

THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD A Theological approach

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I will do some brief remarks about theology, church and the rights of the child. The children have been around for a considerable time, theology and the church a few thousand years while the right of the child in the form of a convention is soon 27 years old. And still there is a connection and even more – since the convention has been ratified by all the states except one – the church need to relate to the convention as well as to the optional protocols dealing with severe issues such as trade/trafficking with children, child prostitution, and child soldiers.

That theology and the church interplay with children is not anything new. Through the years, theologians have discussed the relation to children. That goes for John Chrysostom, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, Barth, Rahner up to modern theologians. In the book *The Child in Christian thought*, edited by Marcia J. Bunge, different chapters discuss with these theologians under head-lines like:

“Perspectives on the Nature of Children” dealing with themes as

- Original Sin and Punishment
- Original Sin and Baptism
- Children as Models of Faith
- Children as Gift of God – and this theme Children as Gift of God has been used frequently through history.
- Children as Vehicles of Revelation

The book also presents theologians giving “Insights into Obligations to Children”

- Theological Reflection on Parenting
- Responsibility of Church
- Responsibility of State and Community
- Child Advocacy

Other author’s have started by asking what are the big questions for small children as in this Norwegian study: Olav Skjerpe, *Små barn store spørsmål* (Small Children, Big Questions).

His research shows that questions that occupies the mind of children are issues like:

- Illness, death and grief
- The concept of and the relation to God – this is of course of interest for the church that the young generation reflect upon God
- Talking with each other about emotions
- Infatuation, love, hope and to be kind to one another

- Emptiness, loneliness, and not to believe in themselves
- Meaning of life
- Divorce
- To be midway between children or adult – and we can keep in mind that child is not just the small children but also the young generation up to 18 year – at least according to the Convention of the child.

The Bible – both the Old and the New Testament – mentions the child and children with some frequency. The next speaker will deal with the biblical texts. But just to give an indication, I give you some of the quotations following each other:

And when your **children** ask you, What do you mean by this observance? Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. My **child**, give me your heart, and let your eyes observe my ways. Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with **child** and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. Their **children** are established in their presence, and their offspring before their eyes. Is there anyone among you who, if your **child** asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the **child** asks for a fish, will give a snake? Whoever becomes humble like this **child** is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such **child** in my name welcomes me. He said to her, “Let the **children** be fed first, for it is not fair to take the **children’s** food and throw it to the dogs.” Then he took a little **child** and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such **child** in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.” People were bringing little **children** to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 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. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little **child** will never enter it.” For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the **child** in my womb leaped for joy. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the **child** Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law. And the **child’s** father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. For the promise is for you, for your **children**, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.” When I was a **child**, I spoke like a **child**, I thought like a **child**, I reasoned like a **child**; when I became an adult, I put an end to **childish** ways.

The special editions of Children's Bible are an interesting reading. Hundreds of pages and with colorful images on each side in order to get a child interested in the stories of the Bible. I just took one of the versions translated into several languages and searched after children in the images. And mainly, they are missing. Yes, there are a few. Several images showing newly born children like Moses, John the Baptist and Jesus. Of course, the image when Jesus is blessing the children shows a child as well as some other stories as when Jesus enters into Jerusalem. You may see an image of the Israelites walking in the desert on their way to the promised land. But it is remarkable – not a child as far as one can see in the mass of people and by the way not any women either. Or maybe there are three children but they are very

difficult to find. A Bible for Children but the images miss to show children as part of the stories. And the same goes for most of the other images. But should not the children be present, even at the forefront with curiosity whenever anything of interest is happening. And in the same way we need to ask – how is the child treated by the church?

Now I will try to put the biblical words in parallel to the wording of the UN Convention on the rights of the child. The aim is to see some of the similarities in order to highlight the challenges the rights of the child may pose on the church and on theology. There are four guiding principles when using the Convention on the rights of the child. All the articles in the convention are guided by these principles to be found in four different articles.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Article 2 – Protected against all forms of discrimination



13 People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. 14 But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them.

Mark 10:13-14

The first principle is formulated in article two and talks about the child as **Protected against all forms of discrimination**. This includes any harmful treatment, any abuse, any victimization, any discrimination – spiritual or psychic of a child. In short – treat every child fairly and with respect. Mark 10 is the well-known story about Jesus and the children. *People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to me; do not stop them* (Mark 10:13-14). In this situation - do not prevent children to approach, to be touched, to be blessed. In other words, do not discriminate against children. When the disciples ask the question about who is the greatest in kingdom of heaven, according to Matthew 18, Jesus called a child to come forward. He tells the disciples *Whoever*

welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me and at the same time warns against any discrimination or hindrance: *If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea.* In what way does the church deal with protection of children against any form of discrimination today?

Christian faith
Church tradition

Christian education
- venues
- various forms of

In the issue of educating the child, the church tries to be active. In the agenda for the church is how Christian faith and the church tradition can be passed on to young generations. What are the venues and how to develop different forms of learning? And this brings us close to the second principle.

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him."
Matt 2:13



Article 6 – Inherent right to life, survival and development

The second principle in the convention is formulated in article six and talks about the child's **Inherent right to life, survival and development**. Maybe this is obvious but we all see around us children threatened by war and severe violence, we see children as refugees, we see children living on the streets of our big cities, we see children without education. Just remember one episode from the childhood of Jesus. Mary and Joseph have arrived to

Bethlehem and Jesus is born in happiness and joy. And the first thing happening to the new-born child is that ... an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, *Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him* (Matt 2:13). There are forces and empires around us threatening the welfare of the children. How does the church deal with the inherent right to life, survival and development of children today?

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

Article 3 – The best interests of the child



Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?
Luke 11:11-12

The third principle is that the best interests of the child should be a priority. Maybe not easy always to determine what is the best interest but always ask the question. It seems that Jesus was also struggling with this question. In Luke 11 he asks: *Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion?* (Luke 11:11-12). Drastic examples but at the focus is the best interest of the child. How can the church protect and implement that the best interest of the child is a priority?

Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.
Luke 4:47



Article 12 – Express views in all matters affecting the child

The fourth and last principle is found in article 12. Children need to be part in and be listened to when decisions are made that affect them. Jesus as 12 years old in the temple. This is trust in the child – 12 years old and he runs his own business. Even when travelling away the parents have confidence that he is in the party but when he is missing, they are worried. Jesus was in the temple in discussions and busy answering questions. *And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.* Of course we can say – that is Jesus. But combined with The Convention of the Child we can learn the need for the church to listen to the child. Or we may claim – the child has the right to express views in all matters affecting them.



Eye-opener of oppression

Instrumental for change

So, the challenge from the right of the child is how can the church respond to the needs of the children, children who lift their hands and ask for their rights? This includes all from children being forced to become refugees to children as victims of bullying. But it is also about accepting that children have vital contributions to the church. One more bible quotation and the location is at the side of the Sea of Galilee when a huge crowd of people followed Jesus. And the question how to get food for hungry people became urgent. Andrew said: *There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish* and it was transformed to food for 5000 people and 12 baskets of left overs. Never underestimate the power and the strength in children. They are instrumental and agents of change.

The challenge is maybe for the church to do **Child Impact Assessments**

- Which children are affected by the initiative?
- What decisions are to be examined?
- What consequences are to be analyzed?

How to take into account:

- The best interest of the child
- The right to life, survival and development
- Express views in all matters affecting the child
- Protected against all forms of discrimination



Get the children involved in planning and decisions.

Acquire the skills to make judgments from a child rights perspective including the four basic principles.

Follow up work on CRC and child impact assessments.

Encourage learning and development.

As an example, in Sweden – the Church of Sweden – recommend that there always on all different levels of the church should be a **Child Impact Assessment**

- Get the children involved in planning and decisions. Sunday service, the weekly activities, budget
- Acquire the skills to make judgments from a child rights perspective including the four basic principles
- Follow up work on CRC and child impact assessments
- Encourage learning and development.



PUTTING CHILDREN AT THE CENTER

We see as a sign of hope that empowered girls and boys are raising their voices and bringing about positive changes as active citizens of today and tomorrow. They are using more and more their right to participation especially in decisions that affect their lives.

”Putting Children at the Centre” is also an issue for the Worlds Council of Churches.

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And let me end with one’s again quoting two of the important sentences:

And whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.

The best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration