern of inadequate care and is readily observed by individuals in close contact with the child. Once children are in school, personnel often notice indicators of child neglect such as poor hygiene, poor weight gain, inadequate medical care,

11. Roger Thurow, *The First 1,000 Days: A Crucial Time for Mothers and Children—And the World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2016), 2.

12. Thurow, *The First 1,000 Days*, 125.

13. Thurow, *The First 1,000 Days*, 102.

14. Thurow, *The First 1,000 Days*, 7.

or frequent absences from school. Professionals have defined four types of neglect: physical, emotional, educational, and medical.¹⁵

Neglect is characterized not only by overtly harmful acts but also by the omission of needful care. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention includes the following types of maltreatment in its definition: physical neglect, emotional neglect, medical and dental neglect, educational neglect, inadequate supervision, and exposure to violent environments.¹⁶

The causes of child neglect are manifold. Although most poor families provide devoted attention to the care of their children in spite of economic hardship, parents who suffer from economic scarcity may give priority to the procurement of food and other things needed for physical survival at the expense of caring adequately for children.

Other causes of neglect can be related to the incapacity of parents and caregivers to maintain a level of care for their own lives. The disorder in their own existence leaves dependent children in precarious circumstances. Studies indicate, for example, that children whose parents abuse alcohol or drugs are far more likely (three times or more) to neglect their children than those who do not abuse substances. Likewise, those parents or caregivers who suffer from certain forms of untreated mental illness are less likely to be able to give adequate care to their children.

Another prevailing problem contributing to child neglect is the inadequate preparation of parents for the tasks of caring for and raising children. The default position for many parents is what they learned about child raising from their own parents, who may or may not themselves have been skilled in parenting. Where deficient and neglectful parenting is passed on from generation to generation, an intervention may be necessary to interrupt the cycle. Providing intentional training for new parents and ongoing skill development for parenting deserve attention by institutions with access to children and their parents, including by faith organizations.

Freedom from corporal punishment and physical abuse

Contrary to the massive research and evidence that demonstrates the harmful and lasting physical, emotional, and spiritual consequences of corporal punishment, parents and caregivers continue to use physical punishment at alarming rates. Increasingly in countries across the world statutes are being put in place to criminalize corporal punishment.¹⁷ The exercise of corporal punishment has

15. "Child Neglect," *Psychology Today* online, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/conditions/child-neglect> Accessed 28 December 2017.

16. For this and the following statistics, see Center for Disease Control and Prevention, "Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Major Findings" (2016), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/childmaltreatment/definitions.html> Accessed 1 January 2018.

17. Victor Vieth, "Providing Pastoral Guidance to Parents on the Corporal Punishment of Children," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 44 (Jan 2017): 31.

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been assumed by many adults as a normal means of child discipline. Without regard for the harmful effects, spanking and other forms of physical punishment have been passed down from one generation to the next.

The medical risks of corporal punishment include the tendency to excess: "in the U.S., 28% of children are hit so hard that they receive injuries."¹⁸ Research indicates the "parents who are out of control emotionally, or who are using objects, are at greater risk to engage in abusive behaviors including kicking, beating, burning, shaking, or hitting a child in places other than the buttocks."¹⁹ It is not only the risk of injury that should dissuade parents and caregivers from corporal punishment but also other long term health risks. "Even in the absence of more severe child maltreatment, researchers have found that harsh physical discipline (pushing, shoving, grabbing, slapping, and hitting) is associated with higher risks of cardiovascular disease, arthritis, obesity, history of family disfunction, and mental disorders."²⁰ Vieth states: "This is one reason the American Academy of Pediatrics discourages parents from venturing down the path of hitting children as a means of discipline."²¹

The mental health and behavioral risks are also substantial. Research shows that there is "no evidence that spanking is associated with improved child behavior and rather found spanking to be associated with increased risk of 13 documented outcomes."²² While this should not be interpreted to mean that corporal punishment is determinative of negative outcomes, the research does demonstrate that corporal punishment is "a risk factor and notes that the more a child is hit and the harsher the discipline, the greater the risk factors for poorer mental health, including

18. Vieth, 32.

19. Vieth, 32, who quotes Adam J. Zolotov et al., "Speak Softly—and Forget the Stick: Corporal Punishment and Child Abuse," *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* 35 (2008): 364–365.

20. Vieth, 32, who cites Tracie O. Affi, et al., "Harsh Physical Punishment in Childhood and Adult Physical Health," *Pediatrics* 132 (2013): e333–338.

21. Vieth, 32, who cites Committee on Psychosocial Aspects of Child and Family Health, "Guidance for Effective Discipline," *Pediatrics* 723 (1998): 101.

22. Vieth, 33, who cites Elizabeth T. Gershoff and Andrew Grogan-Kaylor, "Spanking and Child Outcomes: Old Controversies and New Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Family Psychology* 30.4 (2016): 453–469.

depression, anxiety, anger management, and inability to sustain healthy relationships.”²³

The spiritual risks of corporal punishment also need to be taken seriously. When religion is used to justify child abuse or religious communities ignore the signs of child maltreatment, children are left with unsettling spiritual questions; thirty-four major studies, involving more than 19,000 abused children, demonstrate that large numbers of children “are spiritually damaged from maltreatment.”²⁴

It is not only that lack of education contributes to the ongoing use of corporal punishment by parents and caregivers, but influential Christian literature and many Christian churches continue to advocate for corporal punishment as necessary for child rearing, perpetuating the cycles leading to child abuse. Many of these sources cite biblical passages, especially from Proverbs, to justify their arguments. Vieth holds that both the research about the relation of corporal punishment to child abuse and the concomitant interpretation of Scripture warrant the opposite conclusion:

Whether holding extreme or moderate views on corporal punishment, Protestant proponents of the practice contend, or at least suggest, there is a biblical basis for their beliefs. Many respected biblical authorities beg to differ. According to these scholars the Bible does not require parents to discipline their children by hitting them. Some of these scholars argue that the Bible actually discourages corporal punishment; a handful of them even make the argument the Bible does not authorize the physical discipline of children.²⁵

It is imperative that religious leaders, pastors, and churches educate members and the public that the Bible does not warrant corporal punishment²⁶ and that contemporary research convincingly demonstrates the harmful physical, mental health, behavioral, and spiritual damage done by corporal punishment. Moreover, a consistent ethic of nonviolence by Christians would clearly insist on refraining from all forms of corporal punishment. A child liberation theology advocates an end to every form of corporal punishment and physical abuse against children.

Freedom from sexual abuse

Child sexual abuse is the silent destroyer of the sacred lives of individuals and families in our society. “[T]he ACE [Adverse Childhood Experiences] study estimated that approximately 1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men were sexually abused before the age of eighteen.”²⁷ These statistics indicate the massive number of

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lives affected by child sexual abuse. As noted by Tchividjian and Berkovits, these “staggering estimates underscore the pervasiveness of child sexual abuse and make it likely that every reader of this [article] knows someone who has been, or is currently, the victim of sexual abuse.”²⁸

How is the extent of this scourge possible? Perpetrators intentionally act under a veil of secrecy to hide their grooming and exploitation by imposing secrecy through intimidation and threats against their victims, who as children are limited in their ability to disclose what has happened to them. The prevailing sense of societal shame that accompanies child sexual abuse also condemns many victims to silence about what they have suffered. The unwillingness of others to believe the accounts of victims about their sexual abuse further prolongs and magnifies the suffering.

Denial of abuse is one of the primary impediments toward its prevention. Child sexual abuse is not a new phenomenon; it cuts across socioeconomic status, geographic location, race, and religion.²⁹

Sexual abuse includes both contact behavior (all forms of inappropriate and exploitative touching) and non-contact behavior (for example, spoken or written sexual communication, voyeurism, viewing pornography, exhibitionism, or exposing a child’s naked body). Various terms are used to describe these dynamics, including child molestation, rape, and abuse.³⁰

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America’s social statement, *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, affirms:

Safety within and outside the family is of overriding importance because the damage done to children and youth through sexual abuse or molestation can be remarkably deep and lasting. Such harmful behavior may include

23. Ibid.

24. Vieth, 33, who cites Donald F. Walker et al., “Changes in Personal Religion/Spirituality During and After Childhood Abuse: A Review and Synthesis,” *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* 1 (2009): 130.

25. Vieth, 29.

26. William J. Webb, *Corporal Punishment in the Bible: A Redemptive-Movement Hermeneutic for Troubling Texts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

27. Basyle Tchividjian and Shira M. Berkovits, *The Child*

Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and Ministries (Greensboro, N.C.: New Growth Press, 2017), 11, who cite the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, “Adverse Childhood Experiences Study: Major Findings” (2016), <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/acestudy/about.html> Accessed 1 January 2018.

28. Tchividjian and Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide*, 11.

29. Ibid.

30. See Tchividjian and Berkovits, *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide*, 10-11.

inappropriate touching, exposure to pornography, exposing genitals to children or inducing children to do the same, and sexual or genital relations involving minors.³¹

Sexual abuse affects children not only through such acts but also through the extensive influence of commercial sexual exploitation:

Matters of concern to both society and the church extend beyond abuse and molestation to organized sexual exploitation. Commercial sexual exploitation is widespread throughout the United States and around the world...Expanding cyberspace and other electronic media create new challenges to the protection of children and youth. It is important that parents, society, and lawmakers continue to be extremely vigilant to protect the well-being of children and youth in this electronic world with its often-hidden dangers.³²

Because churches are greatly affected by the prevalence of child sexual abuse, both by what occurs in the lives of their members and through activities organized by congregations, new vigilance is urgently needed through education and comprehensive child protection policies. This should be reduced to writing and incorporated into church mission statements.³³ Excellent and practical resources for introducing, developing, and implementing child protection policies have been developed by the organization, Godly Response to Abuse in the Christian Environment (GRACE), which has published for congregational use *The Child Safeguarding Policy Guide for Churches and Ministries*.

This resource is comprehensive in providing: educational foundations (defining abuse, indicators, impact, and description of people who sexually abuse children), descriptions of protective practices (screening, safe behaviors, and routine protective measures), needful responses to violations of child abuse policy (limited access agreements, reporting, and independent reviews), guidance on how to support survivors, and instruction for implementing child protection policy (training, dissemination, evaluating, and updating).

The manual is filled with step-by-step worksheets to guide

31. Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Social Statement on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, "Protecting Children and Youth in and for Trusting Relationships," http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/SexualitySS.pdf?_ga=2.5159411.1518453362.1514741617-1346528254.1447786722 Accessed 1 January 2018.

32. Ibid.

33. For example, the ELCA has adopted this language: "This church calls for the adoption of preventive measures, including educational programs, appropriate policies, and screening of individuals who care for, supervise, or work with children within this church. It expects that all church leaders will report all instances of suspected child abuse." Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, Social Statement on *Human Sexuality: Gift and Trust*, "Protecting Children and Youth in and for Trusting Relationships," http://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/SexualitySS.pdf?_ga=2.5159411.1518453362.1514741617-1346528254.1447786722 Accessed 1 January 2018.

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congregations in developing comprehensive and effective child protection policies. GRACE also offers Child Safeguarding Certification to accompany congregations through every stage in the process. Given the prevalence of child sexual abuse in our society and the susceptibility of churches in providing access to vulnerable children, we need to transform the climate of secrecy by creating new standards of expectation through the development of child protection policies and their implementation throughout the church.

Biblical and theological resources

The central conviction of a child liberation theology is that "God is Child."³⁴ The seminal work of Janet Pais stands at the creative origin of this under-referenced movement, which construes liberation theology from the experience of suffering children. Just as other liberation theologians affirm the normativity of specific forms of suffering as definitive for the character of God, child liberation theology centers attention on the revelation of God incarnate in the person of the Child Jesus:

Christian faith is centered on the belief that God became human flesh in the person of the Christ child. Jesus is the Word made flesh, God the Son (or Child) incarnate. Jesus tells us that when we receive a child in his name we receive him, and not him, but the one who sent him. In other words, when we receive a child in Christ's name, we receive Christ. We receive God's creative Word in the flesh, we receive God the Child incarnate.³⁵

Jesus rebuked the disciples for not allowing the children to come to him: "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'" (Mark 10:14). Moreover, Jesus extended radical welcome to children, breaking the moral standards of his time as well as ours, by relating to them as those with full personhood: "Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never

34. Pais, 14–16.

35. Pais, 23.

enter it.’ And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them” (Mark 10:15–16).

Jesus, who was a child and experienced all the vicissitudes of childhood, makes the child a sacrament of the kingdom of God. Only by honoring, respecting, and becoming children can we ourselves know what it is to participate in kingdom existence. “If we are to take seriously Jesus’ words and receive each child in his name as Christ, then we must not have any attitude toward any child that would cause us to relate to that child differently from the way we would relate to the Christ child. We all share responsibility for the fate of all children.”³⁶ Jesus not only welcomes children but he makes the status of the child normative for all those who would access God’s kingdom.

God as Child becomes the hermeneutical key for reimagining the entirety of theology from the perspective not only of the suffering of children but what is good for children. This necessitates taking the point of view of the child as person rather than thinking about children as those who are either lacking or deficient of full humanity. The attitudes of Mary and Joseph in relationship to the child, Jesus, become normative for the relationship between parents and children. This means relating to a child as one would relate to the Christ Child: “divine in origin and perfect in human nature.”³⁷

Building upon the foundational work of Pais, Ryan Stollar has contributed a series of articles expanding on key theological themes, including recapitulation: how Jesus entered fully into the human condition to experience every aspect of what it means to be a vulnerable child: “it was necessary that he should pass through every age of life, from infancy to mature years.”³⁸ Jesus was a “powerless, fully human god-child born into a violently anti-child world...God becoming a marginalized, fully human child who is also fully God.”³⁹ Stollar, like Pais, writes as one focused on child protection, especially freedom from every form of physical and sexual abuse.

Taking “God is Child” as the point of departure for theological reflection entails radical revision of traditional interpretations of Scripture and doctrine that denigrate the status of the child as fully representative of the image of God. Conventional teaching about original sin, the Fourth Commandment, and parenting are among those teachings in need of serious reconstruction.

The fall into original sin is not about the inherent sinfulness of children based on the transmission of sin through the sexual process of conception, but rather original sin involves the harmful treatment of children passed on from one generation to the next through the transmission of shame, repression, and injury caused by parents and caretakers, who themselves were likely recipients of the same treatment as children.

The Fourth Commandment that instructs children to “Honor

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your father and mother” needs to be predicated on the moral imperative that parents are to honor their child in the same way they would honor the Child Jesus (Mark 9:36–37). In his explanation to the Fourth Commandment, Martin Luther contended that parents are obligated to care for and protect the children entrusted to them.⁴⁰

The lasting harm and damage done to children through Christian advocacy of corporal punishment, which fundamentally contradicts what God has revealed about children in Jesus Christ, must be unequivocally rejected. Although there are myriad scriptural references to the corporal punishment of adults (Prov 10:13; 18:6; 20:30; 26:3), the Christian community no longer advocates blows for men or women. In a similar vein, Christians need to interpret verses pertaining to the hitting of children (Prov 13:24) in the light of Jesus’ strong admonition not to hurt children (Mark 9:42). Since we now know that corporal punishment hurts children, this form of violence must be recognized as a sinful practice that Christ urges us to stop.

For Janet Pais, a key move toward reconstructing theology as child liberation theology involves making the relationship between Jesus and his Father normative for how we consider the proper relationship between fathers and children. Unlike those feminist perspectives that would distance themselves from using the Father metaphor to describe the character of God, based on negative experiences by children of their own fathers, Pais proposes reclaiming the Father-Child relationship between the Father and the Son in Christian theology as paradigmatic for how fathers are to relate to their children.

The use of “Father” in the gospel is not meant to give divine approval to power-based adult-child relationships, to fathers playing god, or to adult contempt for the child, nor does it define God or imply divine masculinity. Rather the “Father” symbol of the gospel responds to and transforms broken human fatherhood, the prototype of all power-based relationships and therefore the aspect

36. Pais, 24.

37. See Pais, 25.

38. Ryan Stollar, “Jesus as Child,” citing Irenaeus, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/unfundamentalistparenting/2017/06/jesus-as-child/> Accessed 28 December 2017.

39. Stollar, “Jesus as Child.”

40. According to Luther, “Everyone acts as if God gave us children for our pleasure and amusement... We really must spare no effort, time, and expense in teaching and educating our children to serve God and the world.” Timothy J. Wengert, *Martin Luther’s Catechisms: Forming the Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 2009), 56.

of human existence that most needs healing because it is most obstructive of true relationship among human beings and between God and humankind.⁴¹

Rather than abandoning the metaphor of God as Father as irredeemable, Pais makes a thoroughgoing argument for recovering the true meaning of fatherhood through this central biblical image.

While not framed in terms of child liberation theology, other scholarly resources can serve this effort, including two works edited by Marcia J. Bunge, *The Child in the Bible* and *The Child in Christian Thought*.⁴² For example, biblical scholarship can be placed in service of child liberation theology. Judith M. Gundry writes: “Mark’s Gospel illustrates how, in the light of the dawning of God’s kingdom in Jesus, children’s traditional social and religious inferiority can no longer justify their marginalization, but instead requires their emulation and devoted service by adult members of Jesus ‘family’ of disciples.”⁴³

Expressing themes belonging to the central concerns of child liberation theology, Walter Brueggemann states: “The implications for public policy concern the safety, dignity, respect, and economic wherewithal for every child, whose value is attested by the protection and care of society.”⁴⁴

Advocacy in child liberation theology

Child liberation theology advocates praxis to set children free from material deprivation, neglect, corporal punishment, physical abuse, and sexual abuse. This begins with churches, pastors, deacons, and other leaders interpreting the Bible and Christian teaching from the perspective of children, especially those who are suffering from any form of maltreatment and bondage. Child liberation theology takes seriously the research and social analysis that conclusively demonstrates the serious and lasting harm done to children through these forms of oppression.

Educational efforts among church members and the public need to be accompanied by a clear ethical stance guiding advocacy on behalf of vulnerable children. While many social messages and social statements of Christian denominations make references to the needs of children, it should be noted that none of these teachings have been devoted explicitly to social teaching and advocacy about the specific needs of children.⁴⁵

41. Pais, 77.

42. Marcia J. Bunge, *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) and Marcia J. Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

43. Judith M. Gundry, “Children in the Gospel of Mark, with Special Attention to Jesus’ Blessing of the Children (Mark 10:13-16) and the Purpose of Mark,” in Bunge, *The Child in the Bible*, 176.

44. Walter Brueggemann, “Vulnerable Children, Divine Passion, and Human Obligation,” in Bunge, *The Child in the Bible*, 422.

45. See the social messages and social statements of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, <https://elca.org/Faith/Faith-and-Society/Social-Statements>. Accessed 1 January 2018. The ELCA draft statement on “Women and Justice” takes a further step in identifying the social condition of the most vulnerable people as a point of departure for teaching and advocacy.

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The advocacy and educational praxis of child liberation theology should include the following measures:

1. Advocate for structural change to ensure that the needs of children for nutritious food, clean water, medical care, hygiene, and education are addressed as the highest economic and political priority.
2. Support measures to guarantee that the first 1,000 days of life (pregnancy through the second birthday) meet the nutritional and health care needs of every child.
3. Advocate for adequate support services to assist parents and families in meeting the basic physical, medical, mental health, emotional, social, and educational needs of children.
4. Promote educational efforts for parents and caretakers about responsible and effective child rearing practices.
5. Advocate for ending corporal punishment based on research that demonstrates how it contributes to the physical abuse of children.
6. Educate church members and the public that the Bible does not warrant corporal punishment and that, to the contrary, research demonstrates the harmful physical, mental health, behavioral, and spiritual damage done by corporal punishment.
7. Advocate for the end to all forms of commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking, specifically of children.
8. Exercise leadership that certified child protection policies be developed and implemented by every congregation to guard against the sexual abuse of children.

For biblical and theological reasons the material, emotional, social, educational, and spiritual needs of children deserve the highest priority in the advocacy and educational efforts of the church. The retrieval of and commitment to child liberation theology can contribute to making the following goals core commitments of the church: freedom from material deprivation, freedom from neglect, freedom from corporal punishment and physical abuse, and freedom from sexual abuse. Together these core commitments can contribute to the liberation of children for the life-giving relationships that belong to the shalom of God.