

Towards a theology of childhood

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“Luther observed that God is to be found precisely where theologians of glory are horrified to find him: as a kid in a crib, as a criminal on a cross, as a corpse in a crypt.”¹ While preparing to write this essay on the theology of the child, I came across this phrase “a kid in a crib” while Sue and I were reading theologian Catherine Keller to one another during our Covid lockdown breakfast prayers. It simply refused to go away and it impressed me as an exciting place to begin these reflections. It encouraged me that it is a ‘now time’ for a theology of the child that recognises not just the crucial role of childhood in the present crisis of our society, but for our understanding of the nature of deity. Both incarnation: God in the crib, and trinity: the Son eternally proceeding from the Father in the great perichoretic dance, affirm the centrality of a theology of the child to our understanding of the nature of divinity and the future of humanity.

A reminder or two before we proceed. For those familiar with my work, it will be no surprise that I offer to all readers of this article the mythical² gifts of both incarnation and trinity. I see these as crucial means to reflect on the vital issues of our time. This pertains whether or not we count ourselves among the faithful, or identify with what Simon Critchley positively configures as the faithless.³ Secondly, all that I propose is predicated on my research into the subsumption of Western thought and praxis by sovereignty and my conclusion that this constitutes a *lapsis* or fall of the church from the fourth century onwards that significantly displaced the life, teaching and politics of Jesus throughout the centuries of Christendom.⁴ This has coloured both secular and religious mindsets ever since and still does, and requires a conscious mitigating reconfiguration of our hermeneutical approach to both scripture and life in general. My lifelong approach as a follower of Jesus has been the attempt to operate in both research and activism through this recovered lens and to find ways of presenting it inclusively to people of all faiths and none consistent with Jesus’ own apparent practice.

¹Robert Kolb, “Luther on the Theology of the Cross,” in *The Pastoral Luther: Essays on Martin Luther’s Practical Theology*, ed. Timothy Wengert (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009, 41). Cited in Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

² My use of “mythical” is in the technical sense of a story endemic to the depths of world construction, whether believed literally or not.

³ Simon Critchley. *The Faith of the Faithless* (London & New York: Verso, 2012).

⁴ See Roger Haydon Mitchell, *Church, Gospel and Empire: How the Politics of Sovereignty Impregnated the West* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2011) and *The Fall of the Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

This paper is in four parts. Each part sets out various theological implications and then considers their potential impact for action now, in and beyond the Coronavirus pandemic. We begin with a focus on God through the lens of the kid in the crib. This unequivocally positions childhood at the heart of divine manifestation. Some of the primary radical inferences of this for our understanding of the divine nature are set out. From the very start, this has huge implications for the importance of every child, which the section then proceeds to develop. In the second part the focus shifts to Jesus' repeated alignment of children and the kingdom of God. This suggests that the kingdom of God is the particular possession of children. The adverse childhood experiences consequent on our failure to nurture children with this in view are spelt out. Then thirdly, Keith White's extensive exploration of the nature and possible meanings of the relationship between children and the kingdom of God in his superlative book, *The Growth of Love*⁵ are considered in some detail. Finally, the role of children in the future of planet earth and the politics of Jesus is considered through a Pentecostal/Charismatic theological lens with recourse to my own lived experience and a number of initiatives and publications involving children and the life of the Spirit. The attempt is then made to connect this sub-cultural perspective to the role of all children in the future of humankind, our fellow creatures and the whole of planet earth.

1. The Kid in the Crib

To emphasise once more how the incarnational hermeneutic works, it argues from Jesus to God and not the other way round. Therefore, we can say that God as kid in the crib is not the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent deity that theology has at times invoked and who all too easily legitimates the dominant hierarchies of imperial sovereignty systems and besides whom a tiny baby might seem insignificant. Instead, the phrase resonates with Charles Wesley's extraordinary poetry in his hymn *They Shall call His name Emmanuel*:

"See in that infant's face

The depths of deity,

And labour while ye gaze

To sound the mystery."⁶

In trinitarian terms, this deep mythic connection between God and the child is nowhere more clearly affirmed than in Jesus' outburst of praise at the news of his disciples' authority over the

⁵ Keith J. White, *The Growth of Love: Understanding five essential elements of child development* (Abingdon, UK: Barnabas for Children, 2008).

⁶ Charles Wesley, "They Shall Call His Name Emmanuel" (1745).

powers. “At that very time he rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit, and said, ‘I praise you, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants. Yes, Father, for this way was well-pleasing in your sight.’”⁷ This dramatic juxtaposition of the child as the focus of revelation at the fulcrum of the trinity, contrasted with the established intelligentsia at the core of the contemporary powers of empire, could hardly be more striking. Thérèse of Lisieux⁸ expresses this beautifully when she describes the unconditional love flowing from devotion to the child Jesus as “the omnipotent force that ‘lifts the world’”⁹, thereby reframing omnipotence altogether.

For the sake of time, space and current relevance we will consider just three consequences for our understanding of the kenarchy of God from the depth of deity in the face and focus of a child. The first of these draws from the story of the baby in the manger, and is followed by the related originary stories, depicting the divine as homeless refugee child and the divine as the child targeted by violent political abuse. Finally, we reflect on the setting of this kind of divinity at the heart of the cosmos as suggested by the star that “came and stood over the place where the child was.”¹⁰

God, understood in terms of the flesh and blood, humanity, vulnerability and potential of a newborn baby, sets aside, or at least ironically reinterprets, familiar assumptions of transcendence framed as glory, throne, crown, sceptre, hierarchy and the like. Familiar theoretical objections to theological “errors,” such as anthropomorphism or divine passibility are rendered irrelevant or directed towards divinity itself. Instead, the realisation that the place of the greatest vulnerability is the location of the divine presence cascades a re-ordering of our personal and social priorities. Not that these unfamiliar perspectives are unusual in the Jesus story, just that the sovereignty viewpoint makes us blind to them. This is the kenotic perspective that John Caputo describes as the weakness and the powerlessness of God.¹¹ As I have argued elsewhere, I would rather refer to the “true strength of God”, or a “different kind of power”.¹² Either way this is an anti-establishment revolutionary approach. This was the case, of course, for Hebrew prophetic statements that were

⁷ Luke 10: 21.

⁸ Thérèse of Lisieux, (1873-1897) born Marie Françoise-Thérèse Martin, also known as Saint Thérèse of the Child Jesus and the Holy Face, was a French Catholic Carmelite nun.

⁹ See Ruth Burrows, “St. Thérèse of Lisieux and the Holy Child” in *Essence of Prayer* (Burns and Oates, 2010).

¹⁰ Matthew 2: 9.

¹¹ John Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, USA: Indiana University Press, 2006).

¹² Roger Haydon Mitchell, *Church, Gospel and Empire*, 192.

antecedents for the Jesus story as N. T. Wright makes clear,¹³ and seen in this case in “a little child shall lead them,”¹⁴ and “out of Egypt have I called my son.”¹⁵

The positioning of the divine as a child refugee in Egypt¹⁶ invites us to see God as Other, not in the familiarly argued religious sense of being awe-inspiringly removed and separate from us creatures. Instead, Other as stranger and apparent threat to our racial superiority, established mindset, familiar culture, and state structure. Thereby, liable to be positioned as what René Girard has configured as the scapegoat, inviting blame, reprobation, prejudice and rejection.¹⁷ All this is accentuated when the divine child is also depicted as one whose existence is an immediate threat to the autocratic power and position of the existing political leadership, in this case, Herod the Tetrarch.¹⁸ This unequivocally positions deity as a threat to all autocratic rule.

The question remains, what is the outworking of the divine presence in the face of the excluded child, the refugee child and the violently targeted child? Here theology and existential encounter, what Caputo would call the event, is tied inextricably to immanent action. All of which is highly relevant in our twenty-first century. Vulnerable babies, refugee children and children suffering abuse or at risk of abuse, carry the presence and stature of divinity. They are the place where heaven and earth cohere and where socio-political action begins. Clearly not from some existing top down sovereignty system, which deity eschewed, but in full-on identity with the child. To summarise, the child, and in particular the vulnerable, refugee, at risk child, is the fulcrum of divine manifestation and the priority for political action. At a time when the economics of austerity exposed by the pandemic and coupled with the populist politics of Brexit and Donald Trump, have exacerbated child poverty,¹⁹ excluded child refugees²⁰ and caged migrant children,²¹ the implications could hardly be more relevant.

¹³ See N. T. Wright, “The Hope of Israel” in *The New Testament and the People of God* (London: SPCK, 1997), Ch.10.

¹⁴ Isaiah 11: 6.

¹⁵ Hosea 11: 1

¹⁶ Matthew 2: 13-15.

¹⁷ René Girard, *Sacrifice* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2011).

¹⁸ Matthew 2: 16.

¹⁹ In 2018-19, 30% of UK children were in poverty, defined as children in households with incomes after subtracting housing costs of less than 60% of the median. In England, 31% of children were below the breadline, compared with 28% in Wales, 25% in Northern Ireland and 24% in Scotland. (The Guardian 14 Oct 2020).

²⁰ The UK government has for a second time voted down efforts to preserve family reunion rights for child refugees after the UK’s transition out of the EU’s immigration rules on 31 December 2019. (The Independent 04 November 2020).

²¹ “Trump migrant separation policy: Children ‘in cages’ in Texas” (BBC Canada, 18th June 2018, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44518942>).

The star in the East, which the Magi followed to the kid in the crib, affirms symbolically the cosmic, planetary significance of the manifestation of deity as a vulnerable, threatened, refugee child.²² At the same time, it points us clearly to the role of the child and the deity revealed in their face in the reintegration of humanity and the environment and recognises their essential role in the current climate emergency and the future of the planet. It follows that the role of children in the exposure and response to this emergency should be affirmed and encouraged.²³

2. The Child in the Midst

“And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them, and said, ‘Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.’”²⁴

Jesus’ alignment of children and the kingdom of God is one of the most compelling characteristics of his teaching. Indeed, it can be said to be essential to our understanding of it. Matthew’s account here describes Jesus’ initiative in setting the child before the people. Mark further describes a situation where people took the initiative to bring children to him. “And they were bringing children to him, that he might touch them; and the disciples rebuked them. But when Jesus saw it he was indignant, and said to them, ‘Let the children come to me, do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it.’”²⁵

The first draft of this article omitted adequate reference to the work of the Child Theology Movement²⁶ and the breadth of applied scholarship found there.²⁷ Keith White and Haddon Willmer’s book *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18* is particularly relevant to this article.²⁸ I was pleased to discover on reading it that my approach followed the same direction that Willmer and White describe as “the thin traffic” on the theological road that argues from the child to God rather than more systematic theological approaches that tend to bring preconceived notions of deity to the child.²⁹ Their particular concern is to configure a theology that does not displace Jesus

²² Matthew 2: 1-9.

²³ Matthew Taylor, “Children across the UK go on strike to demand action on climate” (The Guardian, 29th November 2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/nov/29/children-across-the-uk-go-on-strike-to-demand-climate-change-action>).

²⁴ Matthew 18: 2-4.

²⁵ Mark 10: 13-15.

²⁶ www.childtheologymovement.org

²⁷ See for example *Anvil* Volume 35 issue 1, 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/rp9f2er6>

²⁸ Haddon Willmer and Keith J. White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*. (London: WTL Publications Ltd, 2013).

²⁹ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 14.

from the narrative by over emphasising “the child in the midst”. Their emphasis on “the child that Jesus placed in the midst,” rather than simply “the child in the midst”³⁰ opens the way to the Jesus hermeneutic that is theologically central to this article. In a similar move to the characterisation of Jesus’ theology as kenarchic theology, this positions the child as a descriptor of Jesus’ theology. It would follow that incarnational theology is child theology. Part of the intention behind this move is to avoid the pitfalls of secularism. However, this could be clearer with reference to the critique of the church and its role in secularisation taken for granted by this article and which gives cause for a more sympathetic view of our increasingly post-secular world.³¹ However, the authors’ intensive work on the theology of the kingdom offsets this lack somewhat. The kingdom they articulate is not a kingdom based on hierarchical sovereignty but rather “the kingdom that Jesus announced and embodied.”³²

The nature of the kingdom of God and its centrality in the teachings of Jesus has been basic to my research and writings for many years.³³ Simply put, rooted in the Hebrew post-exilic prophetic writings and particularly in the book of Daniel, the phrase “the kingdom of God”, used interchangeably with “the kingdom of heaven”,³⁴ was a reference to a way of life in deliberate and definite contrast to the existing regime of the contemporary imperial system of the era. Recent historical and archaeological work puts beyond any reasonable doubt that this was the context for Jesus’ use of the term.³⁵ However, such is the reversal of the originary counterpolitical use of the term “kingdom of God” in Christian history that it is now re-associated with the sovereign rule of empire. This is particularly the case in the United Kingdom with its colonial history of centuries of so-called Christian empire.

As readers will probably be aware, the word kenarchy that defines this Journal was arrived at in the attempt to find a contemporary alternative to the phrase kingdom of God untainted by the baggage that has accrued to it since the subsumption of transcendence by sovereignty.³⁶ Those of

³⁰ Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 33-41.

³¹ See Roger Haydon Mitchell, “A Contemporary Conundrum” in *The Fall of The Church* (Eugene Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2013) and *Thank God for Secularity*: Blog piece for Nonreligion and Secularity Network, <https://thensrn.org/2016/11/10/research-thank-god-for-secularity/>

³² Willmer and White, *Entry Point*, 64.

³³ See for example, Roger Mitchell, *The Kingdom Factor* (Basingstoke, Hants: Marshall Pickering, 1985).

³⁴ “The kingdom of heaven” is Matthew’s rendition of the phrase. The other gospels render the same references as “the kingdom of God”.

³⁵ Cf. Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003); John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan L. Reed, *In Search of Paul* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004); Warren Carter, *Matthew and Empire* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press, 2001) and *John and Empire* (London and New York: T & T Clark, 2008); Wes Howard-Brook and Anthony Gwyther, *Unveiling Empire* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006); Richard A. Horsley Ed., *In the Shadow of Empire* (Louisville Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

³⁶ See Roger Haydon Mitchell and Julie Tomlin Arram eds. *Discovering Kenarchy* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 2-4.

us who have attempted to extrapolate the kingdom rule or kenarchy of God from the testimony of Jesus have so far found seven determinative characteristics of the presence and rule of incarnate deity, which are set out on the Journal's home page. One of these is to provide a society in which children flourish as a first priority. It follows that if the kingdom of God belongs to children then what belongs to them is a society in which they flourish because women are instated, the poor are advocated for, strangers are welcomed, humanity and the environment are reintegrated, prisoners have justice restored to them and the sick are healed. Tragically, this is not the experience of all too many children.

Far from a flourishing context for growth, contemporary research suggests that here in the UK approximately half of all children are impacted adversely by childhood experiences of domestic violence, drug and/or alcohol abuse, familial mental health issues, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, separation, loss and incarceration of a family member. The worse these experiences become in frequency and extent, the more the child can expect mental, physical and emotional consequences that undermine their experience of and contribution to the world around them. In 2014, a study by Professor Mark Bellis, Director of Policy, Research and Development for Public Health Wales, found that nearly 50% of all people living in the UK have experienced at least one adverse childhood experience and 9% have experienced four or more.³⁷

Current research shows that people with four adverse experiences, compared with those who experience none, have a two-and-a-half times increased risk of acquiring a sexually transmitted infection, a five times increased risk of illicit drug use, a seven times increased risk of alcohol addiction and a twelve times increased risk of attempted suicide. This risk increases exponentially with the increase in such experiences.³⁸ The challenge of applied theology must surely be to mitigate these circumstances. Jesus' teaching on the relationship between childhood and the kingdom of God presciently affirms this. "Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a heavy millstone hung around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."³⁹ The hyperbole here fits the current research. Adverse childhood experiences are a drowning weight around the neck of a child.

³⁷ Prof Mark A Bellis, "Adverse childhood experiences: retrospective study to determine their impact on adult health behaviours and health outcomes in a UK population" (Journal of Public Health Volume 36 issue 1, Oxford Academic, March 2014).

³⁸ Siobhan Collingwood, Andy Knox, Heather Fowler, Sam Harding, Sue Irwin and Sandra Quinney; Claire Coulton ed., *The Little Book of Adverse Childhood Experiences* (ImaginationLancaster 2018), 9.

³⁹ Matthew 18: 4-6.

Significantly, this passage in Matthew's account of the teaching of Jesus reconnects us with the infant gaze with which we began, strongly affirming that the true face of deity is the transcendent heritage of children, in particular those blighted by adverse childhood experience. "See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that their angels in heaven continually see the face of My Father who is in heaven."⁴⁰ Here the interconnection between the divine nature as seen in the face of the kid in the crib, and the healing of the child stumbled by a damaging social and familial culture that fails to prioritise the wellbeing of children is obvious.

The pressing question is how society can best be reconfigured for the nurture and repair of childhood. This is something of a challenge in our post-secular moment. How can theology offer insight and help beyond the church to the family of humanity that is the proper focus of our calling? How can we contribute to the potential of the children of the third decade of the twenty-first century to give a lead in the rise of what we might call in Pauline terms "a new humanity"?⁴¹ This is not an easy challenge to resolve although it is something that colleagues of mine here in Morecambe Bay are working hard to achieve. There is not some simple binary between the church and the world. The divide is rather between those who share life from the perspective of egalitarian love and the desire for overall wellbeing, and those who operate from a position of individual autonomy and self-advancement in the context of a top down system of wealth and power. This cuts between some who identify as church as well as some who identify as secular or otherwise. We have an unavoidable "double horizon," a "tension or dialectic" which children themselves share.⁴² Not only is the challenge of political theology to repair and reframe society but to nurture children in this self-same cause.

3. The Growth of Love

Keith White of the Child Theology Movement provides very helpful resources for resolving this tension in his book *The Growth of Love*. Here he introduces five essential elements of child development from his experience as a child care-worker and student of theology and psychology, which resonate powerfully with the connection between children and the kingdom of God in the Jesus story.⁴³ He identifies the substance of the kingdom as love, and the five elements as its necessary practical conditions.⁴⁴ As one might expect, these five conditions resonate with the work and writings of other specialists in child development, but their alignment with the theology of the

⁴⁰ Matthew 18: 10.

⁴¹ Ephesians 2: 15.

⁴² John Peet, *The Politics of the Crucified* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2021, Forthcoming), 15.

⁴³ See, for example, White, *The Growth of Love*, 10, 30 & 42-45.

⁴⁴ White, 46.

kingdom of God and children is what makes them particularly significant here. The five are security, boundaries, significance, community and creativity and this next section looks at each in turn, and asks the question, how might these insights be directed towards this double horizon, and enable children to play their part in kenarchy going forward?

a) Security

In normative Western political terms, security is usually upfront in party manifestos. There it generally refers to law and order, guaranteed by a strong police and judiciary, backed up by the military. Carl Schmitt has shown how basic this is to our Western democracies' obsession with defending ourselves from a perceived enemy.⁴⁵ The kingdom of God, in clear counterpoint, has love at its base, even the love of our enemies.⁴⁶ White configures security in these counterpolitical kingdom terms. His main argument is that both literally and metaphorically, "holding" is the key to security in a child. Security denotes "being held,"⁴⁷ which is "the basis of the bonding and attachment that are vital to the development of self-esteem, identity and the growth of love,"⁴⁸ and the "very ground of our being."⁴⁹ Drawing on work on attachment by psychotherapist Dan Hughes⁵⁰ and clinician John Bowlby⁵¹, White emphasises that without security, attachments tend to be inappropriate or absent, and inward fears and anxieties become overwhelming. He emphasises these deep needs of the child for security in terms of literal and metaphorical "firm arms".⁵² It is noteworthy that in both of Mark's accounts of Jesus setting a child in the midst of the people "he took them in his arms"⁵³, and that the statement "the kingdom of God belongs to such as these"⁵⁴ was quite literally exemplified in this way.

Clearly, there is a huge contemporary need for security and its lack is one of the main reasons for the rise in mental health problems among children.⁵⁵ White offers no easy answers but points the way to a sense of security through relationships and experiences that lead the child, over

⁴⁵ Carl Schmitt, *Theory of the Partisan: Intermediate Commentary on the Concept of the Political*. New York: Telos Publishing, 2007), 85.

⁴⁶ Luke 6: 20, 27.

⁴⁷ White, 50.

⁴⁸ White, 51.

⁴⁹ White, 55.

⁵⁰ Dan Hughes, *Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2004).

⁵¹ John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (Routledge, 1988).

⁵² White, 54.

⁵³ Mark 9: 36.

⁵⁴ Mark 10:16.

⁵⁵ <https://www.nuffieldtrust.org.uk/news-item/striking-increase-in-mental-health-conditions-in-children-and-young-people>

time, to trust that somehow and somewhere security is to be found and to internalise this trust.⁵⁶ While recognising the need for society to be configured around the priority of such relationships across the board, he confronts sensitively the contemporary cultural concern with protecting children from inappropriate touching while attesting the importance of physical touch and embrace in conveying security. Alongside this, he notes the tendency of governments and NGOs to focus on the objective physical sources of childhood deprivation to the neglect of emotional, psychological and spiritual needs when clearly both are crucial.⁵⁷

Part of the impact and integrity of White's work is in his own location in a long term, well-grounded charitable community for children in need of care.⁵⁸ Secure families and such communities provide a basis for children to flourish and to become themselves a bulwark for love and security. However, this is not enough. We need a new conversation and strategy going forward. Here in Morecambe Bay we are hopeful that our community conversations around "Love Learning" will contribute to a new strategy in education and children's services that embodies the "firm arms" of love and kindness as widely as possible.

b) Boundaries

White describes the boundaries through which these "firm arms" of security are experienced as "norms, acceptable behaviour, rules and the like".⁵⁹ He describes the ways in which predictability, regular expectations and routines work alongside established patterns of behaviour making sense of them. In some of our experiences, of course, boundaries and patterns of life can be legalistic and stultifying and themselves become forms of abuse or occasions of stumbling. As someone with an inbuilt antagonism to doing what I am told,⁶⁰ I have reflected on this element carefully. As with security, it can connote hierarchy and domination. However, White's understanding of boundaries is predicated on the loving security of the previous element and qualified by the crucial role played by significance in the section that follows. As he puts it, the "the positives of love and loving relationships ... are built upon ruling out a range of possibilities and options."⁶¹ Such boundaries are "absolutely fundamental in drawing the distinction between conscious and unconscious, inside and outside, my world and your world".⁶² For boundaries to work

⁵⁶ White, 55.

⁵⁷ White, 54-55.

⁵⁸ See White, "The Place Where We Started" in *The Growth of Love*, 16-29.

⁵⁹ White, 72.

⁶⁰ No doubt, in part a reaction to my own somewhat legalistically framed childhood experience in the Plymouth Brethren.

⁶¹ White, 83.

⁶² White, 84.

they must be clear, consistent and lived out unhypocritically by those who apply them. They need to be applied lovingly with flexibility and an implicit commitment to forgiveness and restoration when they fail to be kept.⁶³

Children clearly need to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation. White recognises the need for sexual boundaries and informed and appropriate censorship particularly with respect to children's exposure to the media but admits that while holding "reasonably consistent boundaries" his sense is that "today the messages are likely to be confusing for many children".⁶⁴ If this was the case in 2010, how much more so a decade later. This is a huge area where more theological work and action is imperative in the light of the earlier observations on adverse childhood experiences. However, it remains an area where theoretical and practical agreement has yet to be found. Jesus' teaching about stumbling, already referred to, is critical, and caring and informed adults on both sides of the arguments regard core aspects as equally damaging. What is for sure is that unconditional love and inclusion need to be the undergirding qualities behind our conclusions and the boundaries they might incur.⁶⁵

White roots this framing of boundaries in what he describe as "the subversion of traditional ways of living and organising" embodied in the teachings of Jesus as exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount.⁶⁶ Thomas J. Oord helpfully defines the *agape* love essential to the kingdom of God as expressed through the teachings of Jesus as "overall wellbeing".⁶⁷ Walter Brueggemann and Noel Moules root it in the Hebrew Prophetic tradition with its emphasis on the Deuteronomic and Shalomic narrative of the Old Testament in resistance to the legalistic patriarchal and imperial values which Jesus' teaching subverts.⁶⁸ From this perspective, childhood is the place of exposure to a counterpolitical way of life, which good boundaries reveal and embed. Once again, families and communities that embody these love-based counterpolitics can be a supportive solidarity alongside socio-political action at the local level.

⁶³ White, 87-88.

⁶⁴ White, 91-92.

⁶⁵ This Journal clearly has future work to do on sexuality.

⁶⁶ White, 95.

⁶⁷ Thomas J. Oord, *The Nature of Love* (St Louis Missouri: Chalice Press, 2010), 17.

⁶⁸ See Walter Brueggemann, *Journey to the Common Good* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010); Noel Moules, *Fingerprints of Fire, Footprints of Peace* (Winchester, UK & Washington, USA: Circle Books, 2011).

c) Significance

Perhaps the most significant hidden tension for children growing up in our contemporary West revolves around the nature of the Self. In my chapter in *Renewing the Self*,⁶⁹ I formulate this tension as between the individual understood as an autonomous self and the individual understood as the loved other. The former aligns with the self-orientated promotion of the power of the individual at the expense of the marginalised and enemy other by liberal nation states consequent on subsumption. The latter envisions a society of mutually interdependent individuals motivated by a desire for the instatement of the poor and marginalised and for reconciliation with the enemy other, that is to say the kingdom of God or kenarchy. So for the growing child here is once again a double challenge, how to thrive when specific adverse experiences are at work and how to survive and transform a context hostile to overall wellbeing.

White's configuration of significance is well positioned to answer this. It encompasses confidence, identity, self-worth and ego, and challenges the concept of the autonomous self. The self is located instead in the field of the loved other. He draws on G. H. Mead's⁷⁰ use of 'me' to refer to how others see a person and 'I' for how people see themselves. When both senses of the self are positive, then significance is strong.⁷¹ White consciously places the emphasis on unconditional love as the substance of significance, and maintains repeatedly the need for children to know at least one person who loves them in this way. While recognising other sources of significance for children, particularly those emanating from the plurality of relationships expressed by the metaphor "it takes a village to parent,"⁷² the provision of someone with a conscious commitment to love unconditionally without strings attached is his primary strategy for recovering and maintaining significance. He suggests that the education and so-called 'care' systems simply tinker with helping children in need and fail to get to the root of the matter and calls for "a fundamental review of our priorities and policies."⁷³ He proceeds to draw on Martin Buber's exposition of 'I' and 'Thou' relationships⁷⁴, to explicate the kind of relationships needed between the child and the key significant other, clearly asserting the importance of equal and committed relationships between

⁶⁹ Roger Haydon Mitchell, "Autonomous Selves or Loved Others: A Theopolitical Perspective on the Individual" in Benjamin Wood, ed. *Renewing the Self* (Cambridge Scholars, 2017).

⁷⁰ G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society* (University of Chicago Press, 1934).

⁷¹ White, 99.

⁷² White, 104.

⁷³ White, 101.

⁷⁴ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

adults and children. As he puts it “when a child is part of such a relationship, he or she will tend to take on board his or her own significance.”⁷⁵

White’s emphasis on at least one unconditionally loving other in the life of a child is born out by my own experience. This is something I term supplementary parenting, and it requires wisdom and sensitivity. Where actual parents are dysfunctional or directly harmful, it is a challenge to provide this in a way that recognises and honours them none the less. I am personally grateful for an extremely positive experience of this in my own life. It seems to me to be a calling encompassed in Jesus’ statement in Matthew and Mark, “Follow me and I will make you fishers of men”.⁷⁶ White emphasises that this kind of mutual mentoring is of crucial importance in affirming agency and integrity in children.⁷⁷ Jesus’ own experience, practice and teaching bear this out. It is clear from Luke’s account of Jesus’ apparently deliberate decision at twelve years old to leave his parents and listen to and interrogate the temple teachers,⁷⁸ John’s story of the boy with the loaves and fish,⁷⁹ and Jesus’ affirmation of the children who were shouting in the temple ‘Hosanna to the Son of David’.⁸⁰ The importance of enabling the progressive development of agency in the growing child is something I have developed strongly elsewhere, drawing particularly on the story of the child Jesus in the temple.⁸¹ The provision of scope for disobedience and risk is of great importance. The current climate emergency has highlighted this, and the challenge of standing with but releasing children to protest and demonstrate prepares them for the necessary agency, activism, and civil disobedience further down the road.

d) Community

A strength of White’s work is his positioning of the child in an inclusive and interdependent context from the very beginning. This is particularly the case in his configuration of the crucial role played by community in the growth of love. White sets out the role of community in the life of the child via four specific expressions, family, civic society, school, and church or faith community. He underlines that while family is the initial world of the child, it is a go between for the child and the wider civic society, which is in the fullest sense the child’s place of belonging. He emphasises the role of play in children’s initial experience of community, which resonates with Jesus’ own reference to

⁷⁵ White, 113.

⁷⁶ Matthew 4: 19; Mark 1: 17.

⁷⁷ White, 113.

⁷⁸ Luke 2: 41-52.

⁷⁹ John 6: 8-15.

⁸⁰ Matthew 21: 15-16.

⁸¹ See Roger Haydon Mitchell, “Let No-one Despise Your Youth” in *Resource* Issue 22 (Winter 2011).

children at play to evaluate people's response to the kingdom of God.⁸² White reflects presciently on the detrimental aspects of what he describes, back in 2008, as "electronic communication".⁸³ He warns against its potential to undermine the social and relational aspect of play and signals the increasing dangers of its weakening of children's engagement with community generally. The coronavirus lockdowns, with the resultant greater reliance on social media and virtual connections for wider family life and school has exacerbated this greatly. While there are definitely some benefits for individual focus in relationship and learning from such as Zoom, Skype and Microsoft teams, the downside of loss of face-to-face relationships in community will need attention beyond the pandemic.

While recognising the central place of school in a child's experience of community, White is not a fan of our current education system. School, like family, mediates between the child and the wider community, but it currently reflects a view of society based on the colonial and factory model rather than the values of overall wellbeing and childhood flourishing.⁸⁴ As he puts it, "in my experience many children find conventional schooling inappropriate" and "a fundamental overhaul of what we mean by education worldwide is overdue".⁸⁵ It seems to me that this pandemic is a strategic opportunity to refocus on what we are doing in education, recognising that "if love is to grow, then schools need to be sensitive to the process and their part in it."⁸⁶ As I have already mentioned, this is something underway here in Morecambe Bay and work on this article is motivating me to continue play my part in it.

White proposes five points that highlight the potential of the church or faith community to have a positive mediating role between the child and the wider civic community. These are helpful as a means of evaluating how well this is actually happening. Firstly, church will want to model a multivalent relational context with multiple kinds of association and learning, in this it will provide a positive complement to school. Secondly, it will take the Ten Commandments seriously as relational boundaries. I accept this, but subject to the hermeneutical provisos of Brueggemann and Moules referred to earlier. The danger of straying from boundaries to exclusive laws in relation to the Ten Commandments is very real in my experience. Their deep structural rootedness⁸⁷ in the new

⁸² Matthew 11: 16.

⁸³ White, 122.

⁸⁴ Ken Robinson's 2014 Ted Talk remains one of the best expositions of this.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K9C0KNtqiHU>

⁸⁵ White, 126.

⁸⁶ White, 126.

⁸⁷ Agamben helpfully configures this as *katargēsis*. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2005), 99.

commandment to love one another that Jesus gave⁸⁸ needs to be emphasised. Thirdly, it will not see itself as the alternative to or to the detriment of family but will seek to have dynamic, reciprocal relationship. Fourthly, it will consciously take on the task of training children for civic engagement. Finally, they will aim to be places where the quality of relationships with and between all types of families, including those that “are struggling and feel incomplete” is far more important than organisational success in terms of numbers, success, vision and so on.⁸⁹

While affirming these positive aspects of church expressed as intentional, gathered community, I am less confident that these are in fact common or characteristic expressions of local church. As I have argued elsewhere,⁹⁰ my sense and experience is that church increasingly needs to be configured more alternatively as ecclesia, and made up of those living out the values of kenarchy from both the faith community and wider society. This will result in direct family engagement with the local community in terms of school, work, leisure, charity and the like without the mediation of traditionally organised expressions of local church as Jim Thwaites articulates so cogently in *The Church Beyond the Congregation*.⁹¹

e) Creativity

This fifth and final element is arguably the most significant of these conditions for the kingdom of love and yet perhaps the most often ignored. The creative qualities assigned to both trinity and incarnate deity should be obvious, and not missed, but all too often, they are. However, the first hint of trinity in the Hebrew Scriptures is in the ordinary creation story. “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” and “the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters”⁹² and “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness.’”⁹³ Again, one of the clearest formulations of the incarnation in the New Testament states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made ...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”⁹⁴ The first introduction to God as trinity and God incarnate is as creator.

⁸⁸ John 13: 34.

⁸⁹ White, 129.

⁹⁰ See, for example “De-mystifying church” on Roger Haydon Mitchell’s Blog, <https://rogerhaydonmitchell.wordpress.com/2016/04/30>

⁹¹ See James Thwaites, *The Church Beyond the Congregation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 2000). See also, *Renegotiating the Church Contract* (Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing, 2002).

⁹² Genesis 1: 1-2.

⁹³ Genesis 1: 26.

⁹⁴ John 1: 1-3, 14.

It follows that a primary focus of child theology in this image must be creativity. White focuses on this in six initial ways, creativity at the root of human relationships, creativity and language, creativity and education, humour and jokes, and the Bible and creativity. He then looks at creativity through the five senses of touch, taste, smell, sight and sound, and finally highlights four examples of settings that particularly lend themselves to childhood creativity, safe play and adventure, holidays, worship and sport. As with his whole approach throughout *Growing in Love*, his emphasis on child play is at the forefront. I particularly like the way he ties play and dance together from the start of the mother-child relationship,⁹⁵ something that is highlighted by Luke when he describes the baby John leaping in the womb of Elizabeth, and which in turn brought forth the magnificent Magnificat, with its radical vision of the future of humanity.⁹⁶ This is a very illuminative approach and the section on Creativity and the Bible is in effect an initial attempt at a theology of play. However, I want to make more of the classic understanding of creativity in terms of art, music, dance, drama, creative writing and scientific investigation. For all their rootedness in the Renaissance and Enlightenment, they represent a return to a full-orbed creativity lost by the subsumed ecclesiology of the Catholic Church with its ecclesiastical legalism, something repeated in the later reformed Protestantism of the Puritans and then the legalism of the Plymouth Brethren and later Pentecostals. White's recognition, once again, of the limitations of a mechanistic and utilitarian education system makes the direct connection between these classic forms of creativity and the kingdom of God an antidote and pointer to the kind of holistic education we need instead.

There is much to be done in developing all this into a more complete and applied theology of creativity. However, I cannot get away from the rootedness of Jesus' frustration with his generation in his vision of piping, dancing, dirging, mourning children.⁹⁷ As if to say, even with children who embrace the music, dance and drama that is their heritage, his people failed to see that John the Baptist heralded the fulfilment of the prophet Zechariah's dream of the streets of the city full of boys and girls playing in the streets.⁹⁸ Or Jeremiah's vision of a new society based in everlasting love where virgins rejoice in the dance, with both young men and old together"⁹⁹ and Zephaniah's vision of the Lord God singing over them in joy.¹⁰⁰ Jesus' life and teaching is replete with resonance from these prophetic visions of how society could, should and one day might be. Something that, as we have already seen, Jesus saw and affirmed in the children crying out in the temple "Hosanna to the

⁹⁵ White,

⁹⁶ Luke 1: 41-45.

⁹⁷ Matthew 11: 16-17.

⁹⁸ Zechariah 8: 5.

⁹⁹ Jeremiah 31: 13.

¹⁰⁰ Zephaniah 3: 17.

Son of David.”¹⁰¹ Then there was the music of the angels’ song at his birth,¹⁰² his rejoicing in Spirit over his disciples¹⁰³ or the hymn they sang preparatory to his death,¹⁰⁴ the artistry of the wise men’s gifts,¹⁰⁵ the woman’s alabaster box of perfume,¹⁰⁶ his seamless cloak.¹⁰⁷ Added to this is the drama embodied in Jesus’ miracles, healings, signs and wonders, the creative story telling of the parables and his inquisitive sight into the flora and fauna of his surrounding countryside and the sea of Galilee and its weather, the list goes on. All of this indicates the creative scope of the kingdom that is the inheritance and rightful possession of all children.

4. Children in the life of the Spirit

In the creation story, the Spirit moved on the chaotic formlessness of the face of the waters¹⁰⁸ before the Word spoke into being the creation eventually imaged in humanity and contracted into the messianic face of the kid in the crib. A radical messianic moment that political thinkers from Walter Benjamin onwards reconfigure in hope of a new “becoming” out from the chaos of centuries of subsumption that has reduced life philosophically and politically to what Giorgio Agamben has described as the bare existence of the prison camp.¹⁰⁹ I identify as a Pentecostal Charismatic political theologian and as such reckon the three twentieth century outpourings of the Spirit as actual historic and divine-human pointers towards the restoration and eschatological fulfilment of the kingdom of God. To some this might make me an unlikely bedfellow with the seemingly more secular messianism of Benjamin and Agamben. However, once the subsumption of transcendence by sovereignty is taken into account, the Holy Spirit outpourings take on the same messianic import for the confusion and chaos of twenty-first century capitalism that the creational and incarnational stories of the Spirit moving had on the face of the deep.

This positions twenty-first century children into a dynamic messianic role affirmed by Jesus’ close association of children and the kingdom of God. It is the particular figure of a new humanity articulated by Paul¹¹⁰ and the eschatological role assigned to children at an anticipated messianic

¹⁰¹ Matthew 21: 15-16.

¹⁰² Luke 2: 13-14.

¹⁰³ Luke 10: 21.

¹⁰⁴ Mark 14: 26.

¹⁰⁵ Matthew 2: 11.

¹⁰⁶ Luke 7: 37.

¹⁰⁷ John 19: 23.

¹⁰⁸ Genesis 1: 2.

¹⁰⁹ Giorgio Agamben, *Means Without End: Notes on Politics* (Translated by Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 36.

¹¹⁰ Ephesians 2: 15.

moment portrayed by the figure of the “man child” in the Revelation of John.¹¹¹ With this in view the role that children have had in key points of the twentieth century moves of the Spirit, are portentous, especially when observably spontaneous. In a brief section under the heading “Pentecost” in his exposition of the community element of child development, White insightfully contrasts the “overweening concentration of power and pride represented by the city and tower of Babel” with the unifying and egalitarian experience of Pentecost.¹¹² He then draws our attention to the vital place of children in this reconfiguration of society as quoted by Peter from the prophet Joel in the Acts account.¹¹³

In these days in which lived experience is recognised as a primary source for applied research, I have lived long enough to be a resource for exploring all three twentieth century outpourings. Born in 1903, Evelyn Crooks grew up in the initial years of the Assemblies of God that sprang out of the Azusa Street awakenings. She was the cook at Fegan’s Homes, the orphanage where my father served as maintenance engineer from 1945-55, and where I began life.¹¹⁴ She was my mother’s best friend and began praying for me before I was born. Later in life, when I was a leader in the Charismatic new church movement, she shared with us some of her childhood experiences of the manifest presence of God in their revival meetings and the visual signs they saw in the heavens in the years leading up to the First World War. Then in my later teenage years, I too experienced the manifest presence of God, speaking in tongues, and experiencing other spiritual gifts¹¹⁵ first hand when attending one of the UK’s earliest new churches in the upper room of a pub in Kings Street Canterbury in 1966-67. This was followed by similar experiences in and around Lancaster as a student at the University from 1967-71 and then in the Pacific Islands when working with the students at the University of the South Pacific from 1980-82. Most dramatic of all were experiences in the Argentine revival and associated experiences in the Building Together network here in the UK and subsequently in Toronto between 1993 and 2000. Ecstatic experiences of being prostrated in the Spirit for hours at a time, prophetic enactments of animal behaviour, documented healings, spiritual drunkenness, laughter, stunningly accurate prophecy, deep inner healing and life

¹¹¹ Revelation 12: 1-6. Such has been the baggage of subsumption and its impact on our understanding and treatment of male and female, that a properly messianic reading might well re-interpret this as a (wo)man child.

¹¹² White, 138.

¹¹³ Acts 2: 17; Joel 2: 28.

¹¹⁴ Founded by James Fegan in 1870, throughout more than a century Fegan’s Homes provided care for over 7,500 children. They no longer operate children’s homes but still offer a range of support services to children and families. <https://www.fegans.org.uk/>

¹¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 12: 8-10.

changing experiences of the unconditional love of God were the norm throughout those years. In all of this, children were involved in naturally open and sensitive ways.

At no point in any of this was I personally aware of any psychological origins, inducements, copying, mass hysteria and the like in the manifestations we were having. They were, and remain, some of the most authentic life experiences I have had. From an academically phenomenological perspective, I conclude that these were manifestations of the Holy Spirit and not simply religious or psychological phenomena. Hardly surprisingly, the question arises “what did it all mean?” The distinguishing feature of Pentecostal, Charismatic theology is that it addresses this kind of question. It is a theology, which follows an event or encounter. The classic example is of Peter on the day of Pentecost after the manifestation of flames of fire and the experience of speaking in tongues. His response, drawing on Joel’s prophecy, was “this is that”.¹¹⁶ My attempt to address the twentieth century outpourings and particularly the involvement of children in them is of the same order. It will be quite possibly difficult or irrelevant to some, and perhaps of only historical or academic interest to others. However, I offer it as a complementary perspective on what, despite the context of two world wars and the culmination of Christendom and the biopower that was its progeny, was numerically the most “successful” phase of the world Christian movement. Crucially, I ask how it can be earthed in a politics of love and solidarity for the overall wellbeing of people and planet.

Drawing on the work of Roman Catholic theologian and historian Father Peter Hocken,¹¹⁷ and prophetic thinkers such as Martin Scott¹¹⁸ and Sue Mitchell,¹¹⁹ we can conclude that there are three seasons signalled by the three outpourings. The Pentecostal outpourings of 1906-12 issued particularly in world mission, massively multiplying the reservoir of radical Jesus’ followers worldwide much of this focusing on children.¹²⁰ The Charismatic outpourings of the late 1960s and early seventies focused on restoring and renewing existing intentional church communities and planting new ones, hopefully as an example and resource for society as a whole. During this time I was team leader for the under twenty-ones work at Ichthus Christian Fellowship where we saw many children experiencing the manifest presence of the Spirit. Two significant figures in the UK

¹¹⁶ Acts 2: 16.

¹¹⁷ See Peter Hocken. *The Strategy of the Spirit? Worldwide renewal and revival in the established Church and modern movements*, (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1966); *The Glory and the Shame: Reflections on the 20th Century outpouring of the Holy Spirit* (Guildford, Surrey: Eagle, 1994).

¹¹⁸ See <http://injesus.com/message-archives/prophetic/cobh/prophetic-bulletin-martin-scott>

¹¹⁹ See Sue Mitchell’s Prophetic Insights <https://rogerhaydonmitchell.wordpress.com/sue-mitchells-prophetic-insights/>

¹²⁰ Critically appraised by Grant Wacker, “Living with Signs and Wonders: Parents and Children in Early Pentecostal Culture” in *Studies in Church History* Vol. 56 (Cambridge University Press, 21 March 2016).

New Church movement, Ian Smale (Ishmael) of Pioneer¹²¹ and Graeme Young of Ichthus were highly skilled at making space for this and exerted considerable influence at the time.¹²² This was a contributing factor in beginning to rethink our theology of the child in the light of Jesus' identification of himself and the kingdom with children. During the latter phase of the Charismatic renewal, I was in Albania in 1990 as the Communist regime collapsed in order to witness the extraordinary events taking place among children exposed to the Jesus story for the first time. I will never forget the impact on me of children of thirteen and fourteen laying hands on the sick spontaneously and successfully and demonstrating an extraordinary theological capacity to understand and apply the teachings of Jesus to everyday life.

The Third Wave of outpourings (1993-2000) particularly associated with Toronto Canada and with parallel events in the UK, also known as the Toronto, or Father's Blessing, had significant antecedents in South Korea, South Africa, and Argentina and issued in an emphasis on city and nation transformation via prayer, reconciliation, and prophesy. Despite the attempts to harness these outpourings simply to strengthen church networks and institutions many friends and colleagues who are today repositioned entirely outside organised Christianity in current movements and initiatives for peace and social justice were quite literally turned around and upside down by their experiences in this Third Wave. They and are now carrying the presence of God in very grounded ways in partnership with those who forged their care and solidarity towards their fellow humans among the "all flesh"¹²³ of the secular world, and have no personal experience of these subcultural happenings. In this phase, the involvement of children emerged strongly as key players in the accompanying prayer movement, which is a continuing phenomenon through which significant ongoing space for initiative is being given children worldwide. In research for this article, I have had considerable help from Eva Sarsa of Finland who is one of the facilitators of Children in Prayer.¹²⁴ She provided me with a list of nineteen current writings, books, and initiatives associated with the child prayer movement, including their engagement with the United Nations.¹²⁵ Probably no better example of children in prayer in this season is the "Prayer of the World's Children" delivered to the UN General Assembly at the Special Session on Children, May 2002. It includes the stanza

¹²¹ See Ian Smale: *Angels with Dirty faces: Children in the Kingdom of God* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1989).

¹²² See for example <http://www.youngresources.co.uk/resources/luke-into-jesus/>

¹²³ Acts 2: 17.

¹²⁴ <https://www.childreninprayer.org>

¹²⁵ http://www.kidspray.org.au/kidspray.org.au/Ministry_Reports/Entries/2009/10/6_United_Nations_Prayer_Initiative.html

“We pray that children are actively involved in decision-making at all levels and in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating all matters affecting the rights of the child,
We pray for an equal partnership in this work for children’s rights,
We pray for adults’ commitment and support.”¹²⁶

The whole prayer is worth reading for an extraordinary example of a holistic grasp on the kingdom of God.

This brings us back to the key question of our double horizon. What do the three centuries of Holy Spirit outpouring signify? In order to answer we must acknowledge the ongoing impact of subsumption on the lives, cultures and social constructs of all us who have been part of these experiences and particularly those who have been in leading roles. As Grant Wacker describes, and I have explored in both *Church Gospel and Empire*,¹²⁷ and *The Fall of the Church*¹²⁸, the impact of each season of outpouring was soon diluted or subsumed by the domination system. All too often, it was absorbed into a not very successful attempt to expand and strengthen the Christian movement back into itself. The resultant embrace by some of conservative identity issues and right wing politics that preserved the power of the church institution has been dismaying and detrimental to the calling of the people of faith to be the means of blessing of all the families of humanity.

It remains my hopeful conviction that this is not where the embrace of the kingdom of God by children will take us. As Jesus had urged the multitudes before he suggested that they learn from children at play, the sign of John the Baptist meant that the kingdom of God was upon them. As he put it, “If you can receive it, he is Elijah who is to come”.¹²⁹ The same might be applied to the three moves of the Spirit. They prepare the way for what Luke spells out about John so clearly. “And the crowds were questioning him, saying, ‘then what shall we do?’ And he would answer and say to them, ‘The man who has two tunics is to share with him who has none; and he who has food is to do likewise.’ And some tax collectors also came to be baptized, and they said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what you have been ordered to.’ Some soldiers were questioning him, saying, ‘And what about us, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages.’”¹³⁰ All of this, Jesus’ life and teachings extended to their fullest. Offering your second tunic

¹²⁶ An initiative of Education for Justice, A Project of the Ignatian Solidarity Network
https://www.rscaritas.com/images/stories/documents/prayerofthe_worlds_children.pdf

¹²⁷ Mitchell, *Church, Gospel and Empire*, 153-159.

¹²⁸ Mitchell, *The Fall of the Church*, 66-74.

¹²⁹ Matthew 11: 14.

¹³⁰ Luke 3: 10-14.

extends to giving your only tunic,¹³¹ collect no more than what is ordered becomes give back double what you owe,¹³² and not abusing military power becomes love your enemies.¹³³ This is the kenarchy, which a theology of childhood calls us to nurture and receive from our child brothers and sisters in today's crisis opportunity.

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¹³¹ Luke 6: 29.

¹³² Luke 19: 8.

¹³³ Luke 6: 35.

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