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"Change and Become Like Children": Eschatological Childhood as Critique and Intention of Ecclesiological Life

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"Change and Become Like Children":
Eschatological Childhood as Critique and Intention of Ecclesiological Life

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For Boston, Oakley and Kaldi —
the most inspiring little "pneumatological agents" in my life.

Childhood is openness. Human childhood is infinite openness. The mature childhood of the adult is the attitude in which we bravely and trustfully maintain an infinite openness in all circumstances and despite the experiences of life which seem to invite us to close ourselves. Such openness, infinite and maintained in all circumstances, yet put into practice in the actual manner in which we live our lives, is the expression of man's religious existence.[1]

Karl Rahner

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[1] Karl Rahner, "Ideas for a Theology of Childhood" in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 8: *Further Theology of the Spiritual Life 2*, trans. David Bourke (New York: Herder & Herder, 1971), 48-49.

I. Introduction[2]

The ecclesial landscape of children's ministry in the context of American Christianity is incomplete. Not only has it been theologically curtailed by a particular brand of American Evangelicalism, but it also carries with it implicit assumptions and biases about the nature of children and their abilities to articulate valid, authoritative theological reflection. As such, the practice of children's ministry is often relegated to a lower tier of importance when juxtaposed with adult-centric ministry.

These prevailing sentiments are the products of two different colonialist paradigms used to describe the phenomenon of childhood: the production line and the greenhouse. The "production line" likens children to raw material that needs to be molded by adults into a predetermined design, while the "greenhouse" understands children as seeds in need of attentive gardeners.[3] As these ideas are *historically* important to understand the church's view of children's spirituality, they are nonetheless antiquated and no longer useful to us in theological and ecclesial modernity. They do not hold children as *bona fide* agents of theological and spiritual discourse, therefore truncating their fullness of humanity.

This brief paper attempts to move toward a vision of children's ministry decolonized and freed from these intergenerational shackles. Such a model does not take adult discipleship as the *telos* of successful ministry. Rather, the goal of the local parish should be both the continued personal and social sanctification of *all* Christian disciples and communities, regardless of origin,

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[3] David M. Csinos, *Children's Ministry That Fits: Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Approaches to Nurturing Children's Spirituality*, (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2011), 10-11.

race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or identity, and yes, age. Without the presence and integration

of children in all manifestations of Christian ministry, the prevailing ecclesiological model is

defective at worst and incomplete at best. What follows is an attempt to provide a necessary

repair to American ecclesiology as we know it by offering a vision for children's full unification

with the ministry of the church.

II. The Kantian Shape of Children's Ministry

The German, Enlightenment-era philosopher, Immanuel Kant, was not a minister, nor a

theologian. However, his philosophy has been intensely utilized by theologians in the last two

centuries. Though Kant's philosophy is wide-ranging, systematic, and far too expansive to

summarize *in toto* here, one of his most well-known ethical maxims is what is known as the

humanity formula of the "Categorical Imperative." This states that humanity must never be

treated merely as a means to an end, but as an *end in itself*.[4] In other words, the concept of

"using" someone for the exclusive purpose of achieving a goal is the antithesis to ethics proper.

One must *never* use another human being only to achieve some end. The proper end must always

be the other human being *themself*. Though this is certainly a simplified account, this concept is

relevant to the plight of modern-day children's ministry.

Children's ministry is often undertaken as merely a means to an end, with the intended

end being to create something akin to a "return customer."[5] The goal is not necessarily true

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[4] See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 429ff.

[5] The use of capitalistic language is intentional, as children's ministry is more often viewed as transactional—an exchange of services and goods—than an intrinsic good in the life of the church.

formation and discipleship of children, but the facilitation of consistent church attendance. As such, children are treated as one of these mere means-to-an-end that Kant advises against in his ethical system. Not only does the relegation of children to this sub-level of importance create issues in the Church's theo-ethical teaching, but it also regards children as less-than fully human.

The root of this relegation, though, isn't merely a faulty theological anthropology; it's the result of a kind of imperialist enterprise. As the seats of ecclesial power exist exclusively within adult circles, the structure of intra-church ministry is often easily conducive to a prototypical top-down agenda of dominion carried out by an elder generation toward the younger. The theological work laid out below attempts to invert this narrative by taking steps to decolonize the practice and space of ministry to children by taking children as *ends-in-themselves*. This provides a necessary repair to the faulty ethics of the Church's recent history of children's ministry, but also elevates children to a place of spiritual validity within the Church's life.

III. The Necessity of Christological Foundations

Any foundation we attempt to set in place for a robust theology of children's ministry must take as its cornerstone the dogma of the incarnation. That the messiah came to us as a child is the prolegomenon necessary to take children as a valid object of theological inquiry. Second-century Greek theologian, Irenaeus, was an early forerunner of this idea: "He came to save all through himself…Therefore he passed through every stage of life: he was made an infant for infants, sanctifying infancy; a child among children, sanctifying those of this age…"[6]

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[6] Irenaeus, "The Sanctification of Each Stage of Life," quoted in *Documents of the Christian Church 4th ed.,* ed. Chris Maunder, (Oxford: OUP, 2011), 32.

But not only is the affirmation of Jesus as the *logos ensarkos* important, but also the theological outworking of the interaction between his divine and human natures, respectively. At the Council of Chalcedon in 451CE, a two-nature formula was established, affirming that the historical figure of Jesus was both "truly God and truly man." In other words, the fullness of divinity *and* humanity indwelled and constituted the person of Jesus without any confusion or separation.

While Protestantism does not hold the creeds of the ecumenical councils to the same level of authority as the Roman Catholic (or Eastern Orthodox, to an extent) tradition, the Chalcedonian blueprint is widely accepted amongst most major denominational lines. That being said, if the Chalcedonian formula is to be taken and implemented seriously then it must be attested that the fullness of humanity and divinity were present in Jesus from the moment of birth.[7] In other words, Chalcedonian Christology renders any kind of adolescent developmentalism as dead-on-arrival, requiring an immediate recognition of an infant's full humanity and rejecting the concept of a slowly-emergent personhood only acknowledged in adulthood. Should we dispute this statement, we risk a Docetist infiltration.

Likewise, if we dispute the Christological formula of Chalcedon, we also run the risk of exposing ourselves to a kind of paedological Docetism in which children are understood as not yet fully-human. Thus, taking the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity as a necessary starting point allows us to immediately affirm, without reservation, that children participate in

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[7] The decision to speak of the fullness of Jesus' humanity at the moment of birth and not the moment of conception is intentional. In following with the precedent set forth in Exodus 21:22, the law prescribing the punishment for someone who causes the death of a fetus is not consistent with the punishment prescribed for the killing of another person (Numbers 35:30). Thus, within the Jewish context of Jesus' birth, his humanity would have been fully affirmed when he emerged from Mary's womb. During his development in utero, he would have been merely understood as an extension of his mother's body.

the fullness of humanity. That is not to say that children are born with the same expanse of knowledge or experience as adults. According to the Gospel of Luke, even Jesus "increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor."[8] However, despite their continuing growth in wisdom, children and their experiences, opinions, and voices are just as valid and valuable as those of adults. To affirm the fullness of humanity in children is to deny any developmentalism that suggests that children cannot be productive and fruitful theological interlocutors and agents due to their age.

On the contrary, children are just as receptive and aware of the presence of the divine in their lives as adults are, even if they experience and describe such presence differently than we do. By relegating children to a lower rung on the ecclesial ladder, we do a disservice to both them and ourselves by depriving the wider church community of their insight and contemplation. As such, in this model, children are not viewed passively as mere receivers of theological reflection and spiritual formation, but as co-equal laborers in the task of the gospel. They are, in the utmost and sincerest use of the term, co-pilgrims on the journey of discipleship.

However, this theological task, which both emerging and mature disciples participate in, is empowered by a single pneumatological source. As this necessary task of discipleship is characterized by the famous Anselmian maxim, "faith seeking understanding," we must hold faith as a prerequisite to participation in this particular labor. Following the Pentecost event recounted in Acts 2, there is a consistent correlation between the faith and the originator of that faith, viz. the Holy Spirit. Following recent trends in trinitarian theology and scholarship regarding the relationship between the Son and the Spirit, we now turn to the importance of

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[8]Luke 2:52

pneumatological agency in both affirming children's full-discipleship, as well as tearing down the intergenerational empire often imposed on younger generations of Christians.

IV. Children as Pneumatological Agents

Just as the christological point-of-departure for children's ministry is Jesus' earthly birth, so must the pneumatological point-of-departure be Jesus' second birth: his baptism. While there is no scholarly consensus on Jesus' motive for submitting himself to such an act, the four gospels are in general agreement regarding the scene, including the condescension of the Spirit in physical form. Despite its seeming mystery, it is notable that Jesus' public ministry does not begin until after the baptism and descent of the Spirit.

Bruce McCormack, in his brilliant work on Christology, has used this biblical account (among others) to develop a "pneumatologically driven two-natures Christology," claiming that "Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit [is] the performative agent of all that is done by the God-human."[9] In other words, the life and ministry of Jesus was not animated by the power of the eternal Logos, but the Spirit, and the power of the eternal Logos is manifest merely as "weakness."[10]

Though it goes beyond McCormack's scope of intention, we can certainly utilize his logic. In the above section, we've established children's full humanity by grounding their being in the full humanity of the Christ-child. This particular theological anthropology allows us to collapse the ontological gap between a child's concrete, lived experience and the promise of the

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[9] Bruce McCormack, *The Humility of the Eternal Son: Reformed Kenoticism and the Repair of Chalcedon*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2021), 250 and 258.

[10] See Ibid., 258.

imago Dei, leaving no room for any kind of dehumanizing dualism. Both are rooted and fulfilled in the person of Jesus. As such, we can venture a cautious claim that the same force that acts as the performative agent in the binding of the second person of the Trinity to the life and ministry of Jesus — with the same kind of collapsed ontological gap between the two — can also be understood as the force that binds children, in their individual embodied histories, to the specific earthly existence of Jesus of Nazareth.

Clearly, the situation of McCormack's "pneumatologically driven two-natures Christology" is different from what is proposed here, but a consistent thread can be identified in the third person of the Trinity. In both the event of the incarnation and the earthly-historical lives of children, the Spirit is that which allows divine power to be made complete in, through, and by weakness.[11] And as all humanity enters into childhood at the moment of birth[12], so all humanity is subsumed within this participatory act of grounding. This claims takes for granted that all humanity — not merely those who intellectually accept the basic premises of Christianity — are subject to act by, and be-acted-on by, the Holy Spirit.[13]

If we accept all that is said above, then, the difference between the agency of the earthly-historical Jesus and the agency of the rest of humanity (including children) cannot be due to the power of the eternal Logos present within the person of Jesus, but to another factor, viz. obedience. It is the perfect obedience of the Son to the Father that results in the second person of the Trinity becoming incarnate as the man Jesus, and it is the perfect obedience of the Son to the

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[11] 2 Cor. 12:9. It's the opinion of the author that τελειόω in this particular verse is more accurately rendered as "complete" rather than "perfect," as is the popular translation choice.

[12] See p. 5n7 above

[13] Such a concept is not new to the Christian tradition. It's well-established that John Wesley's understanding of grace was tripartite in nature, allowing for "prevenient" grace; the divine force that gently pulls a person to the Lord from the very beginning of personhood.

prompting of the Spirit that allows Jesus to carry out the ministry we find in the gospels, complete with miracles and destruction of death by death. This perfection begins and ends with Jesus alone as the God-man whose existence was anticipated from eternity. However, obedience can be rendered in this life more-or-less completely by the rest of creation.

The spiritual obedience rendered by children is often unapproachable by mature adults. Typically impervious to the lure of theological accuracy and doctrinal orthodoxy, children are often the ones who render obedience to the Spirit most faithfully, offering themselves — often unknowingly — as model pneumatological agents.

This agency in the lives and spirituality of children can be internal or external in nature, manifesting as either internal disposition toward or external action vis-á-vis goodness, justice, self-sacrifice, etc. There have been several psychological studies carried out in recent years which point to the formation of philosophical concepts like justice and fairness in children's earliest years of development.[14] What concerns us with relation to these studies is not their procedure or their significance for historical systems of child development, but their potential for theological reflection.

There is no reason we might not point to the development and exercise of these concepts in young children and understand them to be the nonobjectifiable action of the Spirit in their lives, unencumbered by the distraction of modern political thought. The simplicity and ease with which children declare that which is good, just, and fair is not only a function of their personal spirituality, but the oft-lost goal of discipleship to which we now turn.

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[14] See Katrin Riedl, Keith Jensen, Josep Call, and Michael Tomasello, "Restorative Justice in Children," *Current Biology* 25 (June 29, 2015): 1731–35; Ernst Fehr, Helen Bernhard, and Bettina Rockenbach, "Egalitarianism in Young Children," *Nature* 454 (2008): 1079-1083; Peter Blake and Katherine McAuluffe, "'I had so much it didn't seem fair': Eight-year-olds reject two forms of inequity," *Cognition* 120.2 (2011): 215-224; et al.

V. Childhood as Essence and End of Discipleship

There is little consistency in the New Testament narratives regarding the theological category of "children." It is a category neither portrayed as consisting of inherently good, nor inherently bad, young people. Instead, it is often used with what seems to be a *tabula rasa* connotation, maintaining a level of spiritual and ethical neutrality that can be directed one way or another. The best analogy I can come up with for how they are often used in light of this understanding is something akin to crash-test-dummies, used as paradigmatic examples of both the good and the bad, the sinless and sinful, etc. This can be seen in the dialectical vacillation between "children of the kingdom" and "children of the evil one" in Matthew 13:38, "children of this age" and "children of light" in Luke 16:8, "children of the flesh" and "children of the promise" in Romans 9, *et al*.

However, this inconsistency must be tempered with other linguistic uses found in the synoptic gospels in which children are heralded as the exclusive heirs to divine favor. There is a parallel text in each of the three synoptic gospels in which people bring their children to Jesus. When the disciples see this, they speak sternly to the people and rebuke them, but Jesus stops them and tells them to "let the little children come." The parallel passages mirror one another as such:

> Then little children were being brought to him in order that he might lay his hands
> on them and pray. The disciples spoke sternly to those who brought them; but
> Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to
> such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." And he laid his hands on them
> and went on his way. (Matthew 19:13-15)
>
> 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. (Mark 10:13-14)

 People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs." (Luke 18:15-16)

Though we don't have the time and space here to discuss any theories as to why, it is worth noting that the phrase "kingdom of heaven" is exclusive to Matthew's gospel; no where else does it appear in either the New or Old Testament. Matthew does, however, also make use of "Kingdom of God" at various times, possibly as a holdover of Markan influence.

In any case, though, the three synoptics all attribute to Jesus this claim that the divine kingdom — God's dwelling place in creation — belongs to little children "such as these."[15] On a surface-level reading, one might come away with the concern that biological age is the determining factor in the inheritance of the kingdom, thereby excluding people of any life-phase after childhood. However, this concern can be alleviated with Jesus' words at the beginning of Matthew 18: "At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, 'Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, 'Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me.'"[16]

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[15] Given the context of Jesus' street ministry, we can also venture an educated guess that the children being brought to him are not children of status, but of the poor, further distancing the kingdom from the social and political elite of the day.

[16] Matt. 18:1-5

Here, we get a glimpse at Jesus' wider soteriological vision. First, this passage offers biblical support to our earlier attempt at grounding the very existence of children in the earthly-historical life of the Christ-child. As Jesus conflates the welcoming of "one such child" with welcoming himself, the *imago Dei* is thereby found and restored in the life of the child through the person of Jesus. Second, we find that it is not the category of biological children *as such* that is the group exclusively privy to an inheritance of the divine kingdom, but those who "change and become like children."

In this, we find children to be the archetypal exemplars of discipleship; the eschatological telos of the Christian life toward which we all must strive. In his article on the theology of childhood, Karl Rahner references the "mature childhood of the adult" as the goal of the Christian's spiritual life. Though this may be helpful for demarcating separate stages of the discipleship pathway, I believe a more apt expression would be "eschatological childhood" — the state all Christian people, regardless of age, participate in through their obedience rendered in the Son through the Spirit to the Father. As such, this childhood is not only the goal of discipleship, but discipleship's very essence and quality, apart from which there can be no participation in the Christian life to begin with.

VI. Possible Implications

The brief analysis above is but a blip on the ecclesiological radar, however, if it does not have any practical implications. What does it mean for the living church to accept children as valid disciples in full communion with the living Christ and take them as exemplars of discipleship? In this section, we will look at the presence of children in the three realms of

Christian life: worship, formation, and service and discuss how a Christologically-grounded theology of childhood can be implemented in the local parish.

VI.1 *Worship*

We will begin by looking to the lifeblood of the local parish: worship. Worship is the goal and negation of the church's communal life.[17] Put another way, worship is both the desired ecclesial end, as well as the perpetual ecclesiological critique. Should an action or nonaction not flow to or from an act of worship, then its validity must be called into question. Worship is the origin of the church's actualistic life.

It is widely understood that "worship" encompasses much more than a Sunday morning service. For example, the other two categories we will be discussing in this section are also acts of worship. Theologically, I would argue that worship is merely am umbrella term that holds within it all acts of obedience to the living God. However, what we will be looking at in this section is particularly the colloquial understanding of worship, i.e. the act of a community of believers gathering and hearing the Word preached.

In Luke 2, we find a scene of the young Jesus in one such Jewish gathering: "…they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers."[18] One popular argument that might arise from this scene is that, as the incarnate God, the young Jesus would

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[17] For the use of the terms "goal" and "negation," I am indebted to the work of Robert Jenson and his trinitarian thought. See Robert Jenson, *The Triune Identity: God According to the Gospel*, (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1982), 24ff.

[18] Luke 2:46-47

have the obvious ability to intellectually contend with the teachers of the day. However, as we have already affirmed above, Jesus "increased in wisdom" as a child, thereby making an Apollinarian Christology a non-starter.[19]

Likewise, as is mentioned above, in the synoptics gospels we see the adult Jesus' famous dictum to "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs."[20] Again, the wider context of this scene is Jesus' street ministry of preaching and healing. When the disciples try to exclude children from this gathering, Jesus corrects them, demanding that the children be allowed to come to him.

These are but two examples of the presence of children in first century correlates to our modern worship. The task presented to the modern church is to discern the ways in which to structure a worship experience that is theologically and ecclesiologically complete. As it stands, worship that does not include, involve, and celebrate the presence of children is not an accurate reflection of the kingdom we are tasked with representing. Though this involvement and celebration will doubtless look different in each congregation and tradition, the imperative to "let the little children come" remains.

VI.2 *Formation*

If worship is the lifeblood of the local parish, then formation is the beating heart. Formation is the motivation of worship; the hope of creating a continuous need for the hearing of

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[19] Apollinarianism was condemned in 381CE for proposing the idea that Jesus had a human body, but a divine mind in place of a human soul. This heresy was condemned on the grounds that it interfered with the principle offered by Gregory of Nazianzus that "what is not assumed is not redeemed." In other words, if Jesus assumed a divine mind in place of a human soul, then the human soul could not be redeemed by Jesus' death and resurrection.

[20] Luke 18:16-17

the Word anew by confronting the hearer with an inexhaustible source of wisdom, grace, and wonder. This Word inspires inexhaustible curiosity into its meaning for the church and the world in the current moment, inevitably bringing the hearer back to the worship of the God who freed the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and freed Jesus from the grave through resurrection.

This cycle of formation and worship is seen in Deuteronomy 6: "When your children ask you in time to come, 'What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the LORD our God has commanded you?' then you shall say to your children, 'We were Pharaoh's slaves in Egypt, but the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The LORD displayed before our eyes great and awesome signs and wonders against Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household. He brought us out from there in order to bring us in, to give us the land that he promised on oath to our ancestors. Then the LORD commanded us to observe all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our lasting good, so as to keep us alive, as is now the case. If we diligently observe this entire commandment before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us, we will be in the right.'"[21]

We can see in this passage the oscillation between formation and worship. The author moves from the curiosity of the children in the laws of the Torah to the response of the parent, at once a conveyance of historical knowledge and an expression of worship in the acknowledgement of God's saving act in the world. And as these decrees, statutes, and ordinances of the Torah are at once theological *and* ethical, so the formation of the hearer—in this case the child—is at once, theological *and* ethical.

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[21] Deuteronomy 6:20-25

The individual components of this formation are without separation or confusion; they do not combine in a Hegelian synthesis to make something new and unique. As they maintain their own identities and categories of existence, they also cannot advance independent of one another. True theological formation is necessarily accompanied by ethical formation and *vice versa*.

As such, the charge left to the believing community from the above passage in Deuteronomy is two-fold, viz. first, to provide opportunities for *true* formation of its youngest disciples by allowing them exposure and access to the present church's correlate "decrees, statutes, and ordinances," and second, by following the example of the Deuteronomic author and responding to these opportunities with proclamation of God's definitive act in the world, both in antiquity *and* modernity. The local parish often thrives on the proclamation of God's act in antiquity (what it understands to be theological formation *solum*), but struggles to speak of God's act in modernity for fear of the ramifications. In other words, to speak of God's act in modernity is to shun ecclesial neutrality and take political and ethical positions on contemporary and pressing issues. Many parishes falsely believe the Church is to exist independent of such worldly matters. However, it is precisely concern for these worldly matters that makes children's formation complete, and it is *action* upon these worldly matters that brings resolution to both worship and formation. It is to this action that we now turn.

VI.3 *Service*

Without practical application and implementation of the theo-ethical formation which flows from the act of worship, the Christian life is truncated and abridged, lacking a final decree of victory over an individual's or community's existence. Likewise, without practical application

and implementation of this formation in a child's life, their discipleship will remain incomplete. As there is no part or aspect of creation that Jesus' victory does not touch, so there can be no part or aspect of creation that Christian discipleship should not influence in one's life.

That being said, worship and formation find their continuing manifestations in acts of service. This third realm of the Christian life is unique in that it does not require an explicitly Christian designation or moniker to be considered valid by the wider Christian community. When one carries out an act of service that aligns with the true formation of the Church, it is immediately identified as such.[22] Within the realm of the Christian life, ethics are both the task and *telos* of discipleship. They maintain a special position of authority to validate the dogma and doctrine of the Christian faith; without any resultant ethical service rendered by a purported follower of Christ, the faith of the follower (or community) is merely false.[23] In this post-Christendom era, the Church's primary preoccupation must become one of ortho*praxy* over ortho*doxy*; there must be a transition of focus away from divergence of doctrine and towards convergence of ethics.

Not only is this a necessary component to the Church's life as the σῶμα Χριστοῦ, but this is crucial for the continued engagement and relevance of the Church to its youngest generation of disciples. In his first letter, John the apostle speaks directly to the young people in his congregation, saying that he is writing to them "because you are strong and the word of God

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[22] Though the space required is not available here, there is a need for comparative analysis between this idea of immediate identifiability in Christian ethics and moral virtue theory in ancient Greek philosophy. There is opportunity to draw parallels between Aristotle's concept of the virtuous as one who intuitively knows the virtuous decision and the truly-formed Christian disciple's intuitive knowledge of that which aligns with the Gospel. C.f. Aristotle's *Ethics*.

[23] James 2:26

abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."[24] The structure of John's writing in this

verse is crucial, as the overcoming of the evil one follows and proceeds from the abiding of

God's word. Action against evil is the only possible logical and theo-logical outcome of true

formation in God's word.

As such, acts of service to the world that stand in line with Jesus' radical ethic of

liberative love *must* be a component of the life of a local parish, and the presence and activity of

children must be part of that component. As disciples guided by both the Church's worship and

formation, children are also obligated to these realms' common destination. This obligation

provides not only a direction for churches to drive their ministry to children, but also an ongoing

critique of the church's relationship with society's wider political life. A parish cannot provide a

comprehensive ministry to children without first accepting 1) its responsibility to the resistance

of evil, and 2) the practical consequences of that acceptance. The involvement of children in

service to the eradication of oppression, poverty, and the like is necessary both for the children's

formation and the act itself to be theologically complete.

VII. Conclusion

The primary motivation behind the genesis of the above work is to solve a problem.

Children, as a category of disciples within the church, have long been dismissed as irrelevant or

unimportant to the church's continued life and ministry. As is laid out above, though, nothing

could be further from the truth. On the contrary, children should not only be involved and

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[24] John speaks to his community as a whole using generalized forms of παιδίον and τεκνίον. Thus, any references in the Johannine epistles to children must be examined first through this lens. His address to the "young people" (νεανίσκος) of his congregation is likely his closest correlate to addressing the actual children and youth present in his community.

incorporated with the entire ministry of the church, but children are the models of obedient discipleship we all should be aspiring to. The eschatological childhood required for true discipleship is defined by the same kind of simple, unencumbered disposition toward the good and the just that children develop and enact in their youngest years.

To fully embrace this eschatological childhood, one must be willing to shed the fear of worldly judgement and political repercussion in favor of doing that which aligns with the radical love of Jesus. To use Paul's language, eschatological childhood requires us to put away the "old self" and clothe ourselves with the "new self."[25] This putting away of the old self demands that we put away our old methods of theological labor which have long dominated and oppressed young voices and, instead, lift up children as those whose spiritual commitments are valid merely by virtue of their existence. To do as much is nothing short of the obedience required to "change and become like children" as has been commanded of us.

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[25] Eph. 4:22-24

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