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August 18, 2021

Notes for pre-conference video for conference on *Theology of Child Safeguarding*. Hosted by the National Office for Safeguarding Children (St. Patrick's College, Maynooth, Ireland).

**Question for this session:** What is the significance of a robust and biblically-based theology of childhood for safeguarding children and strengthening Christian theology and the church's work in the world?

**Title of my remarks:** "Robust Theologies of Childhood: Their Role in Safeguarding Children, Strengthening Theology, and Empowering Action"

### **REMARKS:**

Hello! I am Marcia Bunge and here to speak about "Robust Theologies of Childhood: Their Role in Safeguarding Children, Strengthening Theology, and Empowering Action."

I am a theologian who did my graduate work at the University of Chicago and in Tübingen, Germany. Throughout graduate school, I did not study or write about children, and none of my professors did. Then and often today, the subject of children is considered MARGINAL in theology: a subject perhaps for religious educators but "beneath" serious theologians!

However, once I had children and started teaching, I began wondering why theologians pay so little attention to children. After all, children make up almost one-third of the human population. Like adults, they have ideas and are active in the world. Like adults, they suffer and are victims of violence. So this is when my theology shifted and became less "adult-centered" and more "child-attentive," and I quickly discovered, as my publications show, that childhood is not a marginal but rather a central topic in the Bible, the Church, and world religions.<sup>i</sup>

One key take-away from my research is that robust theologies are foundational—key—to helping children thrive! Strong commitments to children and strong theologies go hand in hand!

So the three-fold aim of my remarks is: to provide one example of a robust theology of childhood; show some ways theologies of childhood can empower the church to safeguard children and help them thrive; and emphasize the need to strengthen attention to children across theology—across all doctrines and practices. As I share my ideas, I invite you to reflect on: How might a strong theology of childhood empower you and your church to help children thrive?

### **PART ONE:**

Let's look, first at **A ROBUST, BIBLICALLY-BASED THEOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD**

Theologies of Childhood raise two important questions: (One) What are our *conceptions of children*—our views and assumptions? (Two) What are our *commitments to them*—our obligations and responsibilities? Our conceptions of and commitments to children are highly interrelated and vary over time and across cultures, and since our conceptions of children affect our treatment of them, we all need to reflect seriously on both questions.

Through my work,<sup>ii</sup> I have found that *although Christians in the past and today have often viewed children in narrow and even destructive ways, the Bible expresses six insightful and central perspectives on children and our obligations to them; and by holding these six perspectives in tension (rather than in isolation), we can broaden our conception of children and strengthen our commitments to them in families and all areas of the church.*

First. The Bible depicts children as gifts of God and sources of joy who ultimately come from God and belong to God. Thus, adults are to delight in and be grateful for children. Many passages in the Bible speak of children as signs of God's blessing who bring us "joy and gladness" (Luke 1:14, John 16:21).

Second. The Bible affirms that children are whole and complete human beings who are made in the image of God. Thus, adults are to treat children with dignity and respect. The basis of this claim is Genesis 1:27, which states that God made humankind, male and female, in God's image. Thus, children, like adults, are fully human. As the ancient theologian Cyprian said, all people, even infants, are "alike and equal" and share a "divine and spiritual equality."

Third. The Bible emphasizes that children are also orphans, neighbors, and strangers; they are among the most voiceless and vulnerable people on the planet, and they are often victims of injustice. Thus, we are commanded to provide for, protect, and seek justice not just for our children but for all children.

Fourth. The Bible views children as developing beings who need instruction and guidance; and adults are to bring up children in the faith, helping them to love God and their neighbors as themselves. Several biblical texts address these responsibilities, such as the famous lines in Deuteronomy: You shall talk about God's commands with your children "when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise."

Fifth. The Bible conveys children are more than learners; they are also active and imaginative social agents with growing moral capacities and responsibilities who, like adults, sometimes miss the mark (or sin against themselves or others). Adults are to model for children compassion and accountability and cultivate with them practices of mutual confession, forgiveness, and renewal. Children are sinned against by peers, parents, and other individuals as well as unjust social systems. As they grow and develop, children also begin bearing some degree of responsibility for their own actions. So it is important to talk openly with children about loving relationships, wrongdoing, and injustices.

Sixth. The Bible also claims that children are often models of faith for adults, spirit-filled, and endowed with unique strengths, gifts, and talents to contribute to the common good now and in the future. Thus, we are to listen to and learn from them; to honor their current relationship with God, contributions, and vocations; and to provide all children with an excellent education. In the gospels, Jesus lifts up children as paradigms of receiving God's reign (Mark 10:13-16), and the book of Acts declares that God's Spirit is poured out "upon all flesh," including sons and daughters (Acts 2:17; cf. Joel 2:28-32). As Catholic theologian Karl Rahner claimed, children are a "sacred trust," and God's expansive grace touches every aspect of the universe and their lives.

## **HOLDING ALL SIX PERSPECTIVES IN TENSION**

A strong, biblically-based theology of childhood holds all six perspectives in tension rather than isolation and provides a rich view of children and adult-child relationships.

However, if we neglect any of the six biblical themes and focus on one or two alone, then our conceptions of children become narrow and distorted, and we risk treating children in inadequate and harmful ways. We can give many examples of such dangers in the church today and in the past.

For example, if we view children as primarily gifts of God and models of faith, then we might delight in them but neglect teaching and guiding them.

Or if we view children as primarily sinful and in need of instruction, then we might teach them lessons but neglect learning from children and delighting in them. We might even physically punish, harm, and abuse them.

Or if we view children primarily as victims, we might neglect hearing their own voices and recognizing their own strengths and agency.

In any context (whether churches, schools, or sports facilities):

If we neglect to view children as fully human, or if our vision is “adult-centered”—then we might emphasize the needs and reputations of adults and our institutions, and as we see in history and our own backyards worldwide, we might even abuse, starve, or kill children; or bury them in unmarked or mass graves.

We can all think of many other examples of such dangers and forms of suffering and abuse in my context, yours, and every part of the world!

We can help avoid these and other dangers and help children thrive by developing robust theologies of childhood that hold together these six and other biblical perspectives...

by cultivating theologies that hold onto biblical paradoxes and seeing children as:

- Fully human and made in the image of God yet also still developing and in need of instruction and guidance;
- Gifts of God and sources of joy yet also social agents capable of selfish actions;
- Vulnerable and in need of protection yet also strong, insightful, and models of faith and endowed with gifts to serve others.

With robust theologies of childhood, we switch from mono-focal, adult-centered to multi-focal, child-inclusive lenses! And we strengthen our commitments to and relationships with children.

## **PART TWO: Now let’s think about some: IMPLICATIONS OF ROBUST THEOLOGIES OF CHILDHOOD**

What happens if we see children from this multi-dimensional biblical perspective?  
If we embrace robust theologies of childhood that honor children’s full humanity?

Theologies of childhood: expand our view of and commitments to children; remind us that protecting children requires honoring their full humanity and more proactively helping them THRIVE; and call and empower us to do so in many ways! Here are just a few examples.

First. A theology of childhood compels us **prevent and respond to child abuse BOTH at church and in the home** by having in place clear, substantive policies and practices in the church and also by more proactively preventing child abuse and neglect in the home (where it mainly occurs) by supporting families in our midst; addressing their basic needs; and teaching and preaching about respect for children, the realities of abuse and neglect in the home, and the dangers of corporal punishment.

Second. If we honor children, we will help them thrive by **strengthening spiritual formation (at church and at home)**. We nurture faith and cultivate resilience by more intentionally honoring children's ideas, questions, and relation to God and building meaningful intergenerational relations.

We do so through a variety of practices, such as caring conversations, stories, service projects, and carrying out spiritual practices at home and at church.

Third. We also help children thrive and cultivate resilience by **honoring children's agency, wisdom, and contributions**, such as by more intentionally offering children and young people leadership opportunities, listening to their ideas, and being inspired by them.

Fourth. If we embrace a theology of childhood, we will **attend more carefully to children's unique vulnerabilities and intersectional forms of suffering**. We will, for example, understand the more harmful effects on children (vs. adults) of risks, such as air and water pollution; malnutrition; exploitation related to aspects of their identity, such as gender, race, nationality; and harsh conditions in refugee camps or factories.

Fifth. If we embrace a robust theology of childhood, then we will address these and other forms of suffering by **strengthening the church's public advocacy for all children**, particularly by enlarging our vision beyond children's immediate needs or the unborn and more intentionally: Addressing poverty and systemic injustices in education, health care. Ensuring "pro-life" efforts are "pro-child" and "pro-life" across life-span.

We can do so by advancing child advocacy efforts (through secular, faith-based, and joint initiatives) and...

by supporting Faith-Based Organizations that work with Children at Risk.

### **PART THREE:**

I want to share a new idea for some of you: The need to **strengthen Christian theology to be child-attentive across doctrines and practices**.

Robust theologies of childhood call us to expand our vision and to rethink not only our views of children but also MANY CENTRAL doctrines and practices in the light of attention to children

and childhood AND to develop what some of theologians are calling CHILD-ATTENTIVE THEOLOGIES!

Like feminist, black, or other liberating theologies, “child-attentive theologies” (or what some call “child theologies”) build on traditional and diverse sources of theology (such as the Bible, the tradition, insights from other disciplines), and they re-think and re-examine a range of central doctrines and practices with attention to the experience of the marginalized or exploited—in this case children. And in this way, they enrich theology as a whole and for the whole church!

For example, if we honored the full humanity of children, then we would need to rethink and revise our understandings of:

The priesthood and ordained ministry (examining their roles, authority, celibacy);

The nature of the church (recognizing children are part of the body of Christ);

The Holy Spirit (recognizing children are also spirit-filled); or

Discipline (emphasizing it is not the same as the corporal punishment of children).<sup>iii</sup>

By reexamining these and other doctrine and practices we would enrich theology as a whole and empower the church’s work in the world! [Twelve theologians from six continents offer more examples in my forthcoming book, *Child Theology: Diverse Approaches and Global Perspectives* (Orbis Books).]

Furthermore, if we honored children’s full humanity, then theological education would include attention to children across the curriculum: not just in courses on religious education but also the Bible, Church, History, Pastoral Care, and Systematics.

## **CONCLUSION:**

In these ways and more, robust theologies of childhood empower the church to safeguard children and help them THRIVE! Where children thrive, the church and communities thrive!

Robust theologies remind us that children are CENTRAL—not MARGINAL—to all aspects of Christian faith and life in the church worldwide and in all areas of theology.

I invite you to keep exploring more implications of theologies of childhood for helping children, the church, and communities in your context THRIVE!

Thanks for joining me, and I will leave you with three

## **QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION:**

1. What biblical or theological conceptions of and commitments to children would you add to the list of six?
2. How might robust theologies of childhood that honor the full humanity of children empower you to safeguard children and help them thrive?
3. Are child-attentive theologies important? What doctrines or practices might need rethinking in the light of attention to children?

Invite you to write down one take-away!

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<sup>i</sup> See Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *Child Theology: Diverse Perspectives and Global Perspectives* (Orbis Books, September 2022); Marcia J. Bunge, Reidar Aasgaard, and Merethe Roos, eds., *Nordic Childhoods 1750-1960: From Folk Beliefs to Pippi Longstocking* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2018); *Children, Adults, and Shared Responsibilities: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Don Browning and Marcia J. Bunge, eds., *Children and Childhood in World Religions: Primary Sources and Texts* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press: 2009); Marcia J. Bunge, Terence Fretheim, and Beverly Roberts Gaventa, eds., *The Child in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>ii</sup> I have written extensively about these six central perspectives in several articles about robust theologies of childhood, and you can learn more there. See, for example, Marcia J. Bunge, “The Dignity and Complexity of Children: Constructing Christian Theologies of Childhood,” in *Nurturing Child and Adolescent Spirituality: Perspectives from the World’s Religious Traditions*, edited by Karen Marie Yust, Aostre N. Johnson, Sandy Eisenberg Sasso, and Eugene C. Roehlkepartain, 43-68 (Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006); Marcia J. Bunge, “A More Vibrant Theology of Children,” *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics* (Summer, 2003): 11-19; Marcia J. Bunge, “Retrieving a Biblically Informed View of Children: Implications for Religious Education, a Theology of Childhood, and Social Justice,” *Lutheran Education* 139, no. 2 (Winter 2003): 72-87; Marcia J. Bunge, “The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood,” *Journal of Religion* 86.4 (October, 2006): 549-578; and Marcia J. Bunge, “Conceptions of and Commitments to Children: Biblical Wisdom for Families, Congregations, and the Worldwide Church,” in *Faith Forward (Volume Three): Launching a Revolution through Ministry with Children, Youth, and Families*, edited by David M. Csinos (Wood Lake, 2018), 94-112.

<sup>iii</sup> For more on the dangers of the corporal punishment of children and rethinking Christian understandings of discipline, see *Decolonizing Discipline: Children, Corporal Punishment, Christian Theologies, and Reconciliation*, edited by Valerie Michaelson and Joan E. Durrant (University of Manitoba Press, 2020), including my two chapters: Marcia J. Bunge, “The Significance of Robust Theologies of Childhood for Honouring Children’s Full Humanity and Rejecting Corporal Punishment,” 108-122; and “Rethinking Christian Theologies of Discipline and Discipleship,” 152-160.