A REEXAMINATION OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

CONCERNING CHILDREN AND CONVERSION

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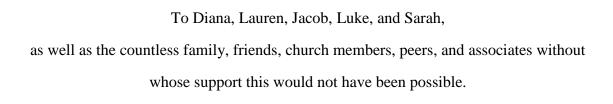Doctor of Philosophy

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by

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APPROVAL SHEET

A REEXAMINATION OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE

CONCERNING CHILDREN AND CONVERSION

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To Diana, Lauren, Jacob, Luke, and Sarah,

as well as the countless family, friends, church members, peers, and associates without

whose support this would not have been possible.

It is not sufficient, but each of you has my undying thanks and appreciation.

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PREFACE

It is difficult to know how to express the thankfulness that I feel toward those who have contributed so much to the completion of this dissertation. While many people have sacrificed and given much to make this work a reality, no one has given or sacrificed more than my wife and children. This journey has encompassed much of our lives and without the willingness of my wife to take care of the duties I was forced to abandon from time to time, and without the willingness of our children to understand why dad was gone for a couple of weeks again and again—not to mention their willingness to sacrifice so that we could meet the necessary financial obligation, this dissertation would never have been written. From my heart, I say to them, "thank you."

I owe a huge debt to Dr. Timothy Beougher. Dr. Beougher provided gentle but firm guidance throughout this process. His encouragement and counsel have been invaluable. I am indeed blessed to have enjoyed the blessing of Dr. Beougher as my supervisor. In addition, I am thankful for the contribution of Dr. Adam Greenway to my studies. I have been blessed to learn from Drs. Greenway and Beougher more than any other instructors in the program. Dr. Beougher has been a consistent source of advice and encouragement at every step along the journey. I am so thankful for his role as my supervisor. Dr. Greenway challenged me as I have never been challenged before, and I am better for it. His contribution to this effort is also something for which I am extremely grateful.

I have met some extraordinary peers along the way as well. I would not attempt to name them, but the men and women with whom I have sat in the many classrooms over the years have each added to my experience. It has been a joy to sustain

many of those relationships and to watch as they have made quite a mark as they have begun to serve the Lord in various capacities.

Many other friends, family members, and church members have contributed much to my educational pursuits. For many of them, their words of encouragement and interest have spurred me on to continue. For others, their support has been financial in nature. I would never have been able to complete this project without their help and support. I especially want to acknowledge my mother and my wife's parents for their kindness and love. I also want to acknowledge the churches I have served as pastor while in this pursuit: Bassett Creek Baptist Church, Pine Hill Baptist Church, and Linden Baptist Church. Additionally, I want to thank the members of my parents' church, which is also the church in which I came to Christ as a thirteen year-old-boy, Macedonia Baptist Church. Their support has been consistent and significant.

Finally, in the weeks before I finished this project, my father passed away unexpectedly. He was so proud that I was pursuing this degree and even after his mind had somewhat failed him, he would still tell his nurses that his son was going to school. He told me on more than one occasion that he "would not be more proud of me if I had been President of the United States." I know that he meant every word. I see my father every day in everything I do. I am grateful for his influence in my life.

I am not, therefore, under any delusion that this work is my accomplishment. Though I get to walk the aisle and my name is on the diploma, I am a product of the love and support of the many I have referenced here, and countless others who have blessed me along the way as well. I can only hope that they know how appreciative I truly am.

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Linden, Alabama

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Pastoral ministry is a daunting undertaking for everyone privileged to serve in that capacity. Herschel York writes, "By its very nature, the field of pastoral leadership is fraught with such incredible difficulties that we must say with the apostle Paul, 'Who is sufficient for these things?' . . . Leading God's people is unlike any other task in the world."[1] One of the more challenging aspects of pastoral ministry is that the pastor is called upon to minister in such a wide spectrum of contexts. In each of these contexts, the pastor often deals with people who are, for a myriad of reasons, struggling, and as a result are particularly vulnerable in that moment. This context creates an awareness on the part of the pastor that should he counsel a vulnerable congregant incorrectly, he could not only fail to provide needed help but could actually inflict harm upon the one he has been called to edify and encourage. Never is the pastor more aware of this burden—and never is the recipient of the pastor's counsel more potentially vulnerable—than in the case of a young child. The need to lead rightly is most pronounced when dealing with these most impressionable of congregants. To add to the sense of urgency regarding ministry to the youngest members of the congregation, the pastor often finds himself extraordinarily invested in the children of the church, and for good reason.

If a pastor manages to remain at a church beyond an average window of service, it is likely he will have opportunities to watch a child from infancy through the child's formative years, and even into the time of life in which the child begins to consider his

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[1] Herschel York, "Ten Unique Challenges To Ministry," The Gospel Coalition, January 6, 2014, http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/10-challenges-unique-ministry.

response to the gospel message. It is this moment, when a child expresses a desire to come to Christ, which this dissertation addresses. What is a pastor to do in that moment when a child begins to ask questions of a soteriological nature? Is there a disciplined way in which a pastor can prepare to respond that will allow the pastor to confidently counsel the child so that the child will be positioned for an effective walk with Christ? Or is the potential for harm so great in the case of the young child that the pastor should err on the side of caution? In that case, perhaps the pastor would better serve the child by lovingly postponing the conversation until the child has reached a greater level of maturity and understanding. A pastor must address these very real questions—and these questions are present in virtually every congregation.

As many demographic groups in the United States continue to show increases, the number of children who are potential members of the faith community is necessarily rising as well. According to the US Census Bureau report published in 2016, the population of the United States now exceeds 323 million people.[2] Digging further into those numbers, one finds that 19 percent of that population is currently under the age of fifteen—that total is over 61 million children under the age of 15 in this country alone.[3]

Numbers that large seem to almost guarantee that a pastor will have opportunities to minister to young children over the tenure of his pastorate. The combination of the importance of this discussion, along with the large numbers of potential needs, would lead one to think that there would be a wealth of information on the topic. That, however, is not the case. The pastor seeking to deal effectively in the matter of children and conversion is presented with few resources that provide guidance in this matter. Marcia Bunge notes, "Until very recently, issues related to children have tended

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[2] United States Census Bureau, "Quick Facts," accessed March 1, 2018, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/table/AGE135213/00.

[3] The World Bank, "Population 0 14," accessed March 1, 2018, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.0014.TO.ZS.

to be marginal in almost every area of contemporary theology. For example, systematic theologians and Christian ethicists have said little about children, and they have not regarded children as a high priority."[4] A cursory survey of a few of the more popular systematic theologies affirms her claim.

Take, for example, Wayne Grudem's often referenced *Systematic Theology*. Grudem's massive tome encompasses over 1,500 pages and covers myriad topics from the study of Scripture. A search of his 2020 updated edition of his work reveals that the word "child" is found 92 times in those 1,500 pages and the word "children" is found 344 times. While some may argue that total is not an insignificant number of appearances, a closer look at the occurrences of these terms reveals that many of these references are in the context of a "child of God" or referencing the "children of God," often in the narrative of the nation of Israel, and not in the context of the developmental or chronological sense of a child. It is not that Grudem denies the spiritual potential of a child. He hints at it on occasion, even stating at one point that children "seek, in simple form, systematic theology and 'whole bible" ethical teaching."[5] But he stops short of anything that would be instructive in the matter of the salvation of a child. Out of the relatively small number of references to "child" or "children" that deal with children in a chronological or developmental sense, only a fraction actually deal on any level with the topic of salvation and children.[6] The closest Grudem comes to directly addressing this issue is in a

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[4] Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 3.

[5] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), 110.

[6] In his *Systematic Theology*, Grudem mentions various theories concerning the souls of children (creationism vs. traducianism) rather than directly broaching the issue of the salvation of children. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 613-15. Grudem notes, "We must realize that a child's sinful nature manifests itself very early, certainly within the first two years of a child's life, as anyone who has raised children can affirm"(629). Though not stated directly, this entry inherently establishes children as sinners in need of regeneration. Grudem writes that "Yet it certainly is possible for God to bring regeneration (that is, new spiritual life) to an infant even before he or she is born" (629-30). As part of a reference to paedobaptism, Grudem refers to "unbelieving children who

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discussion on the "age of accountability" that comes within a larger discussion on the nature of sin in the life of a human and the human's resulting responsibility. Grudem goes on to conclude, "Yet it certainly is possible for God to bring regeneration (that is, new spiritual life) to an infant even before he or she is born."[7]

But, even here his comments are not directed so much toward children, but rather toward infants that die in infancy. He writes, "If such infants are saved, it cannot be on their own merits, or on the basis of their own righteousness or innocence, but it must be entirely on the basis of Christ's redemptive work and regeneration by the work of the Holy Spirit within them."[8] To the very slight degree that the issue of children and conversion is referenced in Grudem's work, it is entirely descriptive and not prescriptive. There is little that would provide guidance for the seeking pastor in this moment.

So even within the pages of a book recognized as a substantive source for theological considerations and attempts to be a thorough resource on matters pertaining to theology, limited information is provided that would add understanding or provide guidance to the pastor seeking help in the area of children and conversion. The most that such books seem to offer is the occasional reference to children as "spiritual beings"— but only to the extent that an adult would be considered as the same. Sadly, on the matter of the disposition of these spiritual beings, the silence that emerges from these books is deafening.

It would be unfair to single out Grudem for criticism in this matter. The

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belong to church families" (1219). Grudem presents information on the "age for baptism." He writes that children "should be old enough to give a believable profession of faith" and further notes that when parents see convincing evidence of genuine spiritual life and some degree of understanding regarding the meaning of trusting in Christ, then baptism is appropriate" (1212-13). Grudem references "a child who knows Christ" in his discussion of the symbolism of the Lord's Supper (1229). This list is the extent of references to a "child" in the developmental or chronological sense as related specifically to the matter of their conversion in the entirety of the book.

[7] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 629-30.

[8] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 629.

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treatment of the matter of children and conversion in his book is not atypical from what is found in other like books. A quick survey of some other popular systematic theologies reveals that Grudem actually goes farther than most in the subject of children and conversion. If one scans *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology,* edited by John Webster, Kathryn Tanner and Iain Torrence; *A Theology of the Church,* edited by Daniel Akin;*, An Introduction to Christian Belief,* by John M. Frame; *Biblical Doctrine,* edited by John Macarthur and Richard Mayhue*; and Christian Theology* by Millard Erickson, one finds that it is a chore to even find any reference to children outside of the references to a "child of God" or "children of God."[9] Matters dealing with children in the chronological and developmental sense are so scarcely dealt with in these significant works that there is not even a single index entry for "child" or "children" in any of these works, except for where it is included as "child of God" or "children of God." Though there has been an increase in instances of published work of late regarding children and conversion, one does not have to dig far to discover that little exists to guide and instruct pastors on what most would agree is among the most needful of topics.

At this point it seems necessary to add a bit of a caveat. I do not mean to imply that such a neglect of these matters is in any way a purposeful avoidance of what could be a controversial topic. Grudem and others regularly deal with controversial topics, and they generally do so in a very definite manner. As such, most would not go as far as Adrian Thatcher, who claims that the lack of writing on the subject of children in Christian theology is tantamount to "neglecting children" and will prove ultimately detrimental to families throughout the Christian culture.[10] Rather, most would simply

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[9] John Webster, Kathryn Tanner, and Iain Torrence, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Daniel Akin, ed., *A Theology for the Church* (Nashville: B & H, 2007); John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013); John Macarthur and Richard Mayhue, eds., *Biblical Doctrine* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017); Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

[10] Adrian Thatcher, "Theology and Children: Towards a Theology of Childhood," *Transformation* 23, no. 4 (January 2006): 194.

attribute the lack of attention given this matter within these works to a function of the focus of these works being necessarily on other topics. But regardless of why the situation exists, the fact remains that there is a dearth of guidance available for pastors on the matter of children and conversion. The lack of voices providing help in this area creates a dangerous vacuum in which the voices of extremism on both ends of the theological spectrum drown out the more reasonable voices as they seek to fill the void that exists. As a result, at times it seems that the only options are the most extreme views; however, that is not the case. As this dissertation seeks to demonstrate, there is a more measured response. While, admittedly, there certainly are extreme views, those can be easily enough rejected. The problem is the lack of a reasoned response to this point to fill the void left when these polarizing views are not affirmed.

Consider, for example, some illustrations that are often paraded out when this discussion is enjoined. On one end of the spectrum would be found those who believe a child can never be too young to come to faith in Christ. They would advocate that every child be treated as an immediate candidate for conversion with the knowledge that some may not be such candidates, but God can ultimately sort all that out. The idea is that one would rather be guilty of encouraging one who was not quite ready to be converted, than to ever discourage anyone who was indeed ready for that moment. This point of view is often symbolized (fairly or not) by the famed "firetruck baptistery." This bold and somewhat outlandish display was reportedly designed for First Baptist Church of Springdale, Arkansas, by a Disney designer at a price tag of $270,000. According to the *Arkansas Times*, when a child was baptized, "sirens blare[d] and confetti was [shot] out of cannons."[11] Critics of this system express fears that children were simply being drawn to the spectacle. What small child would not relish the opportunity to make the firetruck roar and the confetti fly? Such decisions made under these circumstances would be

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[11] Max Brantley, "Baptism by Firetruck," *Arkansas Times*, June 2006, https://arktimes.com/arkansas-blog/2006/06/20/baptism-by-firetruck.

tenuous at best and would seem to set the child up for some significant spiritual challenges down the road.

This assertion is in no way meant to assail the motives of the people who designed this machine, nor is it meant to be a knock against the church that sanctioned it. It is entirely possible, and perhaps even likely, that the intentions were good and that the hearts of those who designed the firetruck baptistery were in the right place—genuinely wanting to see children come to Christ. But at the very least there seems to be some theological conclusions being drawn for the employment of such a creation that are inconsistent with Scripture. More specifics on the scriptural problems with the approach of "no one is too young—let them all come" will be provided in chapter 4 of this dissertation. A personal experience impressed upon me the danger of the "let them come at any age and any level of maturity/understanding" mentality.

While helping with VBS in a neighboring state to my home state of Alabama, I was made aware that one of the teachers of a group of eight and nine-year-olds had written on the board a version of what most would refer to as a "sinner's prayer." She then asked her young class to read it with her. After this recitation, she declared that they were all saved and that she was glad she did not have to worry about them anymore. Obviously, the idea here was that no level of maturity or understanding was necessary for someone to be saved. As long as they could "repeat after me," that action was sufficient for the teacher to then declare them "saved." Admittedly, both the VBS teacher and the firetruck baptistery are extreme examples, but they illustrate the danger of that end of the theological spectrum in the matter of how to deal with the subject of children and conversion. A lack of discipline and caution in this approach is disconcerting at best. Ultimately, those who support this view must address these questions such as, do these methods and others like them present a potentially dangerous path for the child? Should a pastor be this aggressive in promoting conversion (and subsequently baptism) among young children?

Equally disconcerting is the group that would advocate the other end of the

spectrum. This group would advance the thought that children under a certain age should never be considered candidates for conversion. Joe Rigney, professor at Bethlehem College and Seminary, embodies a form of this view. Rigney does not come out and say that young children cannot be saved. He does say, however, that any conversion in the life of a young child should be viewed suspiciously. Rigney insists that such young converts cannot be affirmed right away. He certainly does not say that these youngsters cannot come to faith, but he does assert that one cannot be certain of the validity of the conversion until the child has matured. Rigney calls it the difference between a credible or believable confession of faith and a mature profession of faith. He illustrates the difference between the two using his sons as examples: "When my young sons confess their sins, when they profess faith in Jesus, when they sing out hymns in church, I *believe* them, I think they are as sincere as six and four-year-olds can be. Thus, I cast no doubt on their professions of faith."[12] Rigney contends that he is not just looking for a credible profession, but rather a mature one. He would argue that it is not enough to believe someone wants to come to faith in Christ; that person must have enough maturity to have at least a basic understanding of what is transpiring in the process. Rigney would not go so far as to turn a young child away who came to him claiming to seek Christ. However, he would look upon the conversion with a measure of guarded suspicion, all the while seeking to help the young person learn to walk with Christ. The implication of this approach is that children—especially young children—cannot be necessarily counted upon to make a genuine profession of faith until they have reached a certain level of maturity. If a pastor affirms this viewpoint, then it will shape all he does and knows concerning sharing the gospel with a young child.

While both the Rigney and firetruck examples deal specifically with baptism rather than conversion itself, they certainly provide a platform for viewing the most

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[12] Joe Rigney, "When to Baptize Our Believing Children," Desiring God, July 6, 2015, http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/when-to-baptize-our-believing-children.

extreme views concerning the issue of children and conversion. Neither view will serve well the pastor who seeks to effectively minister to and counsel with his youngest congregants. Which then begs this question: if a pastor is to avoid hastily ushering a curious child through some ritualistic process, and if a pastor is to not give immediate credibility to childhood conversions, then what options are left for the pastor? Can a pastor confidently and effectively minister in the context of children and conversion?

Thesis

My thesis is that a careful study of the Bible, child psychology, and the theology of conversion will give pastors a firm foundation for dealing with child conversion. The human capacity to be in a relationship with God is certainly not limited to adults.[13] There is no scriptural reason to believe that the Holy Spirit excludes those under a certain age from being a part of the kingdom of God and engaging in the work of the kingdom. All are included in the power and work of the Spirit in their lives.[14] Though, the pastor must be mindful that to be a part of the kingdom work, and indeed to be a part of the kingdom, one must have a basic biblical understanding of certain elements that are necessary for salvation. At the most fundamental level, a child who comes looking for guidance regarding salvation should be handled, practically, much as an adult who comes looking for salvation. The gospel is simply the gospel, whether being shared with adults or children.[15] Anyone who is converted, regardless of age, can only be converted as a result of the effectual wooing of the Spirit of God that results in faith in Christ and repentance from sin. Again, neither faith nor repentance is the accomplishment of the sinner, be he adult or child. Both are the result of the work of the Spirit. Therefore, a key for the pastor

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[13] Greg Carlson, ed., *Perspectives on Children's Spiritual Formation* (Nashville: B & H, 2006).

[14] Dave Gidney, "Ecumenism and the Holy Spirit in Relation to Children," *Evangel* 31, no. 3 (Spring 2008): 19-20.

[15] Clifford Ingle, *Children and Conversion* (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 145.

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dealing with a child is the same as if he were dealing with an adult. The pastor must be disciplined and spiritually attuned so that he can ascertain some appreciation of the level of understanding at which the child is currently found. Having ascertained that understanding, the pastor can then lead the child appropriately from that point forward as the Spirit of God works in the life and heart of the child.

Chief among the duties of the pastor in this moment is an assessment of the child's understanding of soteriological concepts. These concepts will be addressed only briefly addressed here, and then will be discussed at greater length in the specific context of children and conversion later in this dissertation. The pastor must ascertain that the child has some understanding of the nature of sin—some sense that he has done wrong in the eyes of God. The language that the child uses here is not of the utmost importance and the child certainly does not need to be able to expound upon more advanced concepts, such as the depravity of man or the doctrine of original sin, but there must be some sense of understanding on the part of the child that he or she has done something that has displeased God. Sin will be real even to young boys and girls who have been made aware, by the working of the Holy Spirit, of their sin.[16] Once the Holy Spirit has shown the child the reality of his sin, then the child must walk through the necessary considerations of faith and repentance—both requisites for salvation. At this moment, if the pastor, through his own observation and the affirmation of the Spirit of God, feels that a fundamental level of understanding has been reached, then he can proceed and confidently minister to the child in the context of conversion.

Background

I have had the privilege of serving in vocational ministry since 1991. For the last eighteen years, that service has been as the senior pastor of one of five mostly rural

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[16] Gene Russell, *Let the Children Come In* (Nashville: Church Growth, 1971), 22.

congregations. The smallest of these congregations averaged about 50 people on a Sunday morning and the largest one about 200 people on a Sunday morning. In each context prior to my current field of service, I have been the only full-time staff member, though I have had some very capable part-time associates and some wonderful volunteers. Currently, I am a part of a staff that includes a senior pastor (me), two full-time associate pastors, a part-time associate pastor, and administrational/support staff. At the time of the writing of this dissertation, I had only been at my current field of service for a matter of weeks, so the experience I am speaking of is largely from the first four churches in which I have served. For each of the first four churches, the single biggest outreach event of the year was always Vacation Bible School. Vacation Bible School was the event into which the churches invested the greatest amount of resources—both time and money. It was the event that was supported by the largest number of church members and people from the communities.

The format for the week always followed the standard form of VBS—the same format that I can remember for VBS when I was a child. That formula was to work toward "evangelism night," where the pastor shared the plan of salvation and then dealt with any children who expressed that they were ready to come to Christ. From my very first year as a pastor, I always felt ill-equipped for that moment. It was always painfully obvious to me that some, if not many, of the children who came forward during VBS did so simply because a friend did, or it just seemed like a "cool" thing to do. I knew that they were not ready to grasp the spiritual concepts of repentance and faith. Though, as uncomfortable as I was with their seeming lack of readiness, I was even more uncomfortable with being perceived as somehow "turning away" a child who "wanted to be saved."

Despite my lack of confidence in the authenticity of the conviction of a young child who came inquiring about salvation, I found myself pressured to "pray" with the child because I certainly could not explain to a mother and father that their child wanted to "be saved" and I did not oblige him. I remain greatly convicted about those moments

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to this day. I fear that my lack of readiness and clarity on how to deal with this moment has created a possibility, if not a likelihood, that many of these children will have significant issues with doubts about their salvation; or worse yet they will walk around with a false assurance of salvation. As a young pastor I knew that I needed guidance on what would be a very combustible topic, though I did not pursue that help as aggressively or as thoroughly as I now wish that I had.

After two or three years of this struggle, I continued to look for help and guidance in this area. What was I, as a pastor, supposed to do in the matter of children and conversion? I spoke with some of the more experienced pastors in the area—only to find that they either were facing the same crisis with which I was dealing, or they simply believed that one just prays a prayer with the child and lets God work out the details. I heard repeatedly from pastors who had served faithfully for a much longer period than I, that a pastor simply could not turn a child away who wanted to pray to be saved. They told me that they would rather err on the side of praying a prayer with one who might not be ready, than risk not praying with a child who was genuinely under conviction. After all, there was no great harm done if they prayed with a child who was not truly ready, they would assert. However, that was not a satisfactory plan for me. I did not feel like I was doing right by these children by not having some sort of plan for how to effectively deal with them.

I had not yet begun seminary at this point; I did not begin seminary until well into my pastoral ministry. These issues were things I found myself dealing with from the outset of my pastoral ministry. Because I had not yet been to seminary at this point, both my research skills and resources were sorely lacking in the very rural contexts in which I served, but I repeatedly attempted to find something that would be a guide to me on this matter. I was unable to find anything. The few pages I found in a few books that dealt with the issue were very non-committal and provided no plan of action. However, the moment that most moved me to act on this matter was yet to come. It was not in my role

as a pastor that I was moved to the point of action; rather, it was in my even more key role, as a father.

This pastoral crisis was deepened when my own daughter came to me at age five expressing a desire to pray to Christ for salvation. My son would do the same thing at nearly the same early age. I felt that both were too young to pursue such a conversation, but as I began to talk with them, I sensed that the Spirit of God was working in their lives. They certainly, at that young age, could not know much of the working of the Spirit, I thought. But there was a conviction and a passion in their hearts that I could not escape. And yet again, I did not know what to do or how to proceed. Could indeed a five-year-old be saved? Was I going to set my children up for a lifetime of doubt and anxiety if I allowed them to proceed with this decision? If I somehow discouraged them from going forward in this moment would I be driving them away from a genuine conversion? The personal conflict at this point became almost overwhelming. This subject of children and conversion became a bit of an obsession for me.

As I began my seminary experience, I noticed the occasional resource along the way that addressed the issue, but there were few, even at the seminary level. When it came time for me to decide on a direction for a dissertation, I was greatly impacted by these experiences. I knew that for me personally, this would provide an opportunity to address some of these longstanding issues. My desire was that some pastor out there who was burdened by a similar conflict would finally have something that would help him navigate these challenging but crucially important waters.

A preliminary glance through the existing material revealed some books that had addressed the subject, but few in a thorough and biblically anchored manner. Most of the books that addressed pastoral ministry to children either did not address the matter of their conversion, or else addressed it unsatisfactorily. These resources simply gave counsel on how to minister to children after they were saved. Existing dissertations offered little on the subject as well. The decision then for me was an easy one. This dissertation would

equip pastors who genuinely want to be of help and guidance to the child in the matter of conversion.

Methodology

This dissertation begins with an exegetical study of relevant biblical texts as they pertain to the subject of children and conversion. Of necessity, this survey of Scripture is not exhaustive. When one considers that the world "child" occurs 121 times in Scripture and that the word "children" is found 448 times, with over 2,700 occurrences of "son" or "sons" (excluding references to Jesus as "son of God"), one quickly realizes that an exhaustive survey of the occurrences of these terms is not practical.[17] I was selective in choosing the passages that advance this discussion. These most relevant biblical passages will be discussed in chapter 2 of this dissertation.

Another necessary part of this methodology was defining certain terms as they are referenced in this dissertation. One of the major considerations to address was the definition of "child." What constitutes a child? When can one have confidence that a child can process the necessary information to yield a meaningful decision on his part? Most experts agree that there has never been a time when one could be better equipped to make that determination than today. According to Michael Rutter of the Institute of Psychiatry, Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Research Centre in London, an explosion of knowledge of the effects of nature, nurture, and developmental processes over the last century have resulted in a much-improved understanding of many of the mechanisms involved in normal and abnormal development of children.[18]

Still, much remains unknown about the development of the child mind. About the only thing all the "experts" seem to agree upon is the idea that there is no consistent

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[17] Roy Zuck, *Precious in His Sight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 13-16.

[18] Michael Rutter, "Nature, Nurture, and Development: From Evangelism through Science toward Policy and Practice," *Child Development* 73, no. 1 (2002): 1.

metric that can be applied across the board when it comes to the matter of the cognitive

development of the child. Each child is different from every other child, and as the

situations in which a child is found change, so too does the mental response of the child.[19]

That reality compounds the difficulty and challenge facing the pastor. The pastor must

somehow evaluate the child's developmental processes and determine what the child is

able to understand. Beth Brown writes that those who wish to minister effectively to

children must have the necessary background to make such informed evaluations: "The

emotional, mental and moral perspectives of children are crucial factors in their perception

of God and must be studied and utilized as we seek to teach children to perceive God

actively and pursue him personally."[20] This factor has the potential to create a barrier for

many seeking to minister to children effectively in the matter of conversion as some

ministers may not have been afforded the opportunity to study the various theories of

child development. To that end, this dissertation offers a primer of sorts on childhood

cognitive theory and the developmental process as seen through the work of recognized

leaders in that field. Much time and emphasis is given to a men considered to be pioneers

in that field, Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget. The various intricacies of child development

theory are discussed in chapter 3 of this dissertation.

While the discussion of the psychological and developmental theories certainly

aids and progresses this understanding, ultimately the pastor will be moved by theological

concerns above all others. For this reason, much attention is given (specifically in chapter

4 of this dissertation) to specific soteriological concepts that must necessarily be rightly

defined and understood to arrive at an understanding of how to proceed regarding children

and conversion. One of the most important of these concepts in dealing with children is

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[19] Boyd R. McCandless, *Children, Behavior, and Development*, 2nd ed. (New York: Holt, Rhineheart, and Winston, 1967), 23.

[20] Beth Brown, "The Development Concept of God in Children," *Journal of Christian Education* 2, no. 1 (January 1981): 28.

original sin, a term most often attributed to the writings of Augustine.[21] This idea is that when Adam committed the first sin (hence the term "original"), God considered all men as having sinned. All members of the human race were represented by Adam and therefore all humans are counted as guilty. It is also "original" in the sense—and this is very important where ministry to children is concerned—that all humans have it from the beginning of human existence.[22] The implications of that concept are massive. R. Stanton Norman notes, "If original sin is transmitted from parent to child, then every person begins life with a corrupted nature as well as the consequent guilt and condemnation of sin."[23] Millard Erickson, however, argues that though humans receive this corrupt nature, they cannot be found guilty of sin until they have committed a conscious voluntary decision to take that action. He asserts that the child is therefore innocent in God's eyes until that child attains moral responsibility. Spiritual death would therefore, according to Erickson, not be imputed to the child.[24] The question then becomes, when does that child become guilty of that act—at what point is that child no longer acting simply as an ignorant child and instead acting as a sinner indulging a sinful impulse? That question seems to be the initial consideration that must be addressed by a pastor in the context of ministering to child in a local church setting. This consideration is, of course, only the beginning of the various soteriological concepts discussed in the chapter dedicated to this part of the discussion. Others include election, faith, repentance, righteousness, and many other necessary considerations.

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[21] Christophe Boreaux, ed., *Original Sin—A Code of Fallibility* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 14.

[22] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 465.

[23] R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 462.

[24] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 655.

Finally, much attention is to be given to practical applications that can be made in the ministry of the pastor as he deals with children and conversion. There are helpful guides that the pastor can consult and some disciplines that he can practice that will enable him to rightly and confidently deal with the child in this important moment. This topic will be covered in chapter 5 of this dissertation.

Here follows a brief description of each chapter of the dissertation and what one can expect to find therein. Chapter 2 is a survey of the relevant scriptural passages pertaining to the subject of children and conversion. Attention is given to texts that are most relevant to this topic.

Chapter 3 provides a definition for what is to be considered a "child." This definition is a largely "secular" view of childhood dealing with cognitive development and the ability to reason at various stages in a child's life. This perspective will provide a foundation for what a child is able to understand and when he is able to understand it, which is a significant foundation for the consideration of children and conversion. Certain accepted signposts of development are discussed. Also included is a discussion of those who may not be children chronologically but would be considered children mentally because of developmental deficits. After reviewing this chapter, the reader will have an informed perception of what is being referenced in this dissertation as a "child."

Chapter 4 is a basic primer on soteriological matters. It is necessary to have a biblically informed understanding of soteriological matters if one is going to effectively discuss how children should be addressed in the application of these concepts. These concepts are discussed only as they are applicable and needful for the advancement of the concentration on children and conversion. These topics include, but are not limited to, original sin, repentance, faith, the Holy Spirit, regeneration, and assurance/evidence of salvation.

Chapter 5 is the practical application of all the information assimilated in the dissertation. The reader is presented with a "plan of action" regarding pastoral ministry

and the subject of children and conversion. Specific signposts of spiritual development and understanding are delineated with helpful guidance on how the pastor can determine where the child might be in his spiritual and mental development. The need to be both sensitive and submissive to the work of the Holy Spirit in this moment is stressed. The chapter contends for a confident and effective approach for ministry to children in the matter of their conversion.

Ultimately this dissertation undertakes a methodology that yields positive results in demonstrating that indeed children can be candidates for conversion and that pastors can minister confidently and effectively when dealing with children in this matter.

Limitations and Delimitations

The consistent and widespread reference to children throughout the biblical text is considered throughout this dissertation. This study, however, focuses predominantly on passages found in the synoptic gospels and the writings of Paul, as they give applicable instructions to the specific focus of this study. Connection of specific passages to various Old Testament and other New Testament books are referenced as is profitable for this study.

The discussion of the potential of children as candidates for conversion is restricted to the setting of the local church. While the case is presented to affirm a child as a biblically sanctioned candidate for conversion, this study only deals with the application of this concept in a pastoral setting.

It is necessary throughout this dissertation to specifically delineate what is meant by the term *child*. While certain chronological considerations are inevitable, chronological age is not the primary consideration in this delineation. There is a greater consideration of the development of the child—both in a cognitive and an emotional sense. This is a considerable challenge as levels of cognitive and emotional development vary greatly, even among children of similar ages and backgrounds. With the guidance provided by works viewed as authoritative in the field of child development, this study

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provides a framework for a working definition of *child* that is used throughout the dissertation. This definition assesses both cognitive and emotional development. In so doing, the study affords inclusion of those who might not chronologically be traditionally labeled as a child, but whose lack of development would indeed classify them as such. Examples of these classifications would include the mentally challenged and emotionally handicapped, among others. Pastoral ministry in the matter of conversion to those outside of the classification of "child" is considered outside of the scope of this study.

While the ultimate goal of this study is to produce an aid to the pastor in the matter of children and conversion, it should be noted that there is no "one size fits all" mentality being put forth. The conclusions drawn in this study are meant to be utilized alongside the spirit-led gifts of the pastor. No "steps to leading a child to Christ" can be concluded from this work, as no such "steps" could be seen as encompassing. What is provided is an assimilation of information and resources that give the pastor the best opportunity to be prepared for his role in the matter of the conversion of a child—a role that this study affirms can and must be filled by the pastor.

The study is limited by the availability of applicable case studies regarding children and conversion. Few case studies on record address the moment in which a child comes to Christ and is either counseled to make that decision or rather is counseled to postpone that decision pending further discussion. The most helpful of these case studies would be those that not only have those moments recorded but that also record the spiritual development over the ensuing years and whether the child persevered in his commitment. This dissertation will make useful application of those case studies which are available, but will be limited by the scarce availability of such records.

CHAPTER 2

SCRIPTURAL FOUNDATIONS

As with any endeavor related to the Christian walk, when the subject is the pastor's role in the matter of children and conversion, one must of necessity begin with the Scriptures. While no passages speak directly to the matter of the spiritual disposition of a child—that is to say nowhere do the Scriptures instruct the age at which such a matter is to be addressed, nor do they give any specific guidelines as to how to proceed when such a time has been determined to have arrived—the Bible is far from silent on the issue of children and their spiritual nature. One can draw much from the way children are used and referenced in stories in which they may not be the main point being taught. Because there are no direct references to the moment at which a child should rightly be considered a candidate for conversion, the pastor seeking a spiritual guide in the matter of children and conversion must look at some of the texts in which children are referenced, even if the spiritual disposition of the child in the story is not actually the focus but is more tangential in nature. Fortunately, such stories are not difficult to locate.

References to children are interwoven throughout the entire story of Scripture. As Scripture follows Abraham's story, the importance of a child becomes quickly apparent. Without Isaac, there would have been a significant impact on the covenant God made with Abraham.[1] While the covenant itself (Gen 17), was with Abraham, without Isaac there would have been no seed of Abraham to carry out the covenant promise. God's ultimate plan was that through the children of Abraham, all people would be blessed. Then later, when the exiles began to return to the land of Israel, Ezra and Nehemiah began

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[1] Scottie May et al., *Children Matter: Celebrating Their Place in the Church, Family, and Community* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2005), 29.

preaching and teaching the necessity of purity in the marriages of the Israelites (Ezra 9; Neh 13). The desire was that any children would be born into a covenant family. Then, as a part of a covenant family, children would be trained so that when the time came, they would be equipped to pass along the covenant lifestyle to another generation. Children are, therefore, of great importance in the story of the Old Testament because throughout the Old Testament the spiritual formation of children is crucial to the development of the covenant people.[2]

As Moses prepared the children of Israel to enter the Promised Land, teaching the next generation of the works of the Lord remained among his highest priorities (Deut 6). Further highlighting the featured role given to children in the redemption narrative is the fact that the New Covenant also unfolded with the birth of a baby. Therefore, from both Old Testament and New Testament examples one sees that children participated with adults in the spiritual life of the faith community, which of course was forming them, through their participation, as covenant people.[3] After the temple was rebuilt, it became the place of worship even as the synagogue became the place of study. Adults studied the law and children were taught the law at the synagogue. As such, the Bible is silent neither on the presence of children in the gospel story nor on the matter of how they were to be instructed and formed in the community of faith.[4] Despite a consistent presence within the stories of Scripture regarding the training of children as part of the covenant community, a large amount of insight is not given into the spiritual disposition and spiritual development of these youngest members of the covenant community When any amount of attention is granted children in Scripture, however, it is enlightening.

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[2] May et al., *Children Matter*, 31-32.

[3] May et al., *Children Matter*, 38.

[4] Catherine Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey: Nurturing a Life of Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 23-24.

What follows is a look into those texts that seek to inform the reader regarding the spiritual disposition of children, and as such seek to offer helpful insight into the conversion of a child and the role a pastor should play in that process. The passage from Matthew 18 will be presented to show that, from a biblical perspective, a child is capable of possessing true faith—the kind that is essential for salvation. Clearly this must be established before the matter of the pastor's role can be explored. The passage from Mark 5 is presented to show not only that a child can possess the faith necessary to be converted, but that Jesus himself invited children to be saved. This section is important in showing that, as is true with people of all ages, God desires to draw children unto himself to be saved. A passage from Mark 10 is presented to affirm that there should be a special sensitivity toward a child and his spiritual disposition, which is helpful to support the idea that the pastor needs to be especially careful and prepared for his role in dealing with the conversion of a child. A passage from Paul's letter to the Corinthians, 1 Corinthians 7, is then introduced to show that the spiritual development of a child is an issue dealt with positively in Scripture, which gives credence to the claim that a child may indeed experience conversion. Finally, the story of Samuel's call is included from 1 Samuel 1. This passage provides a summary of the ideas presented about the capacity of a child to be converted. The first of the biblical passages to be dealt with is the familiar passage in which children are presented to Jesus and he deals with them personally, Matthew 18:1-4.

Matthew 18:1–4

Children, when found in Scripture, seem to frequently display significant spiritual depth. Marcia Bunge notes, "Several biblical passages depict children in striking and even radical ways as moral witnesses, prophets, models of faith for adults, sources or vehicles of revelation, and representatives of Jesus."[5] While an exhaustive survey of such

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[5] Marcia Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives and Best Practices for Faith Formation," in *Understanding Children's Spirituality*, ed. Kevin E. Lawson (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 11.

references to children would be impractical in a work of this length, attention will be given in this section to passages which have the greatest potential for impact on the matter of the role of the pastor in the consideration of children and conversion, as well as passages that deal at greatest length with the matter of the spiritual disposition of children. One of the lengthiest and most often referenced of these passages will be used as a starting point for this section: Matthew 18:1-4.[6]

As is the case with most Scripture passages that reference children, the subject of children seems to be secondary at best in this text. The crux of the scene is a particularly moving interchange between Jesus and his disciples. The disciples recently watched Jesus heal a demon-possessed boy and had received an ensuing reprimand for their lack of faith that resulted in their inability to perform the miracle of healing. Following this encounter with the demon-possessed boy, Jesus then predicted his death (the second time he had made such a prediction) and then performed the miracle of causing a coin to appear in the mouth of a fish. Matthew 18 begins by linking these events to the events about to take place by beginning with, "At that time." The conversation that preceded this one dealt with taxes and earthly kingdoms. The disciples used this opportunity to transition the conversation away from a consideration of earthly kingdoms and instead focus on a consideration of heavenly kingdoms. In Matthew 18:1 the disciples pose to Jesus this question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?" In answering this inquiry Jesus utilizes the example of a child. In response to the disciples' question, Jesus, Scripture

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[6] This scene is also recorded in Mark 9 and Luke 9. Since the Matt 18 record of this scene incorporates the information found in the other records, and since it is the most thorough telling of this happening, the Matt 18 record will be the one primarily referenced here. Matt 18:1-4 reads,

At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" 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 is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven."

All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

records, called a child unto him and stated, "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (vv. 3-4) When Jesus references the child, the word he uses is not *pais*, but its diminutive. While the two ways of referencing a child are not sharply distinguished, Knox Chamblin notes that it is proper when seeing this reference to think of a young or little child.[7] However, some challenge the idea that this was a very young child. The context of the conversation seems to suggest that perhaps this child was not a very small child. If a child is sitting in a marketplace and is able to understand the directions given him by Jesus, then it does not seem a great leap to believe that the child had to be old enough to speak in complete sentences and comprehend others who were doing so.[8]

Barclay Newman and Philip Stine in their *Translator's Handbook* seem to offer a compromise between the two viewpoints. They note that the term (*pais*) as it is used here is the equivalent of a masculine plural form and could be translated simply as "boys."[9] Based on these analyses it seems reasonable to believe that Jesus was speaking of a child in the sense of the type of child being addressed in this dissertation—far from adulthood but able to ask questions, understand, and communicate basic concepts.[10] For this reason, this text seems to be a valid and helpful passage to establish the pastoral role in the matter of children and conversion. While using this young child as a model, Jesus notes that anyone wishing to enter the kingdom of heaven must become like this child.

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[7] Knox Chamblin, *Matthew*, *Chapters 14–28*, A Mentor Commentary (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2010), 873.

[8] Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 11:2–20:34*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 898.

[9] Barclay M. Newman and Philip C. Stine, *A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 41.

[10] More specific parameters are specified in the upcoming chapter on defining a child from a psychological/child development theory standpoint.

Certainly on the most basic and most obvious level, Jesus, by referencing the child as a model to which the disciples should aspire, is holding children forth as an example of true faith—the type necessary for salvation.[11]

Some would point to the fact that the child is nameless and faceless in this story and would suggest that there is nothing to learn about the spiritual disposition of a child from this scene; it almost seems that the child is simply a prop—an object for teaching such as Jesus employs on numerous other occasions at various points in the Scriptures[12] However, that is not an honest reading of the text. Jesus appears here to have a genuine affection for this child, which seems to be borne out in the fact that there is no apparent hesitation on the part of the child to approach him. The affection that is apparent on the part of Jesus toward the child is then affirmed by the warning Jesus goes on to give in verse 6. Jesus cautions that if anyone harms these little ones, a great price will be exacted as a result.

Then, Jesus does what great teachers always do—he answers the question that was asked, but in so doing actually answers the question that should have been asked. He communicates something specific about salvation and humility and the prerequisites for being a child of the kingdom of God. In so doing he reveals that no one is closer to meeting that standard than a child. He instructs the disciples that they are required to turn and become like the child. According to D. A. Carson, "the child is a model, in this context, not of innocence, faith or purity, but of humility and unconcern for social status. Jesus assumed that people are not naturally like that; they must change to become like little

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[11] Bill Prevette, "Members in God's Church," in *Understanding God's Heart for Children: Toward a Biblical Framework*, ed. Douglas McConnell, Jennifer Orona, and Paul Stockley (Colorado Springs: Authentic Publishing, 2007), 231.

[12] Peter Admirand, "Millstones, Stumbling Blocks, and Dog Scraps: Children in the Gospels," *Biblical Theology Bulletin: Journal of Bible and Culture* 42, no. 4 (October 2012): 187-95.

children."[13] The question then is not whether a child is closer to being a model citizen of the kingdom of God than an adult—Jesus settled that. The question becomes whether the child can undergo conversion, no matter how near the precipice the child may be. A cursory reading of the text seems to indicate that Jesus teaches that the child can be converted, as he references in verse 5: "One of these little ones who believes in me."

Not all would affirm his view. For instance, in James Montgomery Boice's interpretation, the meaning is not that clear. He states that Jesus "is not thinking of children literally . . . he is thinking of believers who, because they have become like children in their humility, have come to "believe in me."[14] Boice then reaffirms that assertion, leaving no ambiguity in his perspective: "Let me make that point again. When Jesus speaks of one of these 'little ones who believes in me,' he is not speaking literally of children."[15] He does however offer this caveat: "Though he does not exclude them."[16] While Boice obviously has not warmed to the idea that Jesus is speaking of actual children in the developmental sense, he acknowledges, however perfunctorily, that he cannot state definitively that he is not referencing such children here. Hans-Ruedi Weber offers a more nuanced interpretation of who these "little ones" are. He argues both that the "little ones" actually become a metaphor for the disciples and for groups within the early church, but he also notes that "this does not alter the fact that, originally, Jesus must have spoken about that real child that he had just taken into his arms."[17] Because of this realization, it does no injury to the text to draw conclusions regarding the spiritual

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[13] D. A. Carson, *God with Us: Themes from Matthew* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1985), 112.

[14] James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 2:378.

[15] Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2:378.

[16] Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 2:378.

[17] Hans-Reudi Weber, *Jesus and the Children: Biblical Resources for Study and Preaching* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1979), 49.

disposition of a child.

The prevailing sentiment is that Jesus was speaking of actual children here. Far more commentaries hold a differing view from Boice and suggest that Jesus was indeed speaking of actual little children. In verses 2-5, Jesus is seen holding a child and talking about children. Then immediately in verse 6 he refers to *these* little ones. The debate some readers will engage is whether Jesus was actually referring to the children or if he was referring to young believers who are still new in their faith walk—baby believers, so to speak. That conclusion seems to be a jump that is neither necessitated nor definitively proven in Scripture, however. Catherine Stonehouse notes that the flow of the text gives no reason to exclude children and replace them with humble or young Christians when he uses the term "little ones." Jesus here names children as persons who believe in him—who have faith.[18] It is my opinion that Stonehouse is correct in her assertion here.

It seems unlikely that Jesus would use a child to make a point if the example did not make sense as an extended metaphor. As a teacher, Jesus is careful to use examples that work precisely as extended metaphors. For example, when Jesus spoke of mustard seeds, he was not actually teaching about mustard seeds, but the knowledge of how a mustard seed grows was necessary to inform the example. In other cases, when Jesus often speaks of sheep, he clearly is not just referencing sheep, but certain truths about sheep have to be understood in order for the example to have credibility. In addition, when Jesus speaks of children, though he may be making a larger point about young believers or the need for believers to humble themselves, certain things must be true about children or the example does not make sense. Admittedly, the phrase used in verse 6 is *micron*—literally "one of the least"—which would allow any number of possible meanings to be applied there. But Bruner points to the use of the word "one" here that was used for the first time

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[18] Stonehouse, *Joining Children on the Spiritual Journey*, 36.

in the preceding verse ("one such child.").[19] That understanding allows the reader to connect the "little ones" of verse 6 (and soon in v. 10) to the "one such child" of verse 5. Also, one should be mindful that there is an actual living breathing child standing there with Jesus as he is making the point. At the very least one has to acknowledge that Jesus is not closing the door on the possibility of a child being converted. But there is more than just such a possibility here. While teaching much about the salvation of adults, Jesus is also reminding those listening not to neglect these youngest potential converts—the ones closest to the required description of the citizen of the kingdom of God.

Admittedly, some read this text and conclude that children are not candidates for conversion because they have no need for conversion. Adherents of this view would suggest that Jesus' comments indicate that children are ready to inherit the kingdom of God in their current state. Paulette Taylor-Wingender is among the scholars who hold this view. She notes that this passage "encourages us to recognize that children are, by virtue of their inherent childlikeness, already recipients of the Kingdom."[20] However, this classification of children as already being made recipients of the kingdom clearly is not consistent with what Jesus teaches, as he advocates elsewhere (as will be noted in the section of this dissertation that deals with theological and soteriological matters) that the heart of man is inherently evil. The embracing of a viewpoint such as the one referenced from Taylor-Wingender would necessitate a redefining of child evangelism as simply sharing the good news with a child that Jesus loves them as they are and nothing further is required for them to be accepted as citizens of the kingdom of God. It is a point of view reminiscent of views expressed many years earlier by Horace Bushnell.

Because of the way Bushnell viewed children and salvation, he argued that the

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[19] Frederick Dale Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B Eerdmans, 1990), 213.

[20] Paulette Taylor-Wingender, "Kids of the Kingdom," *Direction* 17, no. 2 (January 1988): 18.

goal of a Christian parent should not be the conversion or salvation of his child. According to Bushnell, the goal of the parent should not be a moment of conversion (what Bushnell derisively terms a "technical experience"), but rather that the child would simply find himself "seeming to have loved what is good from his earliest years."[21] For Bushnell, conversion of the child would be something that had been accomplished in the childhood years at a point the child may not even have been aware of—it simply happened along the way as a result of Godly parents who taught the child of Jesus. However, the viewpoint represented by the writings of Taylor-Wingender and Bushnell and any others who would take the Matthew 18 passage to affirm the "kingdom-readiness" of children is not one that is faithful to biblical doctrine.

Jesus is very open to the children in this passage and he did present them as an example of what a kingdom resident might look like. Though, as Perry Downs indicates, to say that all these children inherently belong to Christ seems a bit of a stretch. He notes, "The issue revolves around the question of what God requires for salvation. To what extent is the understanding of truth necessary for salvation?"[22] Downs goes on to assert that all people, including children, are sinful and in need of redemption. The earlier stated positions of Bushnell and Taylor-Wingender simply do not address this reality. The children in this biblical passage are not ready for the kingdom because of some childlike innocence. They were conceived and born in sin; they are not innocent. Yet they are welcomed and put forth as examples of those who can come to Jesus. This illustration is not a display of innocence of children; rather, it is a display of the grace of God. Richard Leyda writes, "Entrance into the kingdom becomes a matter of the intention of the father to give salvation as a gift of grace to his children based on their utter dependency and not

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[21] Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New York: Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, 1876), 7.

[22] Perry Downs, "Child Evangelization," *Christian Education Journal* 3, no. 2 (January 1983): 11.

merit."[23]

The idea that children are capable of being converted is often affirmed throughout Scripture as children are seen in a variety of encounters with spiritual meaning. In various New Testament passages, it is shown that children can prophesy, praise God, be vehicles of revelation, and even, as is reflected in the Matthew 18 passage, be paradigms for entering the reign of God. Jesus identifies himself (as was just seen in the Matthew text previously discussed) with children and equates welcoming a child in his name to welcoming himself and the one who sent him. The conclusion can be drawn from the Matthew 18 passage that Jesus was indeed referencing a young child as an example of faith and in so doing gave no indication that the child was limited in his capacity to come to know Christ; quite the contrary, he affirms the notion that indeed a child has the capacity to be converted.

Mark 5:21-43

Another text that adds insight to the question of the potential spiritual disposition of a child, and therefore is pertinent to the subject of the pastoral role in the matter of children and conversion, is the story of the healing of Jairus' daughter. This familiar story is found in Mark 5: 21-43.[24] Jesus here is found in the midst of a busy season of ministry.

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[23] Richard Leyda, "Childlikeness—An Essential for Disciples," *Christian Education Journal* 4, no. 2 (January 2007): 326.

[24] Mark 5:21-31:
And when Jesus had crossed again in the boat to the other side, a great crowd gathered about him, and he was beside the sea. Then came one of the rulers of the synagogue, Jairus by name, and seeing him, he fell at his feet and implored him earnestly, saying, "My little daughter is at the point of death. Come and lay your hands on her, so that she may be made well and live." And he went with him. And a great crowd followed him and thronged about him. And there was a woman who had had a discharge of blood for twelve years, and who had suffered much under many physicians, and had spent all that she had, and was no better but rather grew worse. She had heard the reports about Jesus and came up behind him in the crowd and touched his garment. For she said, "If I touch even his garments, I will be made well." And immediately the flow of blood dried up, and she felt in her body that she was healed of her disease. And Jesus, perceiving in himself that power had gone out from him, immediately turned about in the crowd and said, "Who touched my garments?" And his disciples said to him, "You see the crowd pressing around you, and yet you

During this time of ministering and going from place to place, Jesus is moved by the request of a synagogue leader named Jairus. Jairus is concerned because his daughter is dying. He believes Jesus can heal his daughter and entreats Jesus to come to his house and do just that—impart to Jairus' daughter a supernatural healing. Other ministry opportunities along his way to Jairus' house cause Jesus to be delayed in getting to the house. Upon arrival, Jesus is told that the daughter has already died. Jesus, however, continues to the child anyway. Upon reaching the child, Jesus observes that the child is not dead, but only sleeping. The response of those standing around is one of incredulousness, but Jesus continues and commands the child to get up, which she does, miraculously healed and resurrected from the dead.

This scene is significant in that it is one of the few times in all of Scripture where Jesus is seen directly ministering to the needs of a child. The child is silent, as is always the case, and someone comes to Jesus on her behalf—again, that is always the process. The picture of the child is always of one who makes no presumptions and issues no ultimatums when it comes to Jesus. The child always seems willing and satisfied to receive whatever remedy Jesus deems sufficient. The child always seems to have a grateful heart no matter what the answer that Jesus chooses to give, and regardless of

say, 'Who touched me?'" And he looked around to see who had done it. But the woman, knowing what had happened to her, came in fear and trembling and fell down before him and told him the whole truth. And he said to her, "Daughter, your faith has made you well; go in peace, and be healed of your disease." While he was still speaking, there came from the ruler's house some who said, "Your daughter is dead. Why trouble the Teacher any further?" But overhearing what they said, Jesus said to the ruler of the synagogue, "Do not fear, only believe." And he allowed no one to follow him except Peter and James and John the brother of James. They came to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and Jesus saw a commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly. And when he had entered, he said to them, "Why are you making a commotion and weeping? The child is not dead but sleeping." And they laughed at him. But he put them all outside and took the child's father and mother and those who were with him and went in where the child was. Taking her by the hand he said to her, "Talitha cumi," which means, "Little girl, I say to you, arise." And immediately the girl got up and began walking (for she was twelve years of age), and they were immediately overcome with amazement. And he strictly charged them that no one should know this, and told them to give her something to eat.

whether he chooses to move at all.[25] This disposition seems consistent with the previously referenced Matthew 18 text in which Jesus presents the child as a model of the kind of faith for which God is looking.

It is significant to note that the word that the ruler uses in verse 23 to identify his daughter is *thugatrion*, which is an affectionate diminutive that in colloquial English could be translated "little girl."[26] So, as was the case in the Matthew 18 passage, this daughter is the type of small child that would be representative of the focus of this dissertation. This assertion is affirmed when Jesus speaks to the child in verse 41 and he refers to her as "little girl." Though the language is different, this is also a diminutive just as her father had used. It would have indicated a younger child.[27] Then in verse 42, almost as an afterthought, Mark definitively identifies the girl's age—she is twelve years old. However, the previous reference by both Mark and Jesus without a specific age determination indicates that this is not just about ministry to a twelve year old but can be read as revealing truths about ministry to a young child in general.

The imagery here is compelling. Sharon Betsworth posits that in this text Jesus is seen as one who is apparently willing to be a guardian to help a child physically, even though here the girl has a loving, concerned, human father—so her need for Jesus to fill that role would not be as great as if she had no father. For Betsworth, that is when the deeper meaning of this passage comes to light. In addition to being a guardian, is Jesus also shown as willing, and even desiring, to be a divine protector for this little girl. Betsworth writes, "The divine protection is embodied in Jesus and is required for healing

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[25] Cornelia B. Horn and John Martens, *Let the Little Children Come to Me* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University Free Press, 2009), 263.

[26] C. Clifton Black, *Mark*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011), 139.

[27] James W. Voelz, *Mark 1:1 –8:26*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 369.

and in order to be saved, that is, to enter the Kingdom of God."[28] If one subscribes to Betsworth's interpretation, then one has Jesus clearly extending an opportunity for salvation to a young child. However, I cannot quite make the leap that Betsworth does here. Betsworth's eagerness to paint Jesus as the guardian of this girl and then to use that to depict him as her savior requires conclusions that, while not necessarily contradicted by Scripture, cannot be definitively affirmed either. For the purposes of this dissertation, the conclusion that the young girl has both physical and spiritual needs to which Jesus is attentive seems sufficient to support and advance the thesis. That limited conclusion is far more sustainable in the context of this scriptural text than Betsworth's more industrious interpretation.

Mark 10:13-16

Another helpful, albeit brief, scene from the Gospel which instructs in the matter of the spiritual disposition of Scripture is found in Mark 10:13-16.[29] In this text, children are brought to Jesus for a blessing. In so doing, the parents of these children were rebuked by the disciples, presumably because they were troubling Jesus when, in the opinion of the disciples, he had more important issues to which he needed to give his attention. Jesus affirms the devout intention of those who brought the children to him and declares the children's covenanted inclusion in Israel.[30] It was not an uncommon custom for parents in this day to desire an eminent teacher to pronounce a blessing on their

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[28] Sharon Betsworth, *The Reign of God Is Such as These: A Socio-Literary Analysis of Daughters in the Gospel of Mark* (New York: T & T Clark, 2010), 112.

[29] Mark 10:13-16 reads,
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 like a child shall not enter it." And he took them in his arms and blessed them, laying his hands on them.

[30] James M. M. Francis, *Adults as Children: Images of Childhood in the Ancient World and in the New Testament* (Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang Ag International, 2006), 108.

children. The parents would have not been out of line for bringing the children to Jesus and certainly would not have been deserving of the rebuke of the disciples. Though, there seems to be more going on here. In one sense, it is true that this is just a conventional Jewish teacher affirming the inclusion of children in God's covenant, but much more is being communicated. Jesus does not just welcome the children. He could have done that in a manner that would have gathered no attention and would have been comparatively benign against the backdrop of events unfolding around him. However, he does not just bless them as in a conventional sense.

He surpasses the expectations of those who bring the children in that he actually gathers the children up in his arms.[31] According to James M. M. Francis, the picture provided here with the interaction between Jesus and these children is a picture of God's grace: "The point about the inclusiveness of God's free grace could hardly be made more dramatically in the valuing of children not as potential adults, nor as school children who exemplify the virtue of learning, but as heirs by virtue of their inclusion in the covenant because they are beloved by God. "[32] If Francis' interpretation is accurate, then this picture of Jesus bestowing his grace upon these young children serves to further affirm what has been suggested in the two previous texts: Jesus indeed sees children as potential recipients of his saving grace. In this text, nothing should have merited such a reception of the children by Jesus. These children have not even reached the age of the law yet, so they have absolutely no merit and no standing, but Jesus receives them and blesses them without any reason being given.[33]

This is the gracious love of God assured to the children in Jesus' prophetic words and actions. Certainly many remain skeptical of the young child as a candidate for

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[31] Francis, *Adults as Children*, 109.

[32] Francis, *Adults as Children*, 112.

[33] Weber, *Jesus and the Children*, 19.

conversion, as the disciples seem to be skeptical here that there will be any benefit from these young people encountering Christ. Clearly that is not the opinion of Jesus. He was indignant with the disciples for their rebuke and he revealed his great love and affection for these children.[34] However, the encompassing love and affection that came so naturally to Jesus seemingly did not come naturally to the disciples.

The disciples' natural inclination, as is often the case with many believers presently, was to dismiss these children, somehow implying that they were simply not candidates for salvation at this point. Still the disciples would learn, to a great degree from this episode, to emulate the sensitivity of Jesus and the wisdom in Jesus' choice of who is important in his family and kingdom.[35] In Jesus' response to the disciples, two inseparable truths can be gleaned: children are indeed eligible to receive the kingdom and they are not only eligible but are models of what it means to receive the kingdom.[36]

First Corinthians 7:12-14

The scripture passages referenced here from the Gospels are the most instructive when it comes to the matter of the role of the pastor in the conversion of children. There are, however, some passages outside of the Gospels are instructive in this matter, particularly 1 Corinthians 7:12-14 and 1 Samuel 1:1-21. The 1 Samuel passage will be examined in the section that follows. While the subject of the spiritual disposition of children is not the focus of the 1 Corinthians text, much can be gleaned on this topic from Paul's writing in 1 Corinthians 7:12-14.[37]

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[34] Roy Zuck, *Precious in His Sight* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997).

[35] Megan McKenna, *Not Counting Women and Children* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 70.

[36] Prevette, "Members in God's Church," 231.

[37] First Cor 7:12-14 says,
To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the

First Corinthians 7:12-14 occurs in the larger context of Paul's comments on divorce. In the course of his commentary Paul notes that children, even children produced from a union of unequally yoked parents, should be considered holy. While Paul does not elaborate on what he means by this consideration of some children as holy, most understand this to mean that children are consecrated to God, which certainly affirms the potential for their salvation. It seems that God works out the consecration and salvation of these children through the bond with the believing parent(s) in the case where at least one parent is indeed a Christian.[38] This principle certainly does not mean that the child is automatically saved just because he has at least one believing parent, but this does reinforce the fact that while parents have an opportunity and a responsibility to teach the child and direct him to Jesus, at the end of the day, salvation—regeneration—is God's accomplishment. This passage is helpful for the pastor as it reinforces the truth that certain influences, such as the environment of a Christian home and prayers offered therein, are not inconsequential and therefore should be considered as the spiritual disposition of the child is addressed.[39] The prayerful hope is that through the influence of the believing parent, the child will come to know Christ—he will be consecrated, or set apart, by the influence of the believer. Also, as the child is so consecrated, he is drawn by the Holy Spirit unto salvation, as the Holy Spirit builds upon that consecrating influence of the believing parent. In the moment the Holy Spirit empowers the child for repentance and faith, God accepts the child into his own family.[40] This potential for repentance on the part of the child heightens the importance of the influence of these elements on the child.

unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.

[38] Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives," 11.

[39] Downs, "Child Evangelization," 12.

[40] Paul Ellingworth and Howard Hatton, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1985), 133.

Paul certainly was not advocating for marriages between believers and unbelievers, but he was dealing with a cultural reality. In Paul's day, as Craig Keener rightly notes, a believer who remains in a marriage with an unbelieving spouse is going to retain the best opportunity to influence the child rightly.[41]

Paul saw that, in his day, the splitting up of a marriage between a believer and an unbeliever was quite often going to result in the only Christian influence present that had been present for the life of the child. If the one believing parent potentially ceased to be present anymore, then chances were that the believing parent would leave and the child would primarily be raised by an unbeliever. This occurrence would potentially be spiritually detrimental to the child.[42] All of this attention to what is in the greatest spiritual welfare of the child gives credence to the theory affirmed in the passages from the Gospels: children can be seen and must be treated as candidates for conversion. Obviously, if there was no consideration or concern for the spiritual development of the child, there would have been no need for Paul to dedicate such considerable space to this topic.

As one reads through these and other passages that deal peripherally with children and conversion, one cannot help but wonder why the subject is not addressed head-on in Scripture. Why not have a section in the writings of Paul or the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels where the spiritual disposition of children is thoroughly examined? Adrian Thatcher has a theory that addresses that question: "The earliest church did not have time, because of the imminent Parousia, to develop a theology of childhood. The later New Testament church was preoccupied more with matters of persecution and fundamental doctrine."[43] Thatcher is right to remind the reader that the Bible is not offered

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[41] Craig Keener, "Interethnic Marriages in the New Testament," *Criswell Theological Review* 6, no. 2 (January 2009): 43.

[42] Keener, "Interethnic Marriages in the New Testament," 41-42.

[43] Adrian Thatcher, *Theology and Families* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 149.

as a means to satisfy one's curiosity nor is it meant to quench one's desire to be able to answer every question that might be posed. Rather, Scripture is the presentation of a specific narrative—a narrative of the redemption of mankind for the glory of God. Therefore, those passages are included that help to advance that narrative. The fact that children are not addressed separately and specifically simply confirms that they are in no way exceptions to any of the truths about salvation taught elsewhere in Scripture. If the tenets of salvation are the same for children as they are for adults, then it is not necessary to single them out for a separate discussion. The result is that this issue is never addressed specifically in the Scriptures. So, apart from the few scenes in the Gospels, the believer is basically left with a few asides from the writings of Paul to develop a theology of dealing with children in the matter of conversion from the New Testament Scriptures. Scattered texts in the Old Testament might be helpful in this conversation, but none more so than 1 Samuel 1:1-21.

First Samuel 1: 1-21

The calling of Samuel in 1 Samuel 1:1-21 provides helpful insights into the capacity of a child to be converted.[44] The scripture mentions "the boy Samuel" in verse 1.

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[44] First Sam 3:1-21 reads,
Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the LORD in the presence of Eli. And the word of the LORD was rare in those days; there was no frequent vision. At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his own place. The lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the LORD, where the ark of God was. Then the LORD called Samuel, and he said, "Here I am!" and ran to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. And the LORD called again, "Samuel!" and Samuel arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." Now Samuel did not yet know the LORD, and the word of the LORD had not yet been revealed to him. And the LORD called Samuel again the third time. And he arose and went to Eli and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the LORD was calling the boy. Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down, and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, LORD, for your servant hears.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place. And the LORD came and stood, calling as at other times, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant hears." Then the LORD said to Samuel, "Behold, I am about to do a thing in Israel at which the two ears of everyone who hears it will tingle. On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. And I declare to him that I am about

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Jewish tradition holds that Samuel was twelve years old at this time.[45] It is also important to note that at the beginning of the text, though Samuel carried out his service as a young boy willingly and naturally, there was not a recognition or conviction on his part that this service had anything to do with a personal relationship or connection between God and himself. He served God but he served him through serving Eli in the temple.[46] However, at the time in this text when God first calls Samuel, as he is already serving in the temple, Samuel clearly does not yet know the Lord—to use the vernacular of this dissertation, he is not yet saved. Bob Deffinbaugh posits that, much like Saul in the New Testament, Samuel is saved after his call.[47] This is consistent with the text as the text records that Yahweh continues to call to young Samuel, but Samuel does not know the source of the call nor does he understand how to respond. Eli, who unlike Samuel does know Yahweh, is able to discern that Yahweh is calling the young boy and he provides Samuel with a mechanism for response should Yahweh call again. So, young Samuel is able to move from

to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God,[j] and he did not restrain them. Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be atoned for by sacrifice or offering forever." Samuel lay until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the LORD. And was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." And he said, "Here I am." And Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. And he said, "It is the LORD. Let him do what seems good to him." And Samuel grew, and the LORD was with him and let none of his words fall to the ground. And all Israel from Dan to Beersheba knew that Samuel was established as a prophet of the LORD. And the LORD appeared again at Shiloh, for the LORD revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the word of the LORD.

[45] John L. Mackay, *1 Samuel–2 Chronicles*, Expository Commentary, vol. 3 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 67.

[46] Mary J. Evans, *1 and 2 Samuel*, New International Bible Commentary (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2000), 28.

[47] Bob Deffinbaugh, "The Rise of Samuel and the Fall of Eli and Sons," accessed January 2021, https://bible.org/seriespage/4-rise-samuel-and-fall-eli-and-sons-1-samuel-31-422.

ignorance of Yahweh to knowing Yahweh and hearing his Word clearly.[48] Before this scene ends, Samuel submits to the call of the Lord. From that moment forward Samuel certainly knows the Lord and now he is a prophet. He would speak God's Words going forward and, as is always the case for a true prophet, none of these words will fail.[49] That is the end of the picture of the child Samuel. From this point forward Scripture portrays him as an adult who variously exercises the roles of priest and judge, though primarily prophet.[50]

This scene is unique among the Scriptures in that a snapshot of the religious awakening of a young boy is provided. As is often the case with similar texts, the spiritual disposition of the child is not the focus of the story. It has been suggested that to linger too long over the spiritual development of young Samuel is, as Firth writes, to "distort the narrative's central aim, which is to establish Samuel's credentials for the nation as an attested prophet."[51] But while that is the larger function of this text in the context of the larger narrative, one cannot overlook the fact, Firth continues, that this records that Yahweh entrusted his message to the young boy Samuel, and Samuel responded and thus knew the Lord and served him as a prophet.[52] Samuel did not know the Lord at the beginning of this narrative. Now Samuel knew the Lord, for the Word of the Lord had been revealed to him.[53] This knowledge gives credence to the thesis of this

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[48] David G. Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary, vol. 8 (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2009), 77.

[49] John Woodhouse, *1 Samuel: Looking for a Leader* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008), 82.

[50] Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 79.

[51] Firth, *1 & 2 Samuel*, 80.

[52] David Toshio Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 172.

[53] Woodhouse, *1 Samuel*, 82.

dissertation that indeed children are candidates for conversion and can be drawn by God unto salvation.

Conclusions from the Scriptural Texts

It is clear that Jesus had a particular and intense love for children. Thatcher notes that Jesus "exemplified and fostered a counter-cultural adult attitude to them, awarding them first place both in the reign of God and in social and household hierarchies."[54] There was something remarkably unique about Jesus' approach to children. He was open and receptive to children and his openness was for their own sake, not principally for their potential.[55] That could be said of very few in Jesus' day. Jesus could have restricted his conversations and his interactions to adults, but he did not do so. He interacted with children during his ministry often. He loved them and welcomed them and taught his disciples to do the same. Jesus sees the simple act of welcoming a child as an act of greatness, which gives much insight into the value Jesus places on this group.[56]

It is also clear that Jesus considered these children to be spiritual beings. At different times when valuing and affirming the worth of children, Jesus positioned children both as teachers and students, and did not posit them as just an empty vessel waiting to be filled. The examples of Samuel's spiritual development in the Old Testament and Jesus' spiritual development in the New Testament indicate that children are nothing less than spiritual beings.[57] In chapter 4 of this dissertation I deal with various theological and soteriological issues and what the Bible teaches about the need for salvation and the means

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[54] Thatcher, *Theology and Families*, 63.

[55] W. A. Strange, *Children in the Early Church* (Cumbria, CA : Paternoster, 1996), 50.

[56] Robert J. Keeley, *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker 2008), 43.

[57] Karen Crozier, "Reimagining the Spirit of Children—A Christian Pedagogical Vision," in *Nurturing Children's Spirituality*, ed. Holly Catterton Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2008), 341.

by which one can be saved. The biblical passages discussed thus far prove that children are to be considered spiritual beings as any other person would be, and as such what is true for anyone else, is true for a child also. This affirmation of a child as a spiritual being in the sense of any other person being a spiritual being demands that all of the special allowances and amended categories that well-meaning pastors might try to make for children are simply invalid. If children are spiritual beings like all other spiritual beings, then, for instance, one cannot claim that they have some sort of "natural faith" in the sense that it can be equated with "saving faith." This idea of "natural faith" echoes the views of Bushnell and Wingendner referenced previously. John Inchley explains this view thusly: "Many children, especially those brought up in an atmosphere of Christian teaching at home or in the church, will have no need for 'conversion' in the exact meaning of the word as they make their personal response to the savior."[58] The picture presented in the previously referenced texts do not bear that out. If an adult needs to be converted, then a child must as well. There is no basis for this belief in "natural faith." The child cannot be seen as having some natural sense of faith in Christ from birth. To the contrary, the child is actually depraved and outside of the body of faith from birth. The theory of "natural faith" is easily refuted—a refutation supported by the passages discussed in this chapter.

Another theory that some would posit in relation to an understanding of children and conversion is akin to the belief some would have in "natural faith." It is the belief of some that children are in the kingdom simply by virtue of the fact that they are indeed children. Ron Buckland enumerates this view well: "Children begin with God, but will drift away unless they are matured (in the case of the children of Christians) or evangelized (in the case of non-Christians)."[59] Clearly, if one accepts that children are

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[58] John Inchley, *Realities of Childhood* (Valley Forge, PA: Scripture Union Publishing, 1986), 108-9.

[59] Ron Buckland, quoted in Eric Lane, *Special Children: A Theology of Childhood* (London: Grace Publications Trust, 1996), 73.

spiritual beings—like other spiritual beings—then they cannot be automatically admitted into the kingdom of God, regardless of their age or level of experience. The idea that children begin with God and then at some point due to bad influences, or simply a lack of godly influences, wander away and must then be evangelized and brought back is not affirmed anywhere in Scripture. So, this theory can be discarded as well.

Yet another belief that some express regarding the spiritual disposition of children is that if their parents are believers they are included in the covenant of grace by virtue of their parents' conversion. Among the proponents of this view is Louis Berkhof, who states that as long as the children of the covenant do not reveal the contrary, we shall have to proceed on the assumption that they are in possession of covenant life. Here he would add a word of caution: "Since there is no cast-iron guarantee that he will endow every last one of them with saving faith . . . it is necessary to remind even children of the covenant constantly of the necessity of regeneration and conversion."[60] Again, the picture from the Scriptures of children as spiritual beings who must be governed by the laws that govern all spiritual beings will not allow that view to remain unchallenged. It is an appealing idea that the covenant would extend automatically to the children of believers, and it certainly would make the job of the pastor much easier to accomplish in the matter of children and conversion. Clearly it simply does not fit the terms of the covenant. Therefore, that theory must be discarded.

One theory is left that is supported by the picture drawn in the Gospels. If children are spiritual beings, like adults and all humans, and if then the same elements must be required for their salvation as are required for all other spiritual beings, then this is the inescapable conclusion: children, like adults, require regeneration to be saved. Kingdon expresses this conclusion very efficiently: "Since every child is born into the Adamic humanity, every child must, if it is to know salvation, be regenerated and

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[60] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Louisville: GLH Publishing, 2017), 287-88.

transferred into the new humanity in Christ, Children no less than adults require to be regenerated."[61] That conclusion, then, begs an issue that is perhaps only tangential to the subject of this dissertation but merits some attention, however truncated it must be of necessity.

The question is, what happens to babies who die? The conclusion that has been reached here—that babies are spiritual beings and like all other spiritual beings must come to repentance and faith or they cannot be reconciled to God and as such will not go to heaven—seems to resign one to the fact that babies cannot go to heaven. However, that is not the case. The discussion of the eternal disposition of babies hinges greatly on the discussion of the theological and soteriological aspects of this dissertation. As such, that conversation will be continued in chapter 4, but will be addressed briefly here as well. Again, the issue of babies is a totally different concentration that the focus of this dissertation—the pastor's role in childhood conversion. Chapter 4 will provide an opportunity for that discussion. For now, the focus will be restricted to children, who, based on what has been shown from the Scriptures here, are clearly candidates for conversion, and they indeed can be saved.

Some would point out that aspects of a child's development, many of which will be addressed in this dissertation, would actually make it more difficult for a child to make the necessary commitment to come to Christ. Some would go so far as to suggest that such a commitment is beyond the reasonable expectation of what a child can experience. That certainly is the position of Anna Mow, who writes in *Your Child: A Guide for Parents and Teachers*, that salvation should never be reduced to an encounter with God. Rather it is more than" making a decision about one's own life; it is making a decision for Someone and the decision must be followed by a commitment to Him for

[61] David Kingdon, *Children of Abraham: A Reformed Baptist View of Baptism, the Covenant, and Children* (Port St. Lucie, FL: Carey Publications, 1975), 93.

life. God has done his part and we must do our part."[62] Of course this interpretation elevates the child to a place of participation in the accomplishment of his salvation that Scripture does not endorse. As will be explained in detail in a further chapter, the scriptural view of salvation is as an accomplishment of God and God certainly can bring about that accomplishment in whomever he chooses.

However, even some who would affirm this point of view and would argue against Mow's viewpoint still have trouble with how the child might navigate the Lordship aspect of salvation. It seems that such a commitment as to Jesus as Lord for the totality of one's life would indeed be very difficult for a child to adequately consider. John MacArthur writes of that decision: "The point is not that God guarantees security to everyone who will say he accepts Christ but rather than those whose faith is genuine will prove their salvation is secure by persevering to the end in the way of righteousness."[63] While there certainly are significant theological considerations to be addressed, one must acknowledge that the consistent use of children as objects in the teachings about salvation would indicate that children are definitely candidates for conversion. Children can indeed be saved if they are developmentally able to comprehend the necessary concepts of the matter of salvation. As is consistently affirmed throughout this dissertation, there cannot be a gospel informed salvation for adults and a different gospel informed salvation for children. The gospel is the gospel no matter the age of the recipient, and what accomplishes salvation in the adult is also what accomplishes salvation in the child. Conversely, the things that make the equation troublesome for children—a lack of understanding, a lack of ability to commit, a lack of foresight, etc.—also exist to potentially cause difficulty for the adult. Also, just as the adult can overcome these issues by the presence of God and his

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[62] Anna B. Mow, *Your Child: A Guide for Parents and Teachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 139.

[63] John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), 98.

equipping, so too can the child overcome the issue. The adult must depend on the Spirit of God to empower him and so too must the child. The child will often take his cue from the adult in this matter. Helen Oppenheimer writes, "It may be impossible to teach theology directly to children, but what the grown-ups believe, half-believe or disbelieve will get through to the children, not always in ways anyone intends or wants."[64] Indeed, nothing can be cited from Scripture that would be consistent with any teaching that suggests a child is not a candidate for conversion. This dissertation is based on the scriptural conclusion that clearly children can be saved—though they are not guaranteed to be so, as is the case for adults.

Another similarity presents itself in the life of the child and the adult. After each is saved, the journey continues for both, the saved child as well as the saved adult. In a very real sense, the struggle of discipleship in the life of a converted child bears many of the same markers as the struggle in the life of an adult. Even though they may not be able to fully process the nature of their struggle, they are striving to fear God, love their neighbor, and care for creation.[65] Indeed a child is not less of a person and does not have less of a need for the Spirit of God to guide him.

The mistaken assumption can be made in the life of a child as it can in the life of an adult, that the moment of conversion is seen as the end of the process and therefore little follow-up is done. Many children have walked the aisle desiring salvation but were never followed up with properly. That is simply poor evangelism.[66] Converted children are children of God; they are growing and developing—not as pre-adults but as children

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[64] Helen Oppenheimer, *Helping Children Find God* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1994,) 14.

[65] Bunge, "Biblical and Theological Perspectives," 11.

[66] Gene Russell, *Let the Children Come In* (Nashville: Church Growth, 1974), 85.

of God in a unique and important stage of their own development.[67] These children are not just needing to know about God but are seeking to know God. The church must be cognizant of their needs and must act intentionally to meet those needs and give them spiritual guidance. Robert Keeley notes, "Our children's faith, and our own, should be part of the very fabric of their lives, so much a part of them that it comes out in their language and in their thoughts, even when they aren't thinking about religion."[68] The church must reach out to minister to children in the matter of conversion and follow-up. It is then up to the pastor to prayerfully determine how God would use him to guide a child in the matter of conversion, just as he would consider guiding an adult in that same matter. However, along with a careful consideration of these theological concerns, the pastor must be aware of the cognitive and emotional development of the child, both of which have a significant impact on how the pastor proceeds in these matters. Theories of the cognitive and emotional development of the child will be addressed in chapter 3.

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[67] Linda Isham, *On Behalf of the Children* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press 1975), 14.

[68] Keeley, *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith*, 14.

CHAPTER 3

DEFINING CHILDHOOD THROUGH CHILD
DEVELOPMENT THEORY

While theological considerations, as defined by Scripture, are the most important guidelines in the determination of the pastoral role in the conversion of children, considerations of not only the level of the cognitive function of the child, but also the emotional and psychological development of the child, must be considered.[1] How would behavioral science define a "child" for the purposes of this conversation? Also, what implications can be drawn from "secular" research that would inform a pastor in his search for guidance in the matter of conversion and children? Certainly, these questions have been addressed at great length and much insight has been provided as a result. The question this dissertation seeks to answer, then, is, how does the research on emotional and psychological development of a child inform the pastoral role in a child's conversion? If a pastor is to deal rightly with a child in this matter, then he must know something about the cognitive and emotional development of that child. Which leads to this most basic of questions as a foundational consideration—what exactly is a "child" from a developmental standpoint?

Defining Childhood

The question of what defines childhood has been addressed on practically every level, from academia to legislation. While it seems on the surface a relatively underwhelming question, in actuality the question of when childhood begins or ends has

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[1] There is significant debate among Christians regarding the value of psychology in the context of the subject of this dissertation. Christians have great differences in opinion regarding the appropriateness of consideration of psychological and developmental theory in the context of children and conversion.

proven to be not only nebulous but also contentious. The United Nations even attempted to answer that question once and for all in 1989 with a treaty and statement entitled, "The Convention on the Rights of a Child." In "The Convention on the Rights of a Child," childhood was deemed to end at age eighteen—unless it is deemed to end earlier.[2] Of course, that proclamation provided no help in establishing a standard for the ending of childhood. Legally, children are presumed by law to be incomplete beings during the whole of their developing years. They are seen as utterly unable to fulfill their basic needs or even maintain life without extraneous help. They are simply legally classified as incomplete and assigned to their biological parents or some court approved parent substitute.[3] So, the law cannot even decide exactly a child actually is. That inability precisely illustrates the inexact nature of this language that makes the defining of "childhood" an exceptionally challenging undertaking. For the sake of this dissertation, the definition of a child will use the aforementioned language: one who is unable to fulfill his basic needs and who cannot maintain life without extraneous help. However, this definition only begins to address the questions that arise when attempting to define "childhood."

Until relatively recently there was near unanimity in the academic community that childhood could be envisioned as a biologically and psychologically determined phase of human development that was consistent across the board. Now, however, research from around the world demonstrates that the boundaries of childhood and adulthood both within and among different societies vary dramatically. Of course this makes the pastor's difficult job even more complicated as chronological age cannot be seen as a consistent and dependable indicator of childhood. The basic question of defining the age of childhood

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[2] Sandra Smidt, *The Developing Child in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective on Child Development* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2006), 13.

[3] Arlene Skolnick and Jerome H. Skolnick, *Intimacy Family and Society* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 334.

then gives way to more questions, such as the following: When does the child first have an independent mind? When does consciousness begin? When does the child have a sense of self? When does reasoning begin? When does the child know the difference between good and evil? When can the child be expected to make his own decisions?[4]

When it comes to matters of defining childhood, though, most experts agree that there has never been a time when one could be better equipped to make that determination than today. According to Michael Rutter of the Institute of Psychiatry, Social, Genetic and Developmental Psychiatry Research Centre in London, an explosion of knowledge of the effects of nature, nurture, and developmental processes over the last century have resulted in a much-improved understanding of many of the mechanisms involved in normal and abnormal development of children.[5] This improvement in understanding is particularly evident in the area of child development theory.

Under normal circumstances, children start out as inherently active and insatiably curious. These two initial qualities account for much of their remarkable progress in learning. The more things they do, the more skills they acquire. The research is conclusive that as a result of their experiences, especially interpersonal relationships, their concept of themselves gradually becomes clearer.[6] The relational grounding so prominently displayed in the research on early childhood finds a surprising convergence with significant strands of Christian thought. Children try to understand not only what is happening to them, but why; and in doing that, they call upon the religious life they have experienced and the spiritual values they have received, as well as other sources of

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[4] Sidonie Matsner Gruenberg, ed., *Our Children Today: A Guide to Their Needs from Infancy Through Adolescence* (Freeport, NY: Books For Libraries Press, 1952), 55.

[5] Michael Rutter, "Nature, Nurture, and Development: From Evangelism through Science toward Policy and Practice," *Child Development* 1, no. 1 (January-February 2002): 73.

[6] Ruth Strang, *An Introduction to Child Study* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 4.

potential explanation. By comparison, in Christian theology, the relationship of the person with the Holy Spirit grounds and enables the transformational process of conversion and ensuing sanctification. Recent studies of children's development affirm that one should not assume from the outset that two distinct and unrelated processes are at work in the initial stages of the formation of moral agency and the subsequent transformation.[7] For the pastor, all of this research is helpful in ministering to a child when understood and applied through the lens of a biblical worldview. Though, it can be difficult for the pastor to be mindful of both the cognitive development of the child and the spiritual development of the child.

William Hendricks notes that this balance is not an easy for the pastor to strike:

> The pastor, in particular, must be able to translate both the ancient holy book and the modern developmental manual into a language where what is common to both is apparent and makes sense when applied to the lives of children. The translation and transformation of biblical theology into corresponding ideas of developmental psychology and vice versa requires a fine balance.[8]

Both contemporary discoveries in this field as well as much of the classic research that has been longstanding in this field offer great insights in this matter. Within the past several decades, scholars have produced multiple volumes on developmental theory that serve to offer significant insights with much relevance in the matter of pastoral care of children.[9] When discussing classic contributors in this field, two names stand out above the rest: Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget.

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[7] Angela Carpenter, "Sanctification as A Human Process: Reading Calvin Alongside Child Development Theory," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 35, no. 1 (January 2015): 104.

[8] William L. Hendricks, "Theology and Children: Remarks on Relationships between Christian Theology and Childhood Developmental Psychology," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 20, no. 2 (January 1978): 60.

[9] Benjamin D. Espinoza and Beverly Johnson-Miller, "Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision for Christian Education," *Christian Education Journal* 11, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 8.

Erikson's Theories of Child Development

Erik Erikson is a German born psychologist and Neo-Freudian psychoanalyst who spoke the language of developmental psychology and argued on the basis of his clinical experience that adults stagnate in self-absorption unless they take an interest in the next generation.[10] His list of major contributions includes a theory of the eight major psychological stages through which every person is considered to pass. These stages are termed the "Eight Ages of Man."[11] He first introduced this concept in *Childhood and Society*, and reworked and amended it many times over the years of his life. It this theory Erikson seeks to chart the whole human life cycle in terms of eight different phases of ego development (his students labelled his theory from "womb to tomb").[12] Since this dissertation deals only with the matter of children and conversion, only the four initial stages of Erikson's theory—the stages dealing with children up and through the teenage years—will be discussed.[13]

Erikson is seen as particularly helpful to pastors in the area of ministry to children because he affirms that there is something more in human development than instincts, drives, and mechanism. Indeed, exploring Erikson's view on religion is essential for understanding the nature of his views on psychology, which Hetty Zock has

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[10] Donald Ratcliff, ed., *Children's Spirituality* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2004), 22.

[11] Jared Kennedy, "Reflections on the Bible and Childhood Development, an Introduction," Gospel Centered Family, accessed May 4, 2015, http://www.gospelcenteredfamily.com/blog/3y9pab74xp3lqtkxku8qnp852cestk.

[12] Richard Stevens, *Erik Erikson* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 41.

[13] It should be noted that Erikson himself readily admitted that his Eight Ages had their genesis in the work of Sigmund Freud. He acknowledged in an interview that when he first began to write extensively on the subject, he thought he was only providing illustrations of what he had learned from the work of Freud. He stated, "I realized only gradually that any original observation already implies a change in theory. An observer of a different generation, in a different scientific climate, cannot avoid developing a field it is a vital one." Richard Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield, 1995), 13. While the credit for the Eight Ages goes to Erikson, the presence of the influence of Freud and at times the inclusion of Freud's ideas cannot and should not go unattributed.

rightfully characterized as an "existential psychology."[14] This notion of "existential psychology" is reflected even in the names of Erikson's defining eight stages. As such, Erikson's work is easily applied to the work of a pastor. Zock classifies Erikson's work as belonging to the "hermeneutical strand of psychology of religion," in that bodily experiences do take a role but must be interpreted in a sociocultural context. This is effectively then integrated into the work of the pastor whose ministry involves the reading of "living human documents."[15] Erikson has garnered attention from religious writers in recent years because of the correlation of this work with religious thought and values. While Scripture must remain the ultimate authority for pastors in all areas, conversion of children notwithstanding, pastors will benefit from consideration of Erikson's work since it concretely represents the social and developmental interactions that are observable through the Bible and in society at large.[16]

Erikson's eight stages came about in the late 1940s when he and his wife received an invitation to present a paper on the developmental stages of life at the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth. Shortly before the White House Conference, Erikson was invited to present the stages they had worked out together in schematic form to a group in Los Angeles. They had copied the idea of "seven stages" from Shakespeare, but en route to Los Angeles decided that Shakespeare had omitted a stage, which meant that they too had omitted a stage. So, they added the eighth stage and presented it complete at the White House in 1950. The model grew in popularity following the publication of *Childhood and Society.*[17] The resulting theory, sometimes referred to as

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[14] Hetty Zock, "Human Development and Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age," *Journal of Religion and Health* 57 (2018): 437-50.

[15] Zock, "Human Development and Pastoral Care in a Postmodern Age," 448.

[16] Robert Pendergraft, "Erik Erikson and the Church: Corporate Worship That Sustains Through Crisis," *Philosophy Study* 7, no. 6 (June 2017): 281.

[17] Donald Capps, "The Decades of Life: Relocating Erikson's Stages," *Pastoral Psychology* 53, no. 1 (2004): 5-6.

Erikson's life-cycle, is indisputably considered a "classic." Erikson is recognized as having originated the first life span theory of development. His description of his eight stages remains widely cited in the field of developmental psychology even today.[18]

Erikson's first of his eight stages deals with trust versus mistrust and how that results in the creation of hope, or results in the deficit of hope, in the child. According to Erikson, the first thing a child learns to do in life is "to take in." Erikson notes,

> We take in not only with the mouth, but also with the senses, and you can see the child trying even with his eyes to 'incorporate' and then to remember and then to recognize outside what is, as it were, already in him. . . . The basic psychosocial attitude to be learned at this stage is that you can trust the world in the form of your mother, that she will come back and feed you, that she will feed you the right thing in the right quantity at the right time, and that when you're uncomfortable she will come and make you comfortable and so on.[19]

At this stage, at the hand of a mother (or by the missing hand of a mother, as the case may be), Erikson believes that the child learns to trust—or mistrust. Erikson even connects religion to his understanding of the development of hope in this stage, noting, "Religions only sanctify what they recognize as a given if they concern themselves with hope as a basic human attitude which must be transmitted from parent to child and be restored by prayer. . . . The first stage then for man would be the development of hope emanating from a favorable ratio of trust verses mistrust."[20]

This understanding has great implications for the pastor in the matter of counseling children toward conversion. The ability to trust and have hope in Christ—which is a fundamental component of faith—is going to be greatly affected, according to Erikson, by how this stage of the child's life was developed. If the child had a parent who was present and active in meeting his most fundamental of needs, then he is going to have a capacity to trust that a child who was not so blessed would not have. A child that comes

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[18] Zock, "Human Development and Pastoral Care," 439.

[19] Erik Erikson, quoted in Richard I. Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson* (New York: Praeger, 1964), 14-15.

[20] Erikson, quoted in Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, 18.

from a broken home or a home where a parent was not active and present will require a far different tact on the part of the pastor, as this child will have to learn something that he did not learn in his formational years—that is, what it means to allow oneself to truly trust. Though Erikson came to these conclusions many decades ago, modern psychologists have affirmed his conclusion that the quality and character of the emotional programming one receives early in life establishes a pattern that will continue to affect one for a lifetime. For Erikson, the importance of this age is undeniable in the context of spirituality and religion. He notes, "Trust, born of care is, in fact, the touchstone of a given religion. All religions have in common the periodical childlike surrender to a Provider or providers who disperse earthly fortune as well as spiritual health."[21] This development is seen in the infancy stage of a child.

The next stage, according to Erikson, is the "muscular-anal" stage, in which the presence of willpower and autonomy begins to be seen in the life of the child. For the child entering this stage, Erikson suggests that he must learn "not only to manage his sphincters, but his muscles and what he can 'will' with them. Now the urinary and anal organs are, of course, tied in physiologically and with psychosexual development and with aggression."[22] So, just when a child has learned in the first age to trust his mother (and in so doing to trust the world), he must become self-willed and must take chances with his trust in order to see what he, as a trustworthy individual, can will. Cultures will have different ways of breaking this will. If a person emerges from this stage with more shame than autonomy, then they can expect to feel inferior for their entire lives.[23] For a child who has just begun this stage, the implications could be significant regarding the way the child responds in the matter of salvation. For some children, the strong sense of autonomy that

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[21] Eric Erikson, quoted in Stevens, *Erik Erikson*, 44.

[22] Erikson, quoted in Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, 18.

[23] Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, 19-20.

results from this stage may result in their being far less inclined to surrender control of their lives. Others, who may emerge from this stage with a high level of shame, may on some level feel that they simply could not possibly merit the grace and mercy being offered them (even though they may not realize that they feel that way at the time.)

Certainly, a pastor's awareness of where a child is in these ages and some of the influences the child has experienced there will benefit the pastor as he seeks to minister to the child in the matter of conversion. Erikson identifies this stage as occurring in "early childhood," and the effects are life-long. Erikson concludes that the "enduring qualities" of this second developmental stage are a sense of goodness exemplifying autonomy and pride, and a sense of "badness" which takes the form of shame—the sense of having exposed one unnecessarily, and doubt—looking back either literally or figuratively on what one has done.[24]

The third age or stage in the life of the child is known as the locomotor-genital stage. In this stage the child deals with the development of both guilt and purpose. This would likely occur somewhere around three to five years of age—what Erikson refers to as the "play age."[25] If the first stage lays down a basic ability to trust the world and others, and the second stage establishes the child's ability to have confidence in himself as he is, then the third is concerned with how far the child can learn to have faith in his actions. In this "phallic" stage the child is getting adept in using language to obtain what he wants and is now capable of thought and planning as well as fantasy. The child is vigorous and active and into everything.[26] The child in this stage begins to dream of being big and to identify with people whose work or personality he can understand. He begins to learn

[24] Donald Capps, "Erikson's Schedule of Human Strengths and the Childhood Origins of the Resourceful Self," *Pastoral Psychology* 62, no. 5 (2011): 277.

[25] LSU School of Medicine, "Erikson's Stages of Life," accessed June 5, 2019, https://www.medschool.lsuhsc.edu/medical_education/undergraduate/spm/SPM_100/documents/EriksonsStagesofLife.pdf.

[26] Stevens, *Erik Erikson*, 46-47.

that he must work for things and that even his secret wishes must be attached to concrete things.[27] If children are allowed to plan activities and make up games and initiate activities with others, then they develop a sense of security and leadership (initiative.) The child who is not given this opportunity will find himself laden with guilt and insecurity, according to Erikson.[28] The child who has not developed well in this stage will be a challenging prospect to deal with in the matter of conversion. He must somehow come to grips with the insecurity and guilt that has followed him from this stage. The pastor will need to be aware of this deficit so that he might determine how best to proceed. The next stage is stage 4.

Stage 4 is known as the "latency" stage.[29] This stage is where the child continues to cement his feelings of industry or inferiority. This is generally seen between the ages of five and twelve and is marked by the child learning to read and write, do sums, and accomplish tasks on their own. Here the encouragement that the child receives is of the utmost importance. If a child is encouraged and given confidence, then the ego quality that can emerge is a sense of competence.[30] The child begins to really assert his independence here. For the purposes of the pastoral role in evaluating whether a child is ready for conversion, to use Erikson's language, the child would need to have reached stage 4—or the latency stage. This is the first stage in which a child is able to draw independent conclusions. It is the first time he genuinely can understand concepts that are not original to him or his support structure. Here the child really becomes himself, and the result is that each child is remarkably unique when exiting this stage. A person with

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[27] Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, 24.

[28] Crowe Associates Ltd, "Erik Erikson Life Stages," accessed September 4, 2018, http://www.crowe-associates.co.uk/psychotherapy/erikson-life-stages/.

[29] SUNY Cortland, "Erikson's Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development," accessed June 5, 2019, http://web.cortland.edu/andersmd/ERIK/stage4.HTML.

[30] Stevens, *Erik Erikson*, 48.

greater cognitive capacities and a greater capacity to interact with a broader range of people is going to emerge far differently from this stage than a peer lacking in these characteristics.[31] While Erikson continues through all eight stages, for the purposes of this dissertation I will not go into detail beyond stage 4 because when a child has progressed to stage 4 he should be able to make the independent decisions necessary to deal with soteriological matters.[32]

The pastor will benefit by having a knowledge of Erikson's work and these various stages in that it will not only enable him to evaluate where the child may be developmentally, but will also enable him to help address any deficits that might remain due to some gap in the child's development. The pastor may recognize that the child has simply not reached that latency stage yet and therefore some help needs to be given so that he might progress to where he needs to be to deal with the issues that must necessarily be dealt with in the matter of conversion. When is a child ready to be a candidate for conversion? On the Erikson spectrum it would be at a minimum when the child has progressed well into the latency stage, and certainly not before.

It should be noted that not all aspects of Erikson's theory would be helpful to the pastor in the context of children and conversion. Some of his conclusions would seem to undersell the role of the Spirit in the development of a child. At the end of the day, the processes involved in conversion are the accomplishment of the Spirit of God and no stage or theory can explain or predict when that will happen or explain how it will happen. And certainly, no pattern or cycle, even one as heralded as Erikson's, can be viewed as

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[31] Evans, *Dialogue with Erik Erikson*, 26.

[32] Erikson's stage 5 is the stage of identity vs. role confusion. This stage is crucial for the concept of fidelity and generally occurs in the age range of 12–18. Stage 6 deals with intimacy and isolation. This stage is seen as formative in the concept of love and is seen to be engaged in the age range of 18–40. Stage 7 is generativity vs. stagnation and is seen as formative in the area of care. This stage occurs between 40–65. The final stage occurs beyond age 65 and is the stage of ego integrity vs. despair and is seen as formative in the development of wisdom.

universally applicable. That does not mean, however, that there is no use for Erikson's

theories. Erikson does recognize the incredible influence of the family, which has been

verified empirically and provides the pastor a tremendous insight into the state of readiness

of the child for a discussion of spiritual significance. It is clear that the family promotes

or hinders transcendence of the self in children and as such provides a context in which

spiritual development occurs.[33] Erikson's theories then would seem to affirm the pastor

who assesses the development of the child in the context of his family influences.

While there is a healthy dose of skepticism when dealing with child

development theory for some within theological circles, Erikson has fared better than

many of his peers when it comes to the opinion of Christian thinkers. Erikson has been

embraced by numerous pastors and those serving children in ministry capacity who have

had the opportunity to familiarize themselves with his work have found it helpful. As

much as any such purveyor of psychological and psychosocial theory, Erikson's

conclusions are generally seen as compatible with Christianity. Pastors can definitely be

informed by Erikson's conclusion that what a person needs more than anything is a sense

of personal identity; a sense that there is a "sameness" (historical continuity) in one's way

of feeling and relating.[34] For the pastor dealing with children, this insight from Erikson is

just another tool he can use to properly evaluate and approach the child. The pastor

should feel confident and justified in using Erikson's insights as there are strong and

multiple affinities between Erikson's developmental theories and the biblical wisdom

tradition. Donald Capps lists the following similarities: Both speak of practical wisdom

as it gets shaped in everyday life. Like Erikson, the wisdom tradition focuses on the

social context in which morality gets shaped more than on abstract philosophical

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[33] Eugene C. Roehlkepartain et al., eds., *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2006), 239.

[34] Neil F. Pembroke, "John Stott and Erik Erikson on the Problem of Modernity: Applications for the Ministry of the Church," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 18, no. 3 (Fall 1990): 242.

systems.[35] Capps and Erikson both also seem to affirm that human growth follows a pre-established order according to a universal structure. As a result, human development and related virtues and realizations are related to specific stages of development.[36] Capps points out that the writers of the biblical wisdom tradition, like Erikson, discern order in the natural and social worlds that parallel the divine world. Therefore, Erikson would affirm that there is God-established order in creation. Capps writes, "Erikson would be very sympathetic to Montessori's view that the developmental process is infused from the beginning with the Spirit of God."[37] The pastor, then, need not feel that he must choose between the teachings of Scripture and the developmental theory of Erikson. The two are non-contradictory at worst and are actually complementary at best.

Piaget's Theories of Child Development

In addition to considering Erikson, a pastor seeking to minister to children should consider the contributions of one of the pioneers in the area of child development theory—Jean Piaget. Before delving into the specifics of some of Piaget's theories of development, the following question must be addressed: can Pigetian cognitive developmental theory rightly and effectively be applied to the world of spiritual maturity and development, particularly when it pertains to children? The answer is yes. One of the fundamental bases of Piagetian development theory is that conflict motivates development, which is certainly consistent with the teachings of Scripture that affirm that spiritual growth is often the result of struggle. When people, even young children, are faced with circumstances that are not consistent with their current concept of the world, they must look beyond their own reality to make sense of the situation. This directly

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[35] Donald Capps, *Life Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 114.

[36] Capps, *Life Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care*, 100.

[37] Donald Capps, "Erikson's Life-Cycle Theory: Religious Dimensions," *Religious Studies Review* 10 (1984): 121.

affects their understanding of and concept of God or a "higher power."[38] Therefore,

Piaget's work is certainly compatible with scriptural teachings regarding children and the

matter of conversion.

Piaget's work is reminiscent of Erikson's in that it is organized around stages.

The phenomenological school of Piaget draws its conclusions from observations and makes

a synthesis of the results.[39] Piaget sees cognitive development proceeding through four

qualitatively distinct stages.[40] Progression through these stages is accomplished through

the complementary processes of assimilation and accommodation. Children learn by

placing new information into existing mental structures (assimilation.)[41] Of course in

many instances, the existing framework will not be adequate to process new material. In

this case, a child may feel inadequate or confused. Consequently, the wider the spectrum

of children who may be receiving the information, the more difficult it is for the teacher

to effectively provide a framework for all of them to be able to use. This particular

challenge would have been multiplied many times over for Jesus. He faced massive

diversity in background and understanding in the people to whom he was called to minister.

To bridge that gap, Jesus used a parabolic method of teaching—a method that almost

seems Piagetian in application.[42] Jesus presented an image with which they would have

been very familiar and then created a sense of disequilibrium by putting a unique and

unexpected twist on the familiar. This disequilibrium would allow listeners to disengage

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[38] Kelly B. Cartwright, "Cognitive Developmental Theory and Spiritual Development," *Journal of Adult Development* 8, no. 4 (2001): 217.

[39] Hendricks, "Theology and Children," 61.

[40] J. H. Flavell, *The Developmental Psychology of Jean Piaget* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1963).

[41] James D. Foster and Glenn T. Moran, "Piaget and Parables: The Convergence of Secular and Spiritual Views of Learning," *Journal and Psychology and Theology* 13, no. 2 (January 1985): 97-103.

[42] Foster and Moran, "Piaget and Parables," 100.

their expectations and preconceived notions and allow them to dare to think differently on the subject, which of course is what Jesus desired all along. Seeing that Jesus's application of such teaching methods that are in sync with what Piaget would have prescribed creates a sense of confidence that Piaget's system of classification and stages will be something used by the pastor to reach out to the child considering the matter of conversion.

There are many other ways that an understanding of Piaget's research would be helpful to a pastor dealing with a child in the matter of conversion. For Piaget, as he states in his work on developmental processes, it is crucial to understand the evolution of the system of thought of the child to determine how developed the child is in the cognitive processes. Piaget would continue to classify as a child the one who reasons based on objects only—they are unable to project and make conclusions about anything other than what lies directly before them.[43] This child would be classified as in the concrete operational stage. The thoughts of this child are completely focused on the "here and now." The term "concrete" is applied because these operations are only applied to objects which are physically present. The child would have to advance to the next stage to be able to perform operations on concepts or objects that actually are not present.[44]

A further advanced child, one that could be considered an adolescent, is able to reason beyond what is immediately in front of him. He does not limit his reasoning to concrete symbols—he can reason on the basis of formal thought or propositional symbols.[45] This is often seen around the age of 11 or 12, though that age can vary significantly in either direction based on a variety of influences as well as the innate makeup of the child himself. In this stage, the child ceases to be obsessed with the success

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[43] Peter Neubauer, ed., *The Process of Child Development* (New York: Jason Aronson, 1976), 12.

[44] Dorothy G. Singer and Tracey A. Revenson, *A Piaget Primer: How a Child Thinks*, rev. ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 22-23.

[45] Singer and Revenson, *A Piaget Primer*, 12.

or failure of an idea or initiative and instead is more interested in gaining a general knowledge or understanding all the properties that characterize a situation and all the ways in which one can classify a collection of objects.[46] In other words, for the child in this stage, thinking is action; thinking is not just for action. This represents a step from knowing that things exist to being able to consider how things exist and function.[47] One must be sure that a child has developed at least into the beginning of the latter of these stages. He must of necessity be able process things that are not directly in front of him. If he is not able to do that then he certainly will not be able to deal with things from a standpoint of faith, which is by definition the "evidence of things not seen" (Heb 11:1).

Much of the determination of how a pastor progresses when dealing with a child will necessarily hinge on his understanding of what the child can mentally process effectively. An understanding of Piaget would benefit the pastor in this moment as Piaget explains that there is a distinguishable moment in which occurs "the crisis of the child's realization of the limits of human power" in which the child transfers the idea of all-powerfulness from his parents and other advocates to God. In that moment, the child then begins to differentiate himself from the environment and all its elements and as a result the child is far less egocentric in his thoughts.[48] The child who has begun to see God and himself in this form is far readier to have a thoughtful and serious conversation about God and the child's own soul. Robert Williams goes so far as to assert that a foundational understanding of where a child is located developmentally can provide necessary guidance to when that child is ready to be introduced to the concept of God.[49]

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[46] R. Droz and M. Rahmy, *Understanding Piaget* (New York: International Universities Press, 1972), 65.

[47] Hans G. Furth, *Piaget and Knowledge Theoretical Foundations* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 67.

[48] Jean Piaget, *The Child's Concept of the World* (Tonowa, NJ: Littlefield, Adams, and Company, 1965), 132.

[49] Robert Williams, "A Theory of God-concept Readiness," *Religious Education* 66, no. 1 (January 1971): 66.

Some take issue with Piaget's theories. Many of Piaget's critics do not think that his theories are comprehensive enough, particularly when it comes to the subject of this dissertation concerning matters of faith. Researcher John Fowler, for example, is fine with the Piagetian conclusion that faith may be expressed through religion and through cognition, but insists that one most not stop there, as Piaget does.[50] However, many "neo-Piagetians," including Fowler, make the mistake of being prescriptive in their theory and not just descriptive. Fowler, for instance, not only describes how faith and religious judgment develops in a child, but also prescribes how it ought to develop.[51] Still others feel that Piaget does not allow enough for the creative differences from child to child. Where Piaget seeks to classify and dissect every answer a child gives to a question, some theorize that children are wired to give answers even if they have to make them up. Young children, particularly, strive to offer answers even when they could not possibly be in positions to provide accurate information by means of a response.[52] The pastor should be aware that sometimes what Piaget would interpret as a clear defining answer that indicates the stage in which the child is found may simply be the creative energy of the child refusing to allow a question to go unanswered. It is the hard and fast stages of Piaget's theory that create problems for many. As a result, many insist that child development theory does not occupy the same place of influence it once did.[53]

Much of the difficulty comes in that there is no set age by which one can be sure that this development has happened. There simply is no "normal" when it comes to

[50] John W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981), 33.

[51] Eli Gottlieb, "Development of Religious Thinking," *Religious Education* 101, no. 2 (January 2006): 250-51.

[52] Elizabeth Ashton, "Interpreting Children's Ideas: Creative Thought or Factual Belief? A New Look at Piaget's Theory of Childhood Artificialism as Related to Religious Education," *British Journal of Educational Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 1993): 168.

[53] Espinoza and Johnson-Miller, "Catechesis, Developmental Theory, and a Fresh Vision," 9.

reasoning at different ages.[54] Christians will not go through these stages at the same rate

of speed. Bonnidell Clouse notes of the developing Christian that "it is imperative that he

not be locked into a less mature period due to the impoverished milieu of the Christian

groups he associates with."[55] While no definitive checklists can be developed, one can

watch for things that indicate a certain level of cognitive development and understanding.

Piaget distinguishes the various stages with terms such as heteronomy (the constraint of

an external authority). autonomy (self-rule), and equity (mental report and consent). These

terms allow a distinction between the various stages of development for which a pastor

should be able to watch when dealing with a child.[56] Ultimately, pastors familiar with

Piaget's taxonomy should find themselves comfortable with Piaget's choice of terms.

Clouse notes that there is great overlap in the teachings of Jesus and the conclusions of

Piaget: "In his omniscience, Jesus knew all things and represented the most advanced

thoughts possible in the age of morality. Piaget's cognitive developmental approach,

although not religious in nature, approximates the same type of reasoning."[57] Though

Piaget's approach would not necessarily be labeled religious, the pastor will find some

very familiar areas, as many assert that there is great commonality between the teachings

of Piaget and Jesus. Indeed, some more modern thinkers have taken Piaget's model and

amended it to reflect specific stages of faith development in the life of a child.

The Pastor and Child Development Theory

For Fowler, faith is grounded in certain structures which are innate in human

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[54] Kurt Kafka, *The Growth of the Mind* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1924), 124.

[55] Bonnidell Clouse, "Some Developmental Ideas of Jean Piaget," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 23 (September 1971): 104-8.

[56] Jean Piaget, *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (London: Treach, Trubner, and Company, 1932), 171-73.

[57] Bonnidell Clouse, "Teachings of Jesus and Piaget's Concept of Mature Moral Judgment," *Journey of Psychology and Theology* 6, no. 3 (January 1978): 181.

interactions that shape how human beings understand and interact with the world around them, as well as their own internal world. However, unlike Piaget, Fowler separates the content of faith from psychological factors that facilitate the operation of faith within the child.[58] Only when a child attains the capacity for concrete operational thinking can he begin, according to Fowler, to proceed through the necessary stages of faith.[59] Whether by embracing Erikson and Piaget and their theories as presented, or if, like Fowler, one takes the ideas and amends them to better fit a pastoral context, the pastor cannot be afraid to unite the worlds of psychology and theology.

As recently as the seventeenth century, there were attempts to unite the often seemingly irreconcilable fields. Though, by the end of the nineteenth century, theologians and scientists regularly interfered in the fields of the other, as is evidenced in the response to the theory of evolution (of course the theologian would object to such classification, as he would assert that if all truth is God's truth, then how could that be considered "interference?"). Theologians began to publicly accept evolution and scientists allowed them to do so without demanding that they demonstrate a denunciation of their faith in God along the way.[60] Where once it seemed necessary for theologians and scientists to be on different sides of an issue, substantive record affirms that indeed those entities can work well together. Certainly, the pastor familiarizing himself with the work of Erikson,

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[58] For Fowler, the seven stages of faith development are as follows : Stage 0 which is primal or undifferentiated faith, and occurs in infancy—from birth to two years of age; Stage 1 is intuitive-projective faith in which young children, ages two through six or seven, become capable of far more complex communication and thought; Stage 2 is mythic-literal faith; Stage 3 is synthetic-conventional faith; stage 4 is individuative-reflective faith; stage 5 is conjunctive faith; and stage 6 is universalizing faith. Since only stages 0 - 1 deal with the stages of development addressed in this dissertation, they will be the only ones dealt with at length. Fowler, *Stages of Faith*.

[59] Marsulize Van Niekerk and Gert Breed, "The Role of Parents in the Development of Faith from Birth to Seven Years of Age," *HTS Teologiese Studies* 74, no. 2 (June 2018): 6.

[60] Gordon C. N. Hall, "An Integration of Science and Theology in a Pigetian Epistemology," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 8, no. 4 (Winter 1980): 293-302.

Piaget, and even B. F. Skinner, simply allows the pastor to better understand where a child might be in their development and understanding. In this sense the pastor should not only accept the contribution of the psychological community but should enthusiastically welcome it. Hendricks notes rightly that, from the holistic implications of developmental psychology, a pastor could be reminded that religious learning grows out of the actions of all areas of life and resulting reflections on those actions. As such, "religious conversions can be studied and described in order to normalize basic elements and to facilitate presentation of these to children. . . . It can be a small, small world where the bridge of developmental psychology and Christian theology meet in areas of value and wholeness in the life of a child."[61]

Perhaps most importantly this insight allows the pastor to divorce himself from the practice of using age as a singular determining factor in evaluating a child's readiness in the matter of conversion. In many churches, the age of twelve was believed to be the magic number. There was a widely held belief that a child under twelve was not accountable and a child over twelve was. Therefore, the only consideration that a pastor needed to engage was to find out when the child was born. There is clearly no biblical precedent for this belief, but it is likely based in the fact that Jesus was twelve years old when he was found in the temple. A consideration of the development of a child allows the pastor to disregard unwise practices, such as deciding on a child as a candidate for conversion based on his age alone.

The understanding that a child is not defined by his age, but rather by his experiences and influences and his resulting development (or a lack of it), allows the pastor to look far more objectively at each individual situation. A pastor simply can seek to determine the stage of development in which the child is found, according to the understanding of Piaget or Erikson or some other respected voice in the field of child

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[61] Hendricks, "Theology and Children," 70.

psychology. That works itself out practically in some rather obvious ways. Most central to this conversation, Christian theology should not claim that the perception of its value system or the rationale of the "plan of salvation" is understood in its abstract relationships and logical meanings by the child who is not yet developed through those stages that would allow for such thought. The reality is that what appears to be a conversion can actually be a response of a child who accepts, out of respect and the desire for approval, the information and values given to him by his parents and the church.[62] Indeed child psychology and developmental theory can advise as to how the child learns and at what stages various types of learning occurs, but Christian theology must not deny the role of the Spirit or feel the need to compromise any scriptural requirements for conversion. Christian theology must listen to the insights of developmental psychology as to how soon children are able to think theologically.[63] There will be at times a natural tension between the two that on some level is unavoidable. After all, as Hendricks writes, "there is a world of difference between the contemporary definition of a task rigorously undertaken by a social science and a statement of faith which can acknowledge but one remedy and source for the ultimate well-being of all persons."[64] Most theories of child development are far divorced from even the most basic teachings of Scripture concerning children.

For instance, the only psychological theory of major import that would dare look upon a child as a sinful creature in need of salvation would be Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis.[65] Of course the pastor would certainly affirm this understanding, but that is where the similarity with Freud would end. The pastor would insist from a

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[62] Hendricks, "Theology and Children," 71.

[63] Hendricks, "Theology and Children," 72.

[64] Hendricks, "Theology and Children," 60.

[65] Bonnidell Clouse, "Psychological Theories of Child Development: Implications for the Christian Family," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 1, no. 2 (April 1973): 77.

scriptural basis that the child must turn in faith to Jesus Christ and repent of his sin in order to find a remedy for the problem of sin that perplexes him. Ultimately that is a different interpretation of sin and salvation than what is taught by Freud, but that is no reason to reject all of Freud's psychoanalytic insights about how a child learns and processes information.[66] In the same way, pastors should not reject the potentially insightful contributions of child development theory simply because at some points there might be a deviation in belief between the theologian and the psychologist. This somewhat adversarial stance does not excuse the pastor from simply disregarding what can be extremely helpful counsel from the world of child development theory. The worlds of theology and psychology can do more than peacefully coexist—they can indeed help one another thrive.

The consistent takeaway from this brief survey of child development theory is that the pastor must be diligent to watch and listen carefully to the child in these moments. Only when one watches and listens to a child over a period of time do all the "little things" begin to form a bigger and more comprehensive picture that will give a strong indication of where the child is developmentally.[67] This small foray into the area of child development theory will help to define a child in a way that will be extremely beneficial in the matter of pastoral care. If only by simple observation, the pastor can look for certain benchmarks which codify major milestones in child development and he will be far better equipped to think in terms of the ages and stages of child development and the abilities children should display at a particular stage in relation to relationships, reasoning, etc.[68] The pastor has to accept that this practice is not an exact science by any means. Even those who assess

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[66] Clouse, "Psychological Theories of Child Development," 85.

[67] Fritz Redl, *When We Deal with Children* (New York: Free Press, 1966), 333.

[68] Carolyn Taylor, "Underpinning Knowledge for Childcare Practice: Reconsidering Child Development Theory," *Child and Family Social Work* 9, no. 3 (August 2004): 226.

children and their development professionally can find themselves occasionally frustrated by the effort.

The spontaneity, lack of self-consciousness, and sense of unbridled freedom that characterize so much of what is precious about children can also be what is challenging when trying to assess them. Professionals acknowledge that the child's spontaneity is often more simply unpredictability and unreliability, and what is portrayed as a lack of self-confidence can actually be a manifestation of inaccessibility to important sources of diagnostic information.[69] But the fact that it is a tricky undertaking that can on occasion even fool professionals does not negate the value of such an attempt at assessment. One just has to engage the process fully aware that an accurate assessment of the development of young children is a difficult process and the rapid learning that characterizes early childhood is significantly challenging when it comes to assessment.[70]

As will be discussed at length in the next chapter, the child, no matter how young or what stage of development in which he might be found, cannot escape the fact that decision is the focus of this dissertation. The pastoral role is a significant one, as is the parental role and others, but no one can blame the sinful state of a soul on someone else. No one can reject Christ and then blame someone else for it. So as is always the case, while pastoral care of children is something to which great care and attention must be given, especially in the matter of salvation, at the end of the day the child will answer for the disposition of his soul.[71] It is simply the job of the pastor to be an influence and guide unto the right decision for Christ. It should be quickly affirmed that the effort will

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[69] Bruce A. Bracken, *The Psychoeducational Assessment of Preschool Children*, 2nd ed. (Needham Heights, MA: Allyn And Bacon, 1991), 19.

[70] Holly Bohart and Rosella Procopio, eds., *Spotlight on Young Children— Observation and Assessment* (Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2018), 7.

[71] Paul D. Meier, Donald E. Ractliff, and Frederick L. Rowe, *Child-Rearing and Personality Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 222.

differ as children differ. Obviously, ministry unto conversion of a child raised by believing parents will have a much different feel than ministry to a child raised outside the church.

It is not that the requirements for salvation are different, but the manner in which they are broached will necessarily be different. One writer notes that children raised in church-going families occupy a "weird place" in the ministry of the church. The language of conversion indicates that a person's life was headed in one direction until it converted and headed in a different direction. Children raised in believing homes often do not have a lot of external lifestyle issues from which to turn, so the language of conversion is a bit confusing for them,[72] so the resulting conclusion here is not a call for a one size fits all approach, nor is this conclusion a call to have a set of guidelines and rules that strictly govern a pastor's dealings with children. This understanding, rather, results in a call to consider a child's development—what he or she may be cognitively able to understand— not in any way that diminishes the work of the Spirit, but instead that acknowledges certain resolutions must be affirmed by someone coming to Christ. A developmental understanding of childhood (as opposed to a chronological or experiential one) would certainly best equip the pastor to proceed in the context of children and conversion.

In that vein, there are some takeaways that will help the pastor remember as he shares with a child on the matter of the child's conversion. First, the pastor should be aware that children understand concrete terms and language better than they understand abstract terms and language.[73] For reasons that the discussions on Erikson and Piaget from earlier in this chapter help to understand, children are likely to be far more literal than adults when it comes to their use of language. Many different explanations could be offered, but the most obvious is that something intuitive in childhood understanding is

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[72] David Fleer and Charles Siburt, eds., *Like a Shepherd Lead us* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006), 98.

[73] David Staal, *Leading Your Child to Jesus: How Parents Can Talk with Their Kids about Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 19.

more in touch with God than the deep rationalizing of an adult.[74] The pastor should learn from the various theories that indeed it is necessary to be very precise in one's language choice with a child. Also, if anything is apparent from the lengthy examples from Erikson and Piaget, it is that the pastor must always be aware that each child needs to be evaluated for his own level of readiness for this conversation.

Second, readiness needs to be assessed from both a cognitive and a spiritual viewpoint. Children represent one of the great dichotomies of all time. They are, as will be discussed at length in the next chapter, sinful creatures and moral agents, but at the same time they are also to be seen as gifts from God to be enjoyed. They are fully human beings made in the image of God and developing beings who need instruction and guidance.[75] In addition, they will need varying levels of instruction and guidance depending on where they are in their cognitive and spiritual formation. The pastor should carefully let some of the child development theory referenced herein guide him in the determination of what the child is in his development so that the pastor can guide the child forward rightly as the conversation continues.

Third, as the conversation ensues, the pastor should rely heavily on stories and relatable terms. This moment is not a time for a grand lecture. The gospel will be much more clearly communicated to children through stories. David Staal notes, "Children will also engage with what's sad at a deeper level when a leader or teacher uses words that refer to something familiar to them—creating a connection between the story and the listener."[76] Also, again according to where they are in their cognitive and spiritual development, it is very easy for children to get distracted by some aspect of the story.

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[74] Andrew Pratt, *Practical Skills for Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 130.

[75] Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey: Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 17.

[76] David Staal, *Leading Kids to Jesus: How to Have One on One Conversations about Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 185.

None of this approach to sharing the gospel with children should be taken to suggest that the pastor in any way leave out spiritual truths that must be affirmed. Staal encourages his readers to "reexamine our details and be sensitive to the impact on our listeners. Often we simply need to reword what we say in a way that maintains meaning without introducing distractions."[77] There is no set script for pastors to follow in this moment, because the language of communication with a child is going to vary based on the child's experience. For many of the reasons identified in this chapter already, everything the child understands is a product of his experience and limited educational influences, which includes things of a biblical and spiritual nature. For instance, Emma Percy did a rather informal interview session of about twenty different children who were raised in supportive stable homes for the most part in an effort to gain insight into what shaped their ideas on spiritual matters. As one would expect based on the empirical research that exists, Percy found that when it comes to biblical and spiritual matters, children are influenced heavily by the prevailing ideas in their homes and schools. In a different culture, some might even use an entirely different language to talk about these things.[78] However, the pastor should not make the mistake of assuming that the language of children is somehow less deserving of respect just because it may be expressed in a simpler format. Those who seek to contribute to the spiritual and Christian development of children should always bear in mind that children, like adults, can learn all the technical verbal symbols of theology and use all the proper terms and still not be able to apply or define those terms to everyday life. The pastor must guard against this lack of understanding.[79]

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[77] Staal, *Leading Your Child to Jesus*, 30.

[78] Anne Richards and Peter Privett, eds., *Through the Eyes of a Child: New Insights in Theology from a Child's Perspective* (London: Church House, 2009), 144.

[79] William L. Hendricks, *A Theology for Children* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 37.

Finally, at times it may seem impractical and at other times is may seem impossible, but the pastor who seeks to counsel the child in the matter of conversion must effort to know as much about the background of the child as possible so that he might accurately and efficiently evaluate the emotional and cognitive state of the child in an effort to counsel them effectively going forward. Of course, it should be added that no amount of child development theory can take the place of observing and speaking to the child. This approach is not the advocacy of some impersonal evaluative process. When such theories are applied in a sterile and emotionless manner, the risk is that one will lose the uniqueness of the child. While the child development theory is helpful and should inform how the pastor proceeds, it cannot be allowed to result in missing the essence of the child itself.[80]

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[80] Barbara Kimes Myers, *Young Children and Spirituality* (New York: Routlegde, 1997), 5.

CHAPTER 4

SOTERIOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL
CONSIDERATIONS OF CHILDREN

To this point, the focus of this dissertation has been the scriptural and scientific

guidelines for the pastoral role in the matter of children and conversion. It was necessary

to do these examinations before the current chapter, as it was necessary to definitively

demonstrate that children indeed are capable of coming to Christ—and some at a very

young age. It was also necessary to substantiate the claim that a pastor can have confidence

in evaluating the cognitive and social development of a child in an effort to provide counsel

for that child. But ultimately, what one does with this foundational information depends

on one's soteriological perspective. Exactly what must happen for a child to be converted?

For that matter, what must happen for anyone to be converted? Is it different for a child?

To answer these questions it becomes necessary to define and explore some theological

terms with particular significance on the matter of conversion. This discussion then will

begin with a discussion of the *ordo salutis*—that is, the "order of salvation."

Ordo Salutis

This order lists the events that of necessity must occur in the life of every sinner

who is converted—but that order varies from one theologian to the next, depending on

the theologian's viewpoint.[1] For some, it is a quandary that is as vast as the subject matter

itself. For others, it is a fairly obvious and easily grasped concept. The latter was the case

for revered reformed theologian Charles Hodge. As a student in a systematic theology

class he reduced the *ordo salutis* to this summary: "God ordained, Christ merited, Word

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[1] John M. Frame, *Salvation Belongs to the Lord* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2006), 176.

promises, Sacraments sealed, Faith receives, mouth confesses, works testify."[2] However, for most, it is neither that succinct nor that easily explained.

Admittedly, *ordo salutis* can reference two distinct senses. In one sense it is more general, indicating that one has not settled in on a particular order but instead just referring to the ongoing application of salvation in distinction from an understanding of a once for all moment of accomplishment. Though the other sense of the *ordo salutis* is more detailed and technical, having in view the casual and even chronological sequence of various saving acts and benefits, as these are unfolded in the life of the individual sinner.[3] The latter is the approach that will be taken here, as that will be most helpful in the overall focus of this dissertation. But even within that distinction, there is a wide spectrum of understanding.

Some will affirm the conclusions of such theologians as M. J. Erickson and B. Demarest, who prefer to discern a logical order of salvation. They argue for what seems to their understanding to be a logical precedence of conversion before regeneration, but they manage to do so without succumbing to the errors of Arminianism.[4] This perspective argues that there is a necessary distinction between effectual calling and regeneration. Effectual calling, while an intensive working of the Holy Spirit, is not seen as the complete transformation that constitutes regeneration. It does, however, render the conversion of the individual both possible and certain.[5] The *ordo salutis* that would result from this understanding would reflect this order of events: election, verbal calling, effectual calling, and belief of the gospel, repentance from sin, trust in the living Christ, regeneration,

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[2] J. V. Fesko, "Romans 8.29-20 and the Question of the *Ordo Salutis*," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 8 (2014): 36.

[3] Richard B. Gaffin, *By Faith, Not by Sight* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2006), 18.

[4] Jan Henzel, "Perseverance with an Ordo Salutis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 60 (2009): 127-56.

[5] Henzel, "Perseverance with an Ordo Salutis," 127-56.

justification, reconciliation, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification. However, for the purposes of this dissertation, the understanding of the *ordo salutis* embraced here is the product of a more reformed perspective.

From this perspective, the *ordo salutis* is seen as follows: God calls the sinner, God produces regeneration within the sinner, after which the sinner responds with repentance, faith, and obedience. Behind the divine call is God's electing decree. Still, despite the desire to systematically organize the steps in the matter of salvation, one must be careful not to see this organization as a necessarily chronological distinction. The *ordo salutis* is not primarily concerned with a temporal sequence of events, but rather a logical order of those events.[6] There is no time sequence here—just logical steps in the same event. Louis Berkhof writes that the *ordo salutis* describes the process by which "the work of salvation, wrought in the heart of Christ, is subjectively realized in the hearts and lives of sinners."[7] He goes on to add that it is not chronological in nature, but rather "aims at describing their logical order, and also in their inter-relations, the various movements of the Holy Spirit in the application of the work of redemption."[8] Paul deals with this distinction in his letter to the Romans, specifically in Romans 8: 29-30.

Paul clearly writes in this passage that God foreknew certain people and those people he predestined to be conformed to the image of his son (since God is an eternal being, these actions of foreknowledge and predestination cannot be seen as sequential actions on his part, but instead must be seen as logical aspects of his decree).[9] Paul continues to write in verse 30 that God called these people to his kingdom and, as a result,

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[6] R. C. Sproul, "The Order of Salvation," Ligonier Ministries, September 2019, https://www.ligonier.org/learn/qas/which-comes-first-in-the-ordo-salutis-faith-or-regeneration/.

[7] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, new combined ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 415.

[8] Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 415-16.

[9] Sproul, "The Order of Salvation."

those who are called are indeed justified. Having already taught that justification is by faith, Paul's implication is clear that in the sense of a consideration of the *ordo salutis* one can indeed insert faith between calling and justification. God's inward call produces regeneration in the sinner that results in that sinner's crying out to God in repentance and faith—which results in justification.[10] Sanctification then is the result of justification— the order cannot be reversed. This understanding does not teach that justification is the cause of sanctification—sanctification flows from the union with Christ.[11] However, each step in the *ordo salutis* builds on the events that have preceded it. What follows in this chapter is a discussion of those elements which have been here described as aspects of the *ordo salutis* and particularly how each concept applies in the context of the conversion of a child. The natural place to begin such a discussion is the very reason for which salvation is necessary.

Original Sin

The most reasonable genesis for this soteriological discussion is the often-discussed concept of "original sin" (a term whose origin is most often attributed to St. Augustine.)[12] Though, to be fair, one must acknowledge that the idea of children as "sinners" has grown increasingly out of vogue in recent years. Before the eighteenth century, the buy-in was heavy among parents as far as the depravity of their children was concerned. By the end of the eighteenth century, however, mainstream thought on children, heavily influenced by John Locke's theory of the child as a blank slate, began to stray from the idea of children as being wired for sin.[13] By the mid-eighteenth century, colonial

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[10] Sproul, "The Order of Salvation."

[11] Fesko, "Romans 8.29-20," 56.

[12] Christopher Boreaux and Christoph Theobald, eds., *Original Sin: A Code of Fallibility* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 14.

[13] Bonnie J. Miller-Mclemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 13.

representations of upper-class children further softened the public perception of these young people. They were seen as naturally innocent—almost angelic. While it seems that this concept is clearly not what Scripture teaches, nineteenth century theologian Horace Bushnell actually offered religious justification for this shift, saying that a child was born spiritually disabled and every act of parental tenderness could be justified as salvific.[14] If then, as seemed to be the case, the subject of raising children was not actually informed by Scripture, then who was interested in what theologians might have to say on the matter? The effect on the Christian community was palpable. Now that the image of children was one of innocence, Christians seemed ill-equipped to discuss them as moral and spiritual beings. But to understand exactly what a pastor's role is in the matter of children and conversion, one must first return to a biblical lens through which the development of children is to be viewed. Science has taught society that children and parents both are perfectible—infinitely open to human design and in no way inherently flawed and imperfect.[15] What appears to be a flaw in children is simply potential that is yet undeveloped. However, that picture is at odds with biblical teaching. That biblical understanding must begin of necessity with the concept of original sin.

Though Grudem prefers the term "inherited sin," what he describes here is basically accepted as the concept of original sin. This idea is that when Adam committed the first sin (hence the term "original") God considered all men as having sinned. All members of the human race were represented by Adam and therefore all humans are counted as guilty. It is also "original" in the sense—and this distinction is important where ministry to children is concerned—that all have it from the beginning of their existence.[16] The implications of that concept are massive. Norman notes, "If original sin is

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[14] Miller-Mclemore, *Let the Children Come*, 15.

[15] Miller-Mclemore, *Let the Children Come*, 16.

[16] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 495.

transmitted from parent to child, then every person begins life with a corrupted nature as well as the consequent guilt and condemnation of sin."[17] Millard Erickson, however, argues that though humans receive this corrupt nature, they cannot be found guilty of sin until they have committed a conscious voluntary decision to take that action. He asserts that the child is therefore innocent in God's eyes until that child attains moral responsibility. Spiritual death would therefore, according to Erickson, not be imputed to the child.[18] The question then becomes, when does that child become guilty of that act—at what point is that child no longer acting simply as an ignorant child and instead acting as a sinner indulging a sinful impulse? That begs a larger question—is the child to be seen as a "sinner" who therefore is condemned in his sin? Or is the child under some special covering or dispensation of grace that would spare the child the wrath of God? Everything the pastor does in conjunction with the child will be predicated on the way the pastor answers this question in this moment. For that reason, it is crucial at this moment to have a clarification of the question at hand.

The question is not the capacity of the child to sin. Numerous studies—many independent of the Bible or any biblical worldview—have documented at length the development of defiance and opposition to rules and authority that seems to be universally inherent in young children.[19] Children are unquestionably—from the moment they are born into the world—recipients of sinful dispositions for which they are not personally responsible. They are, at least on some level, at the mercy of what Gerald O'Collins refers

[17] R. Stanton Norman, "Human Sinfulness," in *A Theology for the Church*, ed. Daniel Akin (Nashville: B & H, 2007), 462.

[18] Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013), 655.

[19] Richard E. Tremblay, James F. Leckman, and Yanki M Yazgan, "Developmental Origins of Disruptive Behavior Problems: The Original Sin Hypothesis, Epigenetics, and Their Consequences for Prevention," *The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 51, no. 4 (January 2010): 347-48.

to as "a legacy of evil which stretched back to the beginning of human history."[20] He further notes, "The doctrine of original sin supplies a plausible account for a situation that every newcomer on the human scene must face: the shadow side of human history and a certain ingrained disposition to sin."[21] The question is, can this behavior be judged as sin and therefore in need of forgiveness and salvation? To approach this question, one must necessarily deal with a wider discussion of the nature of original sin—that is to say not just considering original sin in the case of children, but considering original at whatever level it is observed. An understanding of original sin will allow for a discussion of other matters of a soteriological nature. This discussion will then return to the application to children and specifically the conversion of children.

Augustine is quoted to have said of original sin that "nothing is so easy to denounce, nothing is so difficult to understand."[22] The concept is rooted in Genesis 3, though it should be noted that neither the word "sin" nor the term "original sin" is found in Genesis 3. The phrase "original sin" is not found anywhere in all the Scriptures.[23] However, with respect to the human race, Adam's sin is original in that this sin was the first sin of humanity. While not all theologians would agree, particularly Armenians who would argue this understanding is an unfair depiction of God, most evangelicals affirm that all indeed do now have a sinful nature that has been inherited due to Adam's sin.[24] Mankind is both guilty because of Adam's sin and because mankind possesses sinful nature. This event is known as the imputation of Adam's sin and is affirmed in Romans 5:12-19.

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[20] Gerald O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer: A Christian Approach to Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 72.

[21] O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 72.

[22] Henri Blocher, *Original Sin Illuminating the Riddle* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1997), 15.

[23] John E. Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013), 4.

[24] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 496.

John Murray, in his classic work *The Imputation of Sin,* notes the following regarding Romans 5:12-19 as it relates to this topic: "In the crucial passage, Paul not only speaks of the wages of sin as penetrating to all, not only of the judicial condemnation as coming upon all, but also of all being implicated in the sin of Adam with the result that they became sinners."[25] Pertinent to this focus, he later asks, "When is the sin of Adam imputed?"[26] He answers, "Sin is intertwined with our very existence in view of Adamic solidarity."[27] Obviously a more thorough discussion of the imputation of sin would require an investigation into the origin and nature of sin, as well as its transmission.[28] For the purposes of this dissertation, the focus is restricted to the consideration of the imputation of Adam's sin. The conclusion is straightforward. Adam was mankind's representative in the Garden of Eden. He sinned and God counted all mankind guilty as well. Adam's guilt now belongs to all of mankind because God rightly imputed Adam's guilt to all mankind.[29] Adam's breach of the covenant resulted in not only his ruin, but the assured and inevitable ruin of the whole human race.[30]

While this view of imputation of sin will be used as the basis for this dissertation, it should be noted that other theories on imputation are also widely held. The view held here is *representationalism*. This view is labeled as such because Adam, as the federal head of humanity and the representative of the entire human race, acts on behalf

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[25] John Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1959), 85.

[26] Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, 85.

[27] Murray, *The Imputation of Adam's Sin*, 91.

[28] Oliver D. Crisp, "Federalism vs. Realism Charles Hodge, Augustus Strong, and William Shedd on the Imputation of Sin," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8, no. 1 (January 2006): 55-71.

[29] Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 495.

[30] Hans Madueme and Michael Reeves, eds., *Adam, The Fall, and Original Sin* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2014), 137.

of humanity and as a representative of all humanity.[31] One alternative to this federalist theory of imputation is what is labeled as *realism*. Augustine is generally regarded as the major proponent of this theory. It has to do with the way in which the descendants of Adam were somehow really present with Adam at the point of his first sin. This view allows a response to those who suggest it is somehow unfair or unjust that the sin of Adam would be credited to someone who was not there and did not commit the act. Augustinian realism responds by affirming that all human beings were somehow metaphysically present with Adam at the moment of Adam's sin.[32] In this theory, Adam's sin is not mine because it was imputed to me; it is mine because it is mine. The major problem with this theory is an obvious shortcoming: it is not clear how God is able to treat Adam and his posterity as one metaphysical unit for the imputation of sin.

Theologian William C. T. Shedd offered a theory of imputation of sin that borrowed much from Augustinian realism. In Shedd's version of this theory, God treats Adam and his posterity as one metaphysical entity. Shedd's theory does not necessitate the idea that post-Adamic humanity is somehow physically or even spiritually present with Adam at the time of his sin. Rather, Shedd posits that since all humans share the same nature as Adam, when Adam sins it affects all human nature and all subsequent instances of that nature in his posterity.[33] Augustus Strong also had a theory of the imputation of sin that had many elements of Augustinian realism. He writes of an

> organic unity of mankind by which the whole race at the time of Adam's transgression existed, not individually but seminally in him as its head. . . . The total life of humanity was then in Adam; the race as yet had its being only in him. Its essence was not yet individualized . . . In Adam's free act, the will of the race revolted from God and the nature of the race corrupted itself.[34]

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[31] Crisp, "Federalism vs. Realism," 56.

[32] Crisp, "Federalism vs. Realism," 60.

[33] Crisp, "Federalism vs. Realism," 62.

[34] Crisp, "Federalism vs. Realism," 63.

This theory, however, is rooted in some obscure claims that cause many theologians to simply find themselves unable to affirm it. Henri Blocher notes these problems with the realist theories of imputation: "'Realizing' the idea of nature so strongly that it becomes numerically one, as a substance, with a history of its own, demands a rather extreme form of Platonism."[35]

The federalist understanding of imputation of sin is much more reasonable and requires far fewer leaps of faith into the obscure and unsated. Adam was the federal head of the human race. Adam chose to sin; and because he was man's representative, all mankind too is guilty. Therefore, mankind does not have to do anything to be guilty. Indeed, he is guilty by his sinful nature—independent of any individual acts. Sin is ingrained in the human nature—it is inseparable from the will. As such, sin cannot be prevented by the will. It may be that one can determine to some extent how he might sin, but one cannot determine whether he sins because, as a result of the imputation of Adam's sin, man is a sinner and therefore his every action will be rooted in sin.[36] The result of this sin is expulsion from the presence of God, just as was the case in the Garden of Eden. This moment is referenced as the "fall" in the Christian tradition. There is a clear contrast in the scriptural account of the life of Adam and Eve before and after the sin event. There is a clear contrast in the stare of original righteousness and—after the fall—the state of original sin.[37] Mankind's sinful state and his inability to fellowship with a Holy God, then leaves him in need of a remedy for his sinful state. Holiness is the attribute that frees God not only from evil itself but from all appearances or suspicions of evil; holiness cannot be

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[35] Crisp, "Federalism vs. Realism," 66.

[36] Ian A. McFarland, *In Adam's Fall: A Meditation on the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 179.

[37] Tatha Wiley, *Original Sin: Origins, Developments, Contemporary Meanings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 35.

aligned or affiliated with sin.[38] His holiness demands that he not fellowship with man as long as man is still in sin. That is the peril of the human condition. The fall has rendered all mankind, including children, unable to please God in their own power. Spiritually dead persons can do nothing to better themselves, and as for children, God must intervene in their lives to change their natures if they are to be free from sin, as is the case for all mankind.[39] Mankind is inherently sinful, is seen to be suffering, and is incapable of self-redemption and as such needs someone beyond himself to heal all these alienations and make it possible to be reconciled to Holy God.[40] Simply put, unable to save himself, mankind is desperate for a savior. That savior is the incarnate Christ. All humanity—necessarily including children—is in need of redemption; in need of a savior. That need is met through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. However, that message is not always well-received.

Some suggest that to teach children that they are inherently sinful runs a risk of damaging them emotionally and psychologically. A 2014 article in *Christian Today* reported that a children's coalition named "Protect Portland Children" claims that the teaching of traditional evangelical concepts to children "encourages fear, judgment and divisiveness in youth" and "is not appropriate for young children."[41] However, the gospel has always been opposed by those who do not believe in its message, so it should not be especially surprising nor should it cause excessive concern that such a protest would be made concerning sharing the truth of one's sinfulness to a child.

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[38] Ralph Venning, *The Sinfulness of Sin* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 30.

[39] Timothy A. Sisemore, *Of Such Is the Kingdom: Nurturing Children in the Light of Scripture* (Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2000), 52.

[40] O'Collins, *Jesus Our Redeemer*, 62.

[41] Brownie Marie, "Children's Christian Ministry Called Psychologically Harmful to Children," *Christian Today.com,* June 30, 2014, https://www.christiantoday.com/article/childrens-christian-ministry-called-psychologically-harmful-to-children/38529.htm.

Even though the eternal Son of God has always been in the world he made, the fullest manifestation of his presence was in the incarnation of the Word in the flesh of Jesus.[42] Through Jesus' sinless life and atoning death he has become the singular satisfier of the wrath of God. God's holiness demands that God judge all sin—so upon the cross of Calvary he who knew no sin, Jesus Christ, became all sin that he might fully satisfy the wrath of God. His death is sufficient to accomplish forgiveness of mankind's sin and full reconciliation to God. Which then begs the most obvious and most important of questions: How can man access the atoning death of Jesus Christ? How does the Calvary event become mankind's redemption event? Jesus' description of how that happens, as recorded in his conversation with Nicodemus in John 3, is that to access forgiveness and salvation through Jesus Christ, one must be "born again."

Regeneration

Paul used a different word but one with the same meaning in Titus 3:5—he used the word translated *regeneration*. Literally it means a new birth; a coming back from death to life.[43] But how is regeneration accomplished? That is what the Philippian jailer sought to learn from Paul when he asked him and Silas, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" (Acts 16:30). Paul and Silas instructed the jailer and his family to believe on the Lord Jesus, which they did, and the whole household came under the Lordship of Jesus Christ rather than the lordship of Caesar.[44] This response is one of many that can be found throughout the New Testament as unbelievers come to Christ. However, even though there is variance in the responses, the common thread in all of these conversion experiences

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[42] Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1981), 309.

[43] Darrell W. Robinson, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1992), 56.

[44] Joel B. Green, *Salvation Understanding Biblical Themes* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 114.

is the reality that God initiates the relationship, the pursued one hears the Gospel message of salvation, and that person responds.[45] There exists enough other scripture to know that response must be one of faith in Christ and repentance to sin. How does this initiation take place and how is this initiation particularly relevant to an understanding of children in the matter of conversion? This initiation begins with God's effectual calling of the sinner.

There is a call made to one and all—a call generally referred to as a gospel call. That is not the effectual call being referenced in this discussion of a call unto conversion. The effectual call of God draws sinners to repentance from sin and faith in his son, Jesus. John Murray describes this effectual call: "We become partakers of redemption by an act of God that instates us in the realm of salvation. . . . The call, as that by which the predestinating purpose begins to take effect, is in this respect of divine monergism after the pattern of predestination itself. It is of God and of God alone."[46] Indeed, the gospel call goes to all people but is clearly not intended to be effectual to all people—the sad but undeniable truth is that not all people believe.[47] This assertion does not suggest that simply because the call of God is effectual that somehow man does not come willingly. J. I. Packer rightly notes, "Grace is irresistible, not because it drags sinners to Christ against their will, but because it changes men's heart so that they come most freely, being made willing by his grace."[48] Though, to those to whom God chooses to elect, he indeed issues an effectual call, which is the initiatory moment in the matter of salvation. Because of this truth, salvation is not by works—not simply because it is by faith, but because those

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[45] Green, *Salvation Understanding Biblical Themes*, 115.

[46] John Murray, "The Call," in *Collected Writings of John Murray* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), 2.

[47] Matthew Barrett, *Salvation by Grace: The Case for Effectual Calling and Regeneration* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 71.

[48] J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990), 295.

whom God has chosen he effectually calls and unfailingly preserves to the end.[49] For the purposes of this dissertation the question becomes, can or would God issue an effectual call to a child? The case has been made that the child is indeed a sinner and is indeed a candidate for salvation. If the effectual call is necessary for salvation, then indeed it must be necessary for a child to receive that effectual call if he is to be converted.

A form of that question is addressed in the Westminster Confession of Faith. In a chapter entitled "Of Effectual Calling," in which the salvific status of infants are addressed (which is admittedly different than the "child" as defined for the parameters of this dissertation, but is still informative and helpful in this discussion), language originally indicated that only a small group of children are recipients of the saving mercies of God. The backlash from this section led to a decision to "tone down what the advocates of confessional revision saw as the harsher expressions of traditional Calvinism."[50] It has long been one of the arguments of those who do not affirm the reformed view of salvation that the very possibility of a child not knowing the mercies of God is offensive to the Scripture. While that discussion is far beyond the parameters of this dissertation, it seems that the belief in an effectual calling only strengthens the understanding that indeed a child can be saved. The only prerequisite for receiving the effectual call of God unto salvation is to be a sinner who needs it—and children, as has been proven in this dissertation, fall into that category. Therefore, if, as the previously presented simplified *ordo salutis* affirms, the first event in the matter of salvation is the extension of an effectual call by God, then there is no reason the effectual call of God necessarily cannot be extended to a child. Also, by the very nature of an effectual call, if such a call is received, then that child will be converted, and regeneration is certain. However, obviously, it may be difficult or even

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[49] Barrett, *Salvation by Grace*, 91.

[50] Richard J. Mouw, "Baptism and the Salvific Status of Children: An Examination of Some Intra-Reformed Debates," *Calvin Theological Journal* 41, no. 2 (November 2006): 244.

impossible for a child to recognize or remember this moment, which is troubling for many and would lead some to ask if a person can be regenerated and not remember when it occurred.

Whether a child (or anyone) can remember a moment in time does not lessen the reality or significance of the moment of regeneration. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, the spiritually dead person is miraculously made alive in Christ. As a result, he can cease his struggle to achieve righteousness by his own works or any other means. Regeneration is less about a decision and more about the work of the Spirit of God. Whether a child or an adult, when one focuses on the sovereign work of the Spirit of God rather than the arbitrary decision of the convert, one sees regeneration as something that can clearly be accomplished in the life of a child if God so moves.[51]

That assertion is not to intimate that the manifestation of repentance and faith will be the same or even similar from person to person, and the evidences of both will certainly be different in the life of a child than in the life of an adult. Though, there will necessarily always be repentance and faith as a response to the gospel if a sinner is converted. God is eternally ready and willing to forgive these repentant sinners of all their wrongdoing.[52] God even empowers the faith and repentance necessary to appropriate forgiveness and salvation. This understanding does not in any way minimize the fact that salvation is God's accomplishment, not man's. It is true that God's choosing of sinners—his election of sinners—is unconditional, but it is equally true that the receiving of salvation is decidedly conditional. The biblical requirements for salvation are repentance and faith. There are no exceptions to this scriptural rule because of the age of the sinner. In addition, it is true that God supplies the repentance and faith that he requires. God must grant what

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[51] Erik Thoennes, "Hour of Decision: How Can I Know I'm a Christian if I Can't Remember When I First Responded to the Gospel?" *Christianity Today* 51, no. 56 (December 2007): 36.

[52] John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992), 47.

he commands, but he also commands what he grants.[53] Since these two requirements of repentance and faith are so important in the matter of salvation, one should consider them briefly and specifically in the context of children and conversion.

Repentance

Repentance, as it is used in the New Testament, is understood to refer to a radical change in the direction of one's life. The New Testament actually uses three verbs in connection with repentance: (1) *epistrepho*, which emphasizes the idea of turning back, and is used to describe returning to the Lord; (2) *metamelomai*, which conveys the idea of regret; and (3) *metanoeo*, which is the New Testament's chief expression for repentance and means to know or to become aware of something afterwards.[54] These verbs combine to paint the New Testament picture of repentance as, in the words of Sinclair Ferguson, "a change of mind that leads to a change of lifestyle."[55]

Richard Owen Roberts writes, "The first word of the gospel is not 'love.' It is not even 'grace.' The first word of the gospel is 'repent.'"[56] John Dewitt agrees that no step in the process of salvation precedes repentance. It must be the genesis of the conversion experience and must be empowered as such by the Holy Spirit. Dewitt writes, "Repentance is the first conscious step in a person's experience of the divine grace, the entrance for all believers in to hope, life, and salvation."[57] No one can be saved without undergoing a radical transformation from the inside out. One does not change himself;

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[53] Charles H. Talbert and Jason A. Whitlark, *Getting Saved: The Whole Story of Salvation in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 67.

[54] Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Gift of Grace* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 14.

[55] Ferguson, *The Gift of Grace*, 14.

[56] Richard Owen Roberts, *Repentance the First Word of the Gospel* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 23.

[57] John Richard DeWitt, *Amazing Love* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1981), 74.

God recreates him. Jesus certainly taught that the gospel cannot be savingly believed until there is genuine repentance. His call was "repent, ye, and believe the Gospel!" (Mark 1:15). When Jesus began to preach and engage his public ministry, his message was one of repentance: "Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is near!" (Matt 4:17). Christ's message was always one of repentance and that repentance was always linked to faith or belief. Jesus preached repentance as being necessary for all sinners—as needful for children as for fathers and mothers.[58]

True repentance then always issues from a realization of sin in the heart wrought therein by the Holy Spirit, of the usefulness of sin, of the awfulness of ignoring the claims of God and defying his authority.[59] When a person truly believes and has been converted, there will be what John the Baptist termed "fruits of repentance" (Matt 3:8). There is no reason to think that anyone has repented if one's life has shown little or no change.[60] One has to be careful in this discussion to not appear to posit a theology that in any way makes the accomplishment of works a prerequisite for salvation. However, it is undeniable that Scripture teaches that there will be measurable works when repentance is genuine, which must be true even in children—though it certainly will look much different than in the life of adults. Ultimately, this assessment should be a self-examination that each person does of their own individual works, or lack thereof. This process is the basic process by which a believer gains assurance that his faith is genuine and his repentance is real.[61] Even though there is definite outward fruit and evidence of repentance, it is actually accomplished inwardly by the power of the Holy Spirit—not by any mental assent of sinful man. Not

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[58] Roberts, *Repentance the First Word of the Gospel*, 66.

[59] A. W. Pink, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 51.

[60] Gerald Cowen, *Salvation Word Studies from the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1990), 64-65.

[61] John MacArthur. "The Fruits of Repentance," Grace to You, accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.gty.org/library/blog/B120828/the-fruits-of-repentance.

until the Lord does this will God pardon the sinner. However, along with repentance there must also be faith, if one is to be converted. The two are inseparable. Martin Luther noted, "Any conception of repenting . . . not wedded to faith in the gospel falls short of the full biblical message. . . . In a real sense, repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin."[62]

Faith

Faith unto salvation must be genuine faith, sometimes referred to as "saving" faith. All faith does not lead to salvation. There are multiple examples in Scripture when someone has faith and yet is still not saved.[63] What, then, distinguishes faith that is genuine from faith that is not unto conversion? What truly is this saving faith required for conversion to Christ? B. F. Gerrish defines New Testament saving faith as a two sided element—those two sides being belief and trust. He notes, "It seems plain enough that we do not have saving faith as the New Testament presents it if the second, moral element is slighted; equally plain, that New Testament faith includes assents to the truths conveyed in the Christians message. I am not even convinced that either element can be said to have precedence."[64] Christopher W. Morgan and Robert A. Peterson offer a slightly different perspective on the defining of saving faith. They note that saving faith must be "defined by the Bible itself and that means paying attention to the Bible's story line. And that means that since the first coming of Christ the only way of salvation, as expressed by Jesus himself and his apostles, is explicit faith in him."[65]

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[62] Martin Luther, quoted in David A. Lambert, *How Repentance Became Biblical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 183.

[63] Alana P. Stanley, *Salvation Is More Complicated than You Think—A Study on the Teachings of Jesus* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), 37.

[64] B. A. Gerrish, *Saving and Secular Faith* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 3.

[65] Christopher Morgan and Robert A. Peterson, eds., *Faith Comes by Hearing A Response to Inclusivism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2008), 249.

What is missing from these definitions of saving faith is the work of the Spirit that must be done for saving faith to be constituted. Genuine, or saving, faith is wrought within a person by the hearing of the Word of God by the operation of the Holy Spirit. That Spirit-produced faith actually serves to regenerate the unbeliever and make him a new person.[66] Both faith and repentance then, which are necessary for salvation, are products and accomplishments of the Spirit and not of mankind.

Therefore, as was noted concerning repentance, faith must also be understood as a work of the Spirit of God; God accomplishes it. Tom Wells writes,

> If we take the Bible at all seriously . . . we have man's helplessness and blindness and enmity toward God to face. Man has fallen out with God. Man's bias is away from God. He has no power within himself to put things right. . . . So if we find a man with faith . . . we can only conclude that his faith has been given to him. It goes without saying that only God could give such a gift.[67]

Therefore, man does not choose what he believes—he just finds that he believes, or he does not. Kevin Klinghorn refers to it as the "involuntariness of belief." Humans are unable to acquire a desired belief by simply willing to acquire it. Klinghorn postulates, "A person who desires to hold a particular belief may yet find there is no decision available to him by which he can ultimately control whether or not he holds the belief."[68]

Definitively, the Spirit enables the sinner to believe; to have faith. That action is intrinsically linked to the proclamation of the Word of God. This truth is a foundational teaching found even in some of the earliest church fathers. John Calvin, for example, believed that whatever man conceives of God's power and word is salvifically ineffective without the Word.[69] There are great implications for this consideration of children and

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[66] Herman Bavinick, *Saved by Grace: The Holy Spirit's Work in Calling and Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2008), 38.

[67] Tom Wells, *Faith the Gift of God* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 78.

[68] Kevin Klinghorn, *The Decision of Faith: Can Christian Beliefs Be Freely Chosen* (London: T & T Clark, 2005), 38.

[69] Victor A. Shepherd, *The Nature and Function of Faith in the Theology of John Calvin* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1983).

conversion. If indeed salvation is a function of faith and repentance, and the active agents in each are the Word of God and the Spirit of God, then what one believes about the salvation of a child then rests on what one truly believes about the sovereignty of God

If it is true for sinful adults, then it must also be true of sinful children: a child must engage biblical repentance and faith if that child is going to be saved from his sin. Kenneth Keathley notes that these two elements are not the same thing "but one cannot exist without the other. If one truly believes on Christ for salvation, then he has truly repented of sin and vice versa."[70] On one hand, that realization seems foreboding as far as the child goes because certainly it would be difficult for a younger child to fully comprehend the meaning of either concept. There is good news for the younger child, however, who struggles to understand—it is equally difficult for the adult to comprehend. The adult can no more accomplish repentance and faith than can the child. Both are works of the Spirit of God that must be enabled by the Spirit of God. Though, that understanding of repentance is far from what is often viewed as repentance in the American church. The term *repentance* conjures images of emotional responses to a sorrow for sin and a fear of punishment, which creates a natural resistance and animosity toward this necessary engagement.[71] The only way that man can know repentance is for God, to use Paul's language from 2 Timothy 2:25, to "grant him repentance." That language is vital—it affirms that indeed repentance is a gift from God, not an accomplishment of man. Without repentance, man is blinded by sin and cannot see the truth of the gospel. Therefore, God mercifully grants him the necessary repentance that he could never accomplish on his own that man might see what he would never otherwise

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[70] Kenneth Keathley, "The Work of God: Salvation," in Akin, *A Theology for the Church*, 729.

[71] William Douglas Chamberlain, *The Meaning of Repentance* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1943), 18-19.

be able to discover. The only hope that a person without Christ has is that, in his mercy, God may grant him repentance.[72]

So, that understanding of repentance necessitates a consideration on how these soteriological truths work themselves out concerning children. If indeed all mankind is corrupted by original sin and the imputation of that sin, and if indeed children and spiritual beings just as are adults, then there can be no biblical support for suggesting that children have no need of salvation—surely, they do. There cannot be a gospel requirement for one set of sinners not required of another set simply because of a difference in age. The Holy Spirit is given at salvation, and certainly if God so chooses, he can give this gift to a child as well as an adult. The Bible speaks of new life beginning at this point. For the child, this experience would be the Holy Spirit connecting the child to God in a new way, as the child now becomes a child of God, at that point equal to Christian adults in respect to relationship with God.[73] That accomplishment means everything for a child that it means for an adult. The child is now a co-heir with Christ, and his experience of God will no longer be observed from the outside but rather in the form of the Holy Spirit inside the child. Just as in the life of an adult who comes to faith in Christ, the child's salvation experience is an experience of God that transforms him permanently.[74] Nothing in that description would prevent a child from being saved and nothing would prevent a pastor from counseling a child for conversion. While certainly safeguards and careful observation should be in place (some of which will be discussed at length in the next chapter) to assure that someone is not guided into a commitment that is not of God, those same safeguards and considerations should be in place with adults being counseled for salvation.

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[72] John Piper, "God Desires All to Be Saved and Grants Repentance to Some," Desiring God, accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/god-desires-all-to-be-saved-and-grants-repentance-to-some.

[73] Donald Ratcliff and Brenda Ratcliff, *Child Faith: Experiencing God and Spiritual Growth with Your Children* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 58.

[74] Ratcliff and Ratcliff, *Child Faith*, 58.

Evidence of Conversion

The conversation centered on children and evangelism falls into a bit of difficulty when one considers what is generally thought about the evidences of salvation. If indeed, as would be considered mainstream Protestant opinion, one of the evidences a person has been genuinely converted—that is that they have been genuinely begotten of God—is their practice of righteousness.[75] This evidence, of necessity, creates difficulty when dealing with a child as obviously the practice of righteousness is much more difficult to discern in one at a young age. Other evidences are equally difficult to observe at this early age, such as a love for God. In a heart made new by the presence of Christ, a love for God overshadows love for pleasure and gratification of self. Where sin once was the object of great affection, sin becomes instead an object of dreadfulness as God becomes the object of one's affections.[76] Again, that transformation is difficult to gauge on the part of a child. Therefore, one has to consider what some evidences of salvation would be that one could observe in a child who has had a conversion experience—or even if such evidences exist. Specific examples of such evidence will be given in the following chapter.

One of the great criticisms leveled by those who discourage child evangelism is that it creates significant doubts in the lives of those converts as they become adults. These doubts can be devastating for adults who were converted as children. Obadiah Sedgwick characterizes doubts about one's salvation as being like "a strong disease" that "shakes the very heart and spirit of the Christians and staggers him on every side."[77] This dissertation will present those things that indicate an authenticity of conversion, even within the youngest of converts. As problematic as it may seem when dealing with

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[75] Peter Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 33.

[76] J. D. Greear, *Stop Asking Jesus into Your Heart* (Nashville: B & H, 2013), 96.

[77] Obadiah Sedgwick, *The Doubting Believer* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1993), 74.

children, one cannot ignore the truth clearly taught in Scripture that change is a necessary result of conversion. Indeed, even the most moral unconverted man is changed upon his conversion.[78] So, too, then, must be even the youngest child.

Arthur Hilderman noted as far back as the sixteenth century that when children are very young they are

> capable of the seeds and beginnings of regeneration and saving grace . . . the youngest infant is not capable of saving grace, but that God is able even to work it in them. . . . This should encourage us to use all the means we can to breed grace in them quickly, because we do not know how soon God may be pleased to work with the means and bless them unto them.[79]

Salvation may well be the first "adult" decision a child makes as he puts away his faith in childish things such as fairy tales and Santa Claus and puts his faith in the reality of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.[80] If indeed salvation is the work of a sovereign God, as this chapter has shown, then it stands to reason that a child can be the recipient of the saving power of God just as adult can be. Children, as can be said of all humanity, are weak and fallen creatures. They need saving. God is moved to grief and anger by their sin and moved to compassion by their weakness, and as a result God saves them; God saves children. By the omnipotent power of a sovereign God, he chooses to save the soul of sinful man—including children.[81] Which brings this dissertation to the necessary question: if a child can be saved, and a child needs to be redeemed, then how is a pastor to successfully navigate these waters? How can the pastor gauge a child's true readiness in this matter and proceed in a manner that will ultimately be helpful and not harmful to the child?

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[78] A. W. Pink, *Regeneration* (Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, 2012), 33.

[79] Arthur Hildersham, *Dealing with Sin in Our Children* (Lake Mary, FL: Soli Deo Gloria, 2004), 20-21.

[80] Art Murphy, *The Faith of a Child: A Step-by-Step Guide to Salvation for your Child* (Chicago: Moody, 2000), 38.

[81] Christopher J. H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 16.

CHAPTER 5

A PRACTICAL APPROACH FOR THE PASTOR

We return now to the scene referenced previously in this dissertation. It is the week of VBS in a relatively small, rural Southern Baptist Church. The VBS director has enthusiastically conducted the midweek "evangelism night" and has reported to the pastor that some children want to "get saved." So, the pastor finds himself facing the eager and excited eyes of children seeking affirmation and guidance on this most serious of matters—and he also finds himself facing his church workers who fully expect him to "pray with the children" and "lead them to the Lord." For most pastors, there is not much of a choice to make in this moment. He likely has some hesitation, but he cannot risk being branded as one of those pastors who did not pray with a child who wanted to be saved. Historically, it has been the role of the pastor in this moment to pray with the child and follow up with the family and hope that this reaction was indeed a genuine move of the Spirit of God and not just an emotional response in the context of the moment. However, in light of the discussion enjoined in this dissertation, that pastoral role is due a bit of reexamination.

It is important, before concluding section, to be reminded that this entire thesis is founded in the understanding that this moment of decision is taking place in a pastoral context. Even beyond that is an understanding that this setting would be a pastoral context in which the pastor has had the opportunity to get to know and develop a relationship with the child in question. The importance of the pastor/child dynamic cannot be overstated in this moment.

Children as Part of the Church

Joel R. Beeke writes that every child has a need to be a living spiritual member of the church. He affirms that believers "must not treat our children as if they were so many

'little heathens' who have no rightful place in our well-ordered church services. They belong there."[1] It is the primary responsibility of the pastor to ensure that the child feels a sense of belonging. He must see the pastor as *his* pastor—not just his parents' pastor. The pastor must have cultivated a relationship with the child prior to this moment if he is to be effective in this most crucial of contexts. If the pastor has not invested in the child's life prior to this moment, then it will be difficult for the pastor to effectively counsel the child in this moment.

Admittedly, it is more difficult for the pastor to cultivate such relationships in larger contexts. It may be that, of necessity, the children's pastor or even a volunteer member of the church has more opportunity to significantly interact with the child and as such the pastor may need to lean on this person during this time. Though, the pastor's role in the matter of children and conversion cannot begin when the child comes to the potential moment of conversion. For the pastor to do what he needs to do in this moment, a sense of relationship and trust must exist between the child and the pastor. Beeke suggests some relatively simply policies and practices that, if implemented, would allow for these relationships to function. Some are as simple as "include the child in worship." He notes that children were present in the synagogues where Christ taught and Paul clearly expected children to be present in the church when his letters were read because he addressed the children on occasion.[2] Jason Helopoulos agrees with Beeke noting that allowing children in the worship service lets them know that God is for them also.[3] Other easily implemented ideas for providing a context for pastors and children to develop a relationship include having the pastor teach a children's class or involving the children in some sort of ministry

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[1] Joel R. Beeke, "Children in the Church," *Puritan Reformed Journal* 4, no. 2 (2012): 201-16.

[2] Beeke, "Children in the Church," 207.

[3] John Helopoulos, "Let the Children Worship in Church," The Gospel Coalition, accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/let-the-children-worship-in-church/.

in which the pastor is leading. While children's ministry per se is not the focus of the dissertation, part of the ability of the pastor to effectively minister in this moment will be rooted in his established relationship with the child, which will enable him to proceed effectively. Of course, the pastor who is dealing with the question of counseling a child in the matter of conversion must also deal with the question of whether a child should be allowed to participate in the ordinances of the church, specifically the revered ordinance of believer's baptism.

The easy answer to this question of whether a child should be baptized is really a function of the overall question of this dissertation—can a pastor confidently and effectively counsel a child in the matter of conversion. If indeed he can, then he can certainly baptize the child in recognition of the practice of believer's baptism. However, the debate over baptizing children has deep roots and an extensive history in the church. Infant baptism, and in this case child baptism, is attested early in the third century in Rome and in Carthage, and the texts that support this also support the contention that the practice had been in place for a generation or more prior to the writing of these texts.[4] Cyprian, who lived from 200–285, argued strenuously in favor of paedobaptism. Summarizing the decision of a synod held at Carthage in the mid-third century, he wrote, "We all judge that the mercy and grace of God is not to be refused to any one born of man . . . no one ought to be hindered from baptism and from the grace of God."[5] Furthermore, he writes specifically of "infants" and "newly-born persons" that they "deserve more from our help and from the divine mercy, that immediately, on the very beginning of their birth, lamenting and weeping, they do nothing else but entreat."[6]

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[4] David F. Wright, *Infant Baptist in Historical Perspective* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2007), 8.

[5] Peter J. Leithart, "Infant Baptism in History: An Unfinished Tragicomedy," in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, ed. Gregg Strawbridge (Phillipsburg, NJ: P and R, 2003), 252.

[6] Leithart, "Infant Baptism in History," 252.

Going forward to the fourth century and into the fifth century, Chrysostom's Easter sermon makes it clear that the church was baptizing infants, noting, "Even though they have no sins, that they might gain righteousness, filiation, inheritance, and the grace of being brothers and sisters and members of Christ and the grace of being the dwelling-place of the Holy Spirit."[7] In the West the situation was similar, with the practice confirmed well into the medieval period. Isidore of Seville, who died in 636, described a baptismal liturgy that included a catechumen stage for children. He noted, "Because children are not able to make renunciation themselves, this rite is performed through the hearts and mouths of those who carry them."[8] Even then, though, there was a debate about the ability of a child to genuinely be converted. Moving from the medieval period toward the modern period, there was a significant diminution of the import of infant baptism. In many cases in the patristic period, baptism was a part of a larger set of rituals that declared without question that the person being baptized was being admitted to the fellowship of the church. Only a bishop was allowed to administer the oil of confirmation and there simply was not always a bishop to be found. So, confirmation evolved into a totally different practice from paedobaptism and as a result robbed paedobaptism of much of its previously held significance[9]

Proceeding to the sixteenth century one finds the Anabaptists coming out distinctly against the practice of paedobaptism. A letter sent between Anabaptist leaders of the day speaks of infant baptism as a "senseless, blasphemous, abomination, contrary to all scripture."[10] Southern Baptists also entered the discussion. In 1852, R. B. C. Howell authored, and the Southern Baptist Publication Society of Charleston, South Carolina

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[7] Leithart, "Infant Baptism in History," 253.

[8] Leithart, "Infant Baptism in History," 254.

[9] Leithart, "Infant Baptism in History," 262.

[10] Gregg Strawbridge, "The Polemics of Anabaptism from the Reformation Onward," in Strawbridge, *The Case for Covenental Infant Baptism*, 265.

published, a book entitled *The Evils of Infant Baptism.* There are twenty chapters in this book and each chapter is a discussion of a reason that infant baptism is evil. For example, chapter 10 is titled, "Infant Baptism Is an Evil Because Its Practice Perpetuated the Superstitions That Originally Produced It"; chapter 13 is titled, "Infant Baptism Is an Evil Because It Leads to Religious Persecution"; and chapter 19 is titled, "Infant Baptist Is an Evil Because It Retards the Designs of Christ in the Conversion of the World."[11] The controversy remains today, but for the focus of this dissertation, one must rightly understand the doctrine of baptism.

Baptism should not be seen as a sacrament—it is not a means of conferring grace. It is an ordinance of the church that provides a visible and compelling testimony of a person's conversion. Once the act of conversion is separated from the act of baptism then the conversation becomes much clearer. However, even among those who would affirm that baptism is not the saving act but is testimony that the saving act has occurred, still have differing ideas regarding whether a child, even one who professes faith in Christ, should be baptized. For example, famed Southern Baptist Pastor W. A. Criswell, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church, Dallas, believed that converts should be baptized as soon as possible after their conversion—except in the matter of children. He had a hard and fast rule that no child under the age of nine would be baptized. This decision was based on Criswell's beliefs concerning the age of accountability of children. Kenneth Stewart addressed this issue in his PhD dissertation on Criswell submitted to the Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 2008. He interviewed many members of Criswell's staff and reported that though Criswell would not allow children under nine to be baptized, he did want to affirm them in their desire for salvation. He reportedly presented them to the congregation and rejoiced in the fact that the child had taken a "step toward God." The child would then be placed into class, and upon completion of that class, the child would

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[11] R. B. C. Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism* (Watertown, WI: Baptist Heritage Press, 1988), 14-15.

meet one-on-one with Criswell to give Criswell the opportunity to evaluate the child's testimony of conversion. If the child seemed to understand to Criswell's satisfaction and was past the age of nine, then, and only then, would Criswell baptize the child.[12]

Some would suggest that the debate regarding child baptism is simply a matter of misunderstanding what is happening. Among those in protestant churches who affirm or practice infant baptism is Kevin DeYoung, pastor of Christ Covenant Church in Matthews, North Carolina, and assistant professor of theology at Reformed Theological Seminary. DeYoung is a self-describe paedobaptist and he carefully explains that he does not baptize the baby as a matter of the conference of grace or because the baby is presumed to regenerate. Rather, his church has chosen to baptize infants because they are children of the covenant and therefore should receive the sign of the covenant.[13] So then, what is the correct way to see this issue? Since this dissertation is focused on children and conversion rather than infants and conversion, I will ask the question this way: should children be baptized immediately upon their profession of faith. The answer is "no." The hesitance to baptize children immediately should not be interpreted as to mean that somehow they cannot be saved. Children are certainly candidates for conversion. The reasoning for that conclusion has already been presented in this dissertation. So, if children can be saved and those who have been saved should be baptized, then why should children not be included in that practice? Tim Challies notes that the decision to wait in the matter of baptizing children is a decision that is born of wisdom and conscience:

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[12] Kenneth Todd Stewart, "An Inquiry into the Determinative Evangelistic Growth Factors at the First Baptist Church, Dallas, Texas under the Leadership of W. A. Criswell, 1944-1991" (PhD diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2008), 138-41.

[13] Kevin DeYoung, "A Brief Defense of Infant Baptism," The Gospel Coalition, March 12, 2015, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/a-brief-defense-of-infant-baptism/.

The New Testament contains no clear example of a child receiving baptism; neither does it contain a clear example of a child being refused baptism. In the absence of clear commands the leaders of each church must prayerfully exercise charity and wisdom as they seek to determine whether or not they will make it their practice to baptize children who profess their faith.[14]

That conviction has been the guiding principle for many churches, and remains the best way to proceed on this understandable sensitive matter.

Three examples are next presented of how specific churches dealt with this somewhat prickly issue and the conclusions to which each came as a matter of what would govern their policy regarding the baptism of children. The elders of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in 2004 framed their statement around the assertion that while Scripture clearly says that believers are to be baptized, Scripture is not clear on an age at which that should happen. Their policy is as follows: "We believe that the normal age of baptism should be when the credibility of one's conversion becomes naturally evident to the church community. . . . While it is difficult to set a certain number of years which are required for baptism, it is appropriate to consider the candidate's maturity."[15] Their approach is the correct one. One should not evaluate a candidate for baptism based on age but rather based on the evidence of conversion and maturity in their faith that occurs. This takes time to observe and therefore one should not be determined to baptize quickly, particularly a child. This position is similar to the one advocated by the leaders of Sojourn Church. In a position paper published by their leadership in 2009, they state, "Since children can be saved, and saving grace is communicated through the gospel (and not through the ordinances), there is no danger to the child in waiting. In fact, waiting can increase the honor associated with the event as well as discipline and faith within the child. Rushing participation in the ordinances poses greater dangers than waiting."[16] Clifton Baptist

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[14] Tim Challies, "When Should My Children Be Baptized," September 11, 2012, https://www.challies.com/articles/when-should-my-children-be-baptized/.

[15] Elders of Capitol Hill Baptist Church. 2004. "Baptism of Children at CHBC (2004).

[16] Sojourn Church. 2009. "Children in the Church - Position Summaries."

Church offers similar guidelines. They are willing to baptize a child, even a young child, but only after a conversation with church leadership that lends credibility to the child's profession of faith. The Clifton Baptist policy states,

> The elders of Clifton Baptist Church will handle parents' requests for children's baptism on a case-by-case basis. If after serious inquiry we agree with parents that a child is truly a believer, we will recommend he or she be baptized. If, however, we are unable to gain confidence of the state of the child's spiritual condition, we will recommend that further time be given.[17]

This type of moderate approach is affirmed by the conclusions of this dissertation. A church should require that a child wait to be baptized until they have given validity to their profession of faith. That need for validity in profession of faith returns to the focus of this dissertation—the process by which the pastor can confidently and effectively deal with a child in the matter of conversion. The next section examines the process by which a pastor should proceed in this consideration.

Cognitive Assessment

The first thing the pastor needs to assess is the cognitive ability of the child. If the child is not yet cognitively developed enough that he can reasonably be expected to process the information that will be coming his way, then he cannot be expected to make a commitment based on that knowledge. So, in this moment, the work of some of the child development experts referenced previously in this dissertation can be invaluable. Before specific means of evaluations and certain signposts of cognitive development are identified, it should be noted that this practice of assessing the cognitive readiness of a child seeking to be counseled in the matter of conversion is not universally applauded. For example, leading Southern Baptist thinker Danny Akin asserts that, when it comes to the matter of children and conversion, "psychological arguments carry no weight in this discussion."[18]

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[17] Elders of Clifton Baptist Church. n.d. "Clifton Childhood Baptism and Church Membership."

[18] Robert Matz, "The Cognitive Abilities of Children and Southern Baptist Baptismal Restrictions," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 61, no. 1 (2018): 43-61

He is not saying that one must be a certain age to come to Christ, he is simply saying there is no place for any type of psychological assessment in the process.

However, as has been previously stated, it is not necessary to make enemies of psychology and theology. It is certainly possible to utilize the insight offered by the pioneers of child development theory while being governed in that consideration by a worldview that demands everything be seen through the lens of Scripture and the presence of the Holy Spirit. This dissertation will render conclusions based on an affirmation that there is plenty of room for both fields to not only coexist but benefit each other. The two have long made an uncomfortable pair. A renewed interest in the intersection of religion and psychology was bred out of the introduction of a convention symposium at the 1959 American Psychological Association entitled "The Role of the Concept of Sin in Psychotherapy."[19] While initially it seemed that this presentation was simply going to breed more contempt between the fields of psychology and theology, it actually created a healthy curiosity between the advocates of each field of study. That mutual curiosity fostered cooperation between the two fields that can truly benefit a pastor in this new role.

Admittedly, the fields of psychology and theology differ greatly on the matters of methodologies and source materials. Theologians consider the Scriptures to be their primary reference, while using history, archaeology, philosophy, and other doctrines as secondary sources. Psychology uses reason and observation of nature as its primary sources.[20] Though, despite this basic and fundamental difference, they can benefit one another. Jonah Waseberg offers this insight:

> Theology offers to psychology an understanding of the human condition and the philosophy behind it . . . psychological studies suggest that perhaps religious belief and spiritualty can reduce amygdala activation in the brain which reduces stress and

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[19] John D. Carter and Bruce Narramore, *The Integration of Psychology and Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1979), 10.

[20] Jonah Waseberg, "The Dialogue Between Psychology and Theology," The American Association of Christian Counselors, accessed February 10, 2020, https://www.aacc.net/2018/12/10/the-dialogue-between-psychology-and-theology/.

increases motivation. . . . The conversation regarding psychology and theology is certain to continue for years to come."[21]

So, there is no reason for the pastor to shy away from the substantial help that can be provided from these scientific fields. It in no way diminishes the spiritual aspect of the conversion experience when one uses child development theory to assess the cognitive ability of a child who has sought out the counsel of a pastor.

Child Development Theory

How then can child development theory benefit the pastor in this moment? The pastor in this reimagined role realizes that some cognitive realities cannot be ignored in the crucial moment. A child must at the very least be old enough to give significant attention to the discussion. If a child is not capable of focusing enough even for a conversation to be engaged, then it is an easy call that the child is not yet ready to walk through the process of conversion. Indeed, the ability to pay attention at some length is a fairly dependable indicator of where a child is on the spectrum of development. Recent research on how long children of different ages can sustain their attention to certain objects and actions provides a timetable of the development of attentional control and duration.[22] A number of factors contribute to this development in addition to age.

For instance, individual difference in attention may be a reflection of biological differences in certain processes that underlie attention, such as autonomic functioning; individual differences in attention may also be related to environmental factors.[23] These potential variances due to these and other contributing factors prevent the pastor from simply assigning an age and saying that as of a certain year the child can be expected to pay attention to the degree that he or she can receive the information being fed to them.

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[21] Waseberg, "The Dialogue Between Psychology and Theology."

[22] Mary Gauvain, *The Social Context of Cognitive Development* (New York: Guilford, 2001), 72.

[23] Gauvain, *The Social Context of Cognitive Development*, 72.

While for many pastors there has long been a desire to be able to assign "an age of accountability," as has been referenced elsewhere in this dissertation, that age is not a chronological distinction, but a developmental one. Because of this distinction, the pastor will have to be evaluative in this moment and determine if indeed the attention span of the child is sufficient. This evaluation leads back to the previous emphasis on the need for a substantial and preexisting relationship between the pastor and the child. Granted, there may be circumstances where such a beneficial preexisting relationship does not exist. Perhaps the pastor is new to the field or the family has only recently come to the community or the congregation. In this case, the pastor needs to try to fill in the gap that this lack of a relationship will create. Perhaps he could talk to a previous pastor or a Sunday school teacher, or could schedule visits with the parents that would provide a context for this conversation with the child. Ultimately, the best case scenario is that the pastor has had an opportunity to develop a relationship with this young congregant as a natural progression in the life of the church. Certainly this existing relationship with the child will help inform the evaluation. If indeed the pastor feels that this necessary metric has been satisfied, then he can proceed to further evaluation of the state of the child's development. Useful at this juncture to the pastor will be the work of two of the pioneers in the field of child development theory, Erik Erikson and Jean Piaget, both referenced earlier in this dissertation. Since the various stages and their implications were addressed at some length in chapter 3, that information will not be repeated here. What will be addressed here are some of the signposts of each stage and how the pastor proceeds as a result of this awareness.

Erikson

It is unlikely that a pastor would find himself counseling a child in the first of Erikson's stages—the stage characterized by the development of trust versus mistrust. This stage generally occurs in the infancy years, although some children report to have conversion experiences as young as four years old, which technically would not be far

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from this stage. For most cases, if the pastor sees that the child is still in this first stage, it would be a reliable indicator that the child is not yet ready to consider committing his life to Christ in the matter of conversion. The child who seems to be exceptionally dependent upon the adult in his life, still depending on the adult to make all his important decisions, as an infant would, is likely still processing through this stage.[24] Again, it is unlikely that the pastor would ever have to counsel someone still in this stage as they would be too young to comprehend anything being discussed. However, should the child show tendencies toward overdependence on authority figures, it could signal to the pastor that the child could have significant issues trusting something or someone as an independent decision and not at the direction of a parent. In this case, it would be vitally important that the pastor talk to the child and not let the parent speak for the child. This undertaking is part of the new pastoral role that the pastor must be willing to embrace. This practice could serve to prevent those seeming conversion experiences that are more a product of the conviction of the parent than the conviction of lostness in the life of the child.

According to Erikson, the child who has a most healthy relationship with a mother during these months of infancy is going to find himself most receptive to the concept of God in later stages. Erikson teaches, "The basic trust experienced in a mother's recognition is the foundation and forerunner of trust in God."[25] For this reason, a child who was not afforded this parental affirmation is going to have issues when it comes to trusting, including trusting God. This conclusion is not meant to imply that a child who lacks this foundation is doomed to an inability to trust anyone or anything—things can be altered and changed as the child develops through further stages. As has been noted, this tendency toward distrust "is not just established forever, like a cornerstone in a building.

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[24] J. Eugene Wright, *Erikson: Identity and Religion* (New York: Seabury Press, 1982), 51.

[25] Wright, *Erikson*, 56.

No, it is alive right through life, and developing."[26] This stage ultimately gives way to

Erikson's second stage: the stage of "autonomy vs. shame and doubt."

Much as with Erikson's first stage, it is unlikely that a pastor will deal with

children in this stage in the counseling context, as this stage usually encompasses late two

year-olds, three year-olds, and perhaps early four year-olds. This stage is among the most

crucial stages of development as far as impact on spiritual development of a child. In this

stage the child learns to hold on to the right things at the right time and to let go of the

right things at the appropriate time, which creates within him a sense of willpower and

autonomy that will indeed be a lifelong value.[27] The influences on the development of a

child are profound in this stage. The child whose independence is supported and

encouraged in this stage will become far more confident in his ability to make

independent decisions and to survive in the world than the child whose independence was

not supported in this stage.[28]

One of the signposts of a child whose development in this stage is lacking is an

inherent sense of shame and a lack of ability to see things as linear—he may have a

problem identifying some behaviors as good and other behaviors as bad. In this stage the

child first deals with the battle of the will—the struggle to choose between right and

wrong.[29] A child whose development is lagging in this area will be identifiable to the

pastor as the child likely will not see the need to be saved because they have not developed

a sense of right and wrong. Again, they likely will not yet be coming to be counseled for

salvation, but if they are asking questions it likely will be because they want to pray for

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[26] Francis L. Gross, Jr., *Introducing Erik Erikson: An Invitation to His Thinking* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1987), 26.

[27] Wright, *Erikson*, 59.

[28] Saul McLeod, "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development," Simply Psychology, accessed February 11, 2020, https://www.simplypsychology.org/Erik-Erikson.html.

[29] McLeod, "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development."

reasons other than they sense a need to be forgiven because they have done wrong. Where the pastor may begin to get some questions, as far as Erikson's metric is concerned, is in stage 3, which concerns what Erikson refers to as the "play age."

This age would be from three to four, and maybe even five years old. In this stage, the child is able to move in many ways. Imagination becomes a driving force at this age as the child dreams of roles he might fulfill, tasks he might accomplish, and also great endeavors he might not accomplish or at which he might severely fail.[30] The child who has navigated this stage well will have the ability to picture what the pastor may be attempting to communicate regarding his state before the Lord. The child in this stage can picture beyond the immediate setting, which of course is needful for a conversation about spiritual things. This stage is the first stage in which the child might actually be ready to have this conversation—though it would seem that most of the time this stage would still be very early. The pastor who finds the child in at least this stage of development, as defined by Erikson, would need to use some other evaluative measures, such as Piaget's, which will be discussed later in this chapter, to proceed confidently with a conversation about conversion at this point.

If a child has not properly navigated this stage, then that would be evidenced by a sense on the part of the child himself that he is a bad child—so bad that perhaps there is no need to even have the conversation. The child who has developed well to this point will have a sense of purposefulness. The child whose development is lagging here will seemingly express a sense of passivity—a state in which nothing really seems to matter and nothing really affects what happens down the road.[31] But the pastor who senses significant development here may indeed feel like going forward to determine if there seems to be justification for having an extended discussion, even at this early age.

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[30] Wright, *Erikson*, 62.

[31] Wright, *Erikson*, 65.

However, at the next of Erikson's stages the pastor will often find himself ready to engage the child to a significant degree of depth in the conversation concerning conversion.

The fourth of Erikson's stages is the "latency" stage." This stage generally goes from the end of the previous stage—which is usually around five years old—up until about twelve years old. In this window the child's peer group will become very important as a major source of self-esteem.[32] Children begin their educational pursuits in this stage as well and must cope with the demands of an immensely larger and brand new world. This endeavor can create excitement and hope in children who are properly prepared for this stage and it can create anxiety and despair for those who are not. School children who can complete their schoolwork and therefore excel in that setting are generally happy and fulfilled children; those who cannot feel inadequate and inferior to the others.[33] The lagging child becomes overwhelmed with a sense of inadequacy and inferiority, but there is even a danger for the successful child at this stage. There is the chance that within the experience of the successful child at this stage that identification with tasks and only tasks will become the child's identity.[34] As the pastor engages with the child who seems to be in the midst of this stage, the pastor must be careful to assess the effect of the child's development to this point and allow the way he deals with the child on the matter of conversion to be informed by that assessment.

If he is dealing with a child who feels inferior because of his inability to thrive in the schoolhouse, then the pastor will need to reinforce the truth that God does not require the child to earn his love or to meet some standard before he will save us. The child struggling with inferiority needs to know and believe that God knows all there is to know about him and loves him intimately. The child who has been successful and received

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[32] McLeod, "Erik Erikson's Stages of Psychosocial Development."

[33] Gross, *Introducing Erik Erikson*, 33-34.

[34] Wright, *Erikson*, 66.

affirmation in the classroom needs to know that his need for God is just as great as the child who has not been as successful. The child whose success has made him identify too much with the tasks laid before him needs to know that God is not impressed by how much one does or what one accomplishes—he simply loves unconditionally. For the child seeking counsel from his pastor, an understanding of where the child is in this stage can very much benefit the pastor and assist him in giving good and appropriate counsel to the child seeking guidance. In this way, the work of Erikson in the field of child development can be of great value to the pastor seeking to counsel a child in the matter of conversion. As the pastor attempts to assess the state of readiness of the child in the matter of conversion, the pastor can rely on the work of the other previously discussed pioneer in the field of child development theory, Jean Piaget.

Jean Piaget

As noted previously in this dissertation, Piaget's theory of childhood development is based on cognitive development—mental processes such as perceiving, remembering, believing, and reasoning. As such, he has little to say on more ethereal matters, such as personality and emotion, because in his eyes the intellectual abilities a child possesses at a certain age permit certain types of emotional behaviors.[35] So a child cannot be expected to respond in manner that is not in concert with his intellectual state. Though certain aspects of development may vary from person to person as different influences make themselves known. Overall, Piaget firmly believes that the path of cognitive development is the same for all people.[36]

Piaget enumerates that development in the listing of stages. Critics of Piaget have often suggested that there is error in Piaget's stage theory. Some suggest that there

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[35] Dorothy G. Singer and Tracey A. Revenson, *How a Child Thinks: A Piaget Primer* (New York: New American Library, 1978), 10.

[36] Barry J. Wadsworth, *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive and Affective Development*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1984), 172.

should be fewer stages; others have found the need for more stages. Often there is disagreement with the ages with which Piaget has defined his stages. However, such criticism shows a misunderstanding of what Piaget is trying to communicate. Piaget's focus is not on children showing certain structures at specific ages, but that stages of development evolve in a broad, continuous sequence.[37]As the child proceeds and develops, each successive stage arises out of the one preceding it, but it is distinctive from the stage that comes before it. Though Piaget allows for some variation in the ages at which the stages occur, he insists that the stages are constant across the board. Also consistent in Piaget's work is his understanding that cognitive development is caused by two processes: accommodation and assimilation.[38] Accommodation is the process of adapting cognitive schemes for viewing the world to fit reality; assimilation is the complementary process of interpreting experience.[39] When one cognitive scheme becomes inadequate for making sense of the world, it is replaced by another. This evolutionary progression is framed by Piaget in a structure that incorporates four distinct stages. For the purposes of this dissertation, these stages will be the focus of the discussion on how Piaget's work can help the pastor in the matter of children and conversion. These stages are the sensorimotor stage, preoperational stage, concrete operational stage, and formal operational stage.

The sensorimotor stage encompasses 0-2 years of age. As stated concerning Erikson's earliest stages, the pastor will not ever have to deal with someone in this stage for counseling on the matter of conversion—but understanding this stage is necessary for understanding the stages that follow. During the sensorimotor stage, an infant's reflexive behaviors gradually evolve into clearly intelligent behavior. The infant develops problem-

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[37] Mary Ann Spencer Pulaski, *Understanding Piaget* (New York: Harper and Row, 1980), 18.

[38] Usha Goswami, *Cognition in Children* (East Sussex, UK: Psychology Press, 1998), 259.

[39] Goswami, *Cognition in Children*, 259.

solving behavior.[40] The child adapts to the world around him chiefly, by means of actions. This adaptation enables him to interact with the people and things in his life through his self-regulated gestures, cries, and movements.[41] This stage is truly when the child begins to have an understanding of the world around them. Again, this child is not capable of discussing any topic at length, and certainly not one as complex as conversion, but the development of this stage is essential to prepare him for more complex considerations at the next stage.

The next stage, according to Piaget, is the preoperational stage, which encompasses from 3–7 years of age. A child's thought in this stage is egocentric in that he is unable at the beginning to assume the viewpoints of others. The main achievement of this stage is the ability to attach meaning to objects with language. The child in this stage can for the first time think about things symbolically. The child can process that the world represents something other than itself.[42] Clearly, if a child is going to consider things of a spiritual nature, he must be at the minimum in this stage of development. He must be able to think about things far beyond what is immediately before him. The pastor faced with counseling a young child needs to have conversations with the child to determine if indeed he is to that point of development. The child in this stage is beginning to develop his worldview and the pastor needs to speak with him about biblical matters— but he needs to do so in a manner that does not rely solely on verbal explanations. The pastor must intentionally relate it to the firsthand experiences of the child.[43] Children in this stage enjoy fantasy and play so the pastor can be very dramatic in his telling of the

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[40] Wadsworth, *Piaget's Theory*, 173.

[41] Pulaski, *Understanding Piaget*, 27.

[42] Karen Richardson Gill, "What Are Piaget's Stages of Development and How are They Used?" Healthline, accessed February 11, 2020, https://www.healthline.com/health/piaget-stages-of-development.

[43] Stanley N. Ballard and Roland J. Fleck, "Teaching of Religious Concepts: A Three Stage Model," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 3, no. 3 (1975): 168.

biblical stories as well. But it is crucial that the pastor recognize where the child is developmentally. If he begins communicating in a way that is above the level of development of the child, then he is going to get a false impression of where the child is and will therefore be unable to counsel the child appropriately on this most important of matters.

According to Piaget, the next stage would be the concrete operational stage. This stage generally begins around age 7 and continues to around age 12. The child in the concrete operational stage is able to consider much more sophisticated classification systems and can perform logical analyses of items in different classes. For instance, the child might be given some red plastic blocks and some blue wooden blocks. If he were asked which one was more numerous—the red ones or the wooden ones—the child in the concrete operational stage would have no trouble making that comparison and coming up with the right answer. [44] This moment is where the child really begins to think hypothetically and much more abstractly. Clearly a child that would be classified at this stage in Piaget's system would be cognitively able to have a conversation about conversion. If the pastor assessed that the child was able to intelligently discuss things that were not directly in front of him and also if he was able to carry on some measure of conversation, then that would be evidence that the child was in this stage of development and the pastor could proceed with confidence. The fourth and final stage of Piaget's system is from about age 12 into adulthood. Since that age range is beyond the focus of this dissertation, it will not be discussed in depth, but will only be referenced here for the sake of completing the information about Piaget's system. The fourth stage is the formal preoperational stage and is the stage where children and then adults are able to engage in high level problem solving and deductive reasoning. For all intents and purposes at this stage the pastor is dealing with an adult and should proceed as such.

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[44] Neil J. Salkind, *An Introduction to Theories of Human Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 255.

However, what if that is not the case—what if the pastor, through his limited application of the ideas of Piaget and/or Erikson or some other theorist with whom the pastor might be familiar, assesses that this potential convert is not an adult in his thought process? At that point two vital decisions must be made about the child's cognitive ability. Is the child ready cognitively to discuss these weighty matters, and if so. how does the pastor need to go about it? Obviously, other factors will play into this moment—many of which have been discussed earlier in this dissertation. The child's home life, his experience in church, his family structure, etc., will weigh heavily in this moment. But as the pastor carefully moves forward, there are some helpful tips that one can glean from the work of child development theory that will instruct even how the pastor might go about sharing the gospel of Christ with the child.

Ultimately, the desire is that the gospel would be shared, and the child would come to Christ. No matter how young or what stage of development in which the child might be found, one cannot escape the fact that moment which is of course the focus of this dissertation. While the pastoral role is significant, as is the parental role and others, even for a child a sense of personal accountability is necessary. No one can blame the sinful state of a soul on someone else. No one can reject Christ and then blame someone else for it. So as is always the case, while pastoral care of children is something to which great care and attention must be given, especially in the matter of salvation, at the end of the day the child will answer for the disposition of his soul.[45] It is simply the job of the pastor to be an influence and guide unto the right decision for Christ. It should be quickly affirmed that the effort will differ as children differ. Obviously, ministry unto conversion of a child raised by believing parents will have a much different feel than ministry to a child raised outside of the church. The requirements for salvation are not different, but the manner in which they are broached will necessarily be different. One writer notes that

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[45] Paul D. Meier, Donald E. Ractliff, and Frederick L. Rowe, *Child-Rearing and Personality Development* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 222.

children raised in church-going families occupy a "weird place" in the ministry of the church. The language of conversion indicates that a person's life was headed in one direction until it converted and headed in a different direction. Children raised in believing homes often do not have a lot of external lifestyle issues from which to turn, so the language of conversion is a bit confusing for them.[46]

Therefore, the resulting conclusion here is not a call for a one size fits all approach, nor is this conclusion a call to have a set of guidelines and rules that strictly govern a pastor's dealings with children. Rather, this understanding results in a call to consider a child's development—what he or she may be cognitively able to understand—not in any way diminishing the work of the Spirit, but acknowledging that certain resolutions must be affirmed by someone coming to Christ. A developmental understanding of childhood (as opposed to a chronological or experiential one) would certainly best equip the pastor to proceed in the context of children and conversion.

Communicating the Gospel with a Child

In consideration of how to apply some of these basic concepts of a developmental understanding of childhood, some takeaways will help the pastor remember as he shares with a child on the matter of the child's conversion. First, the pastor should be aware that children understand concrete terms and language better than they understand abstract terms and language.[47] For reasons that the discussions on Erikson and Piaget from earlier in this chapter help one to understand, children are likely to be far more literal than adults when it comes to their use of language. Certainly many different explanations could be offered, but the most obvious is that there is something intuitive in one's childhood understanding that is more in touch with God than the deep

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[46] David Fleer and Charles Siburt, eds., *Like a Shepherd Lead Us* (Abilene, TX: Leafwood Publishers, 2006), 98.

[47] David Staal, *Leading Your Child to Jesus How Parents Can Talk with Their Kids about Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 19.

rationalizing of an adult.[48] The pastor should learn from the various theories that indeed it is necessary to be precise in one's language choice with a child. And if anything is apparent from the lengthy examples from Erikson and Piaget it is that the pastor must always be aware that each child needs to be evaluated for their own level of readiness for this conversation.

That readiness needs to be assessed from both a cognitive and a spiritual viewpoint. Children represent one of the great dichotomies of all time. They are, as will be discussed at length in the next chapter, "sinful creatures and moral agents," but at the same time they are to be seen as "gifts from God to be enjoyed." They are fully human beings made in the image of God and developing beings who need instruction and guidance.[49] They will need varying levels of instruction and guidance depending on where they are in their cognitive and spiritual formation. The pastor should carefully let some of the child development theories referenced herein guide him in the determination of where the child is in his development so that the pastor can guide the child forward rightly as the conversation continues.

As the conversation ensues, the pastor should rely heavily on stories and relatable terms. This moment is not a time for a grand lecture. The gospel will be more clearly communicated to children through stories. David Staal notes, "Children will also engage with what's sad at a deeper level when a leader or teacher uses words that refer to something familiar to them—creating a connection between the story and the listener."[50] Also, again, according to where the child is in his cognitive and spiritual development, it may be very easy for him to get distracted by some aspect of the story.

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[48] Andrew Pratt, *Practical Skills for Ministry* (London: SCM Press, 2010), 130.

[49] Catherine Stonehouse and Scottie May, *Listening to Children on the Spiritual Journey Guidance for Those Who Teach and Nurture* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 17.

[50] David Staal, *Leading Kids to Jesus: How to Have One on One Conversations about Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 185.

None of this discussion is meant to suggest that the pastor in any way should leave out spiritual truths that must be affirmed. Staal encourages, "Reexamine our details and be sensitive to the impact on our listeners. Often we simply need to reword what we say in a way that maintains meaning without introducing distractions."[51] There is no set script for pastors to follow in this moment because the language of communication with a child is going to vary based on the child's experience. For many of the reasons identified in this chapter already, everything the child understands is a product of his experience and limited educational influences, which includes things of a biblical and spiritual nature. For instance, Emma Percy did a rather informal interview session of about twenty different children who were raised in supportive stable homes for the most part in an effort to gain insight into what shaped their ideas on spiritual matters. As one would expect based on the empirical research that exists, Percy found that when it comes to biblical and spiritual matters, children are influenced heavily by the prevailing ideas in their homes and schools. In a different culture, some might even use an entirely different language to talk about these things.[52] However, the pastor should not make the mistake of assuming that the language of children is somehow less deserving of respect just because it may be expressed in a simpler format. Those who seek to contribute to the spiritual and Christian development of children should always bear in mind that children, like adults, can learn all the technical verbal symbols of theology and use all the proper terms and still not be able to apply or define those terms to everyday life. The pastor must guard against this lack of understanding.[53]

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[51] Staal, *Leading Your Child to Jesus*, 30.

[52] Anne Richards and Peter Privett, eds., *Through the Eyes of a Child New Insights in Theology from a Child's Perspective* (London: Church House Publishing, 2009), 144.

[53] William L. Hendricks, *A Theology for Children* (Nashville: Broadman, 1980), 37.

Case Studies

What then does this practice of applying these concepts of child development look like in practical application? This dissertation will present some case studies involving children that provide an example of how a pastor might proceed with a child seeking counseling in the matter of conversion.

Consider "Gracie." Gracie is presented by Grace Wieser Davis in Davis' book *Childhood Conversions* as a real young girl who actually had this experience in coming to Christ. According to Davis, at the age of eight years old, Gracie attended a revival service. She had once heard a Sunday school teacher say that the age of eight was old enough for a child to get saved, so she had waited for her eighth birthday and decided now to pursue conversion. The first few services she attended were not concluded with an invitation, but finally an invitation was given and eight-year-old Gracie decided to go forward—but at the last minute determined to wait. It was the fourth night of invitation before Gracie went forward. Davis writes of Gracie that "while [she] knew what she wanted, she hardly knew what to do."[54] She was met by an older lady who inquired as to the reason she came forward. Gracie explained that she wanted Jesus to "make her good." The older lady instructed Gracie to pray and directed her to a minister at the close of the meeting. Upon talking with the young girl, the minister stood her up on a bench for all to see so the young girl could give a word of testimony, and in so doing he affirmed that indeed she had been converted. When she began the walk home with her father, he questioned if she was certain that she had been converted and she said she knew she was because she felt it in her heart.[55]

I do not wish to criticize the pastor or the lady who counseled with the young girl. This conversion experience took place in a time when this method was the accepted

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[54] Grace Weiser Davis, *Childhood Conversions* (Chicago: Christian Witness Company, 1897), 8.

[55] Davis, *Childhood Conversions*, 8.

method of counseling a prospective convert (much as it still is in many places, which is much of the reason for this dissertation.) This conclusion, then, is not to suggest that the counselor and pastor on the scene there should have done things differently. It is simply to suggest that were a pastor to have the opportunity to counsel with eight-year-old Gracie in 2020, the conversation would be vastly different as the pastor's role has been reimaged based on the best insight that is currently available. Were this moment to occur in a current setting, the initial counselor would be well advised to take some time to inquire as to the background of the young lady. In so doing she would be able to assess on some level the spiritual maturity and perhaps even the cognitive development of the young inquirer. Rather than bring the young girl forward and put her on a bench immediately to affirm her decision, the minister would be wise to encourage the young girl for her desire to come to Christ and then to refer her back to her local pastor for further counseling (this dissertation is focused on the pastoral setting so in this example this congregant is a girl who indeed had a local church and a local pastor with whom she could counsel). It would then be the joyous duty of that pastor to assess and evaluate more concretely the cognitive development of the young girl. He would need, through conversations, to determine that she was at least in Piaget's "concrete preoperational stage," or Erikson's "latency stage," or some other similar stage of development that would give the pastor confidence that indeed the child can process thoughts and reason to a level that is necessary to understand the basic concepts of salvation.

Certainly, some pastors will feel ill-equipped to do this assessment, but this need is why it is necessary for pastors to rethink their role in this process. A child who was not clearly in the aforementioned stages, or some equivalent metric, would be potentially unable to reason to the level necessary to understand what the conversion experience is all about. The pastor must accept the responsibility to be well-versed enough in some level of cognitive that in this moment he can know whether or not to proceed, or whether or not in that moment the best thing for the spiritual development of the child is to

continue to instruct and encourage the child to the point that they have developed cognitively to the level needed for a conversation concerning conversion. Of course, a cognitive assessment is not the only evaluation that the pastor should be undertaking.

Not only must the pastor be sure the child is readily cognitively for this moment, but he must also be certain that the child is spiritually ready for this moment. For little Gracie, her statement that she wanted Jesus to "make her good" would provide a really good opportunity for the pastor to ask what she means by that. As referenced in the chapter on theological considerations, there must be some understanding on the part of the potential convert of the nature of sin. Of course for a child, that will be a very basic understanding. But there must be recognition on the part of the child that there is a deficit of some nature in their lives. No one will seek Christ for forgiveness if they are not on some level aware that something has necessitated that need for forgiveness. Sometimes the child may have trouble communicating it—but it is not a matter of what is spoken as much as it is a matter of what is inherently understood, and the pastor will have to probe a bit to confidently ascertain this awareness. If a child does not understand that God has a standard and that we will never reach that standard on our own, then it is unlikely that the child grasps the necessary foundation for a conversation on conversion.

In the case study, Gracie knew she wanted Jesus to make her right, but there needs to be a conversation as to what allows her to know that she is not currently "right."[56] Is this process just her comparing herself to others who have come to Christ? Is this process a social or cultural guilt that comes from failing to meet some manmade expectation? Or is this process truly a spirit-wrought realization that my sin has caused me to fall short of God's requirements? The pastor, in this newly imaged role, must be able to ascertain both the cognitive and spiritual development of a child in order to proceed

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[56] Gracie reportedly grew up and continued to serve the Lord faithfully. This conclusion affirms the truth that salvation is ultimately God's business and those who serve him cannot mess it up, despite our woeful inadequacies at times. Davis, *Childhood Conversions*, 14.

confidently in this matter. The child who is unable to grasp the meaning and the consequence of sin and therefore does not have a sense of a need of the savior's love and forgiveness is simply developmentally not ready to advance to the moment of conversion, whether the deficit is a cognitive one or a spiritual one, or some combination of the two.[57] This circumstance will require that the pastor both speak and listen in terms that have meaning to a child but do not lose their meaning as a follower of Christ, regardless of the age. One writer suggests that a pastor give thought to what the gospel might sound like when using nothing but child-centered terms. This suggestion is not that the message be altered or "dumbed down" for the children's sake, it is simply an exercise to increase the ability of children to both understand and discuss the gospel message, and later on other matters of Christianity as well.[58]

The Gospel in Children's Terms

What might the gospel message look like in "children's terms?" Various organizations that emphasize ministry to children have attempted to answer this question. One such organization is "Centrikid." Centrikid describes their organization as "an overnight camp for second–sixth graders to experience the time of their lives and learn more about the message of Jesus Christ."[59] I chose Centrikd for this example because they deal with the age range that is the general focus of this dissertation. They have established a guideline for presenting the gospel to those in this age range. They present the gospel to the children in five principles. Principle 1 is "God rules." The message here is that "God created everything, including you and me, and he is in charge of everything." Scripture used to back up this principle includes Genesis 1:1, Revelation 4:11 and

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[57] Gene Russell, *Let the Children Come In* (Nashville: Church Growth, 1974), 28.

[58] Staal, *Leading Your Child to Jesus*, 68-69.

[59] CentriKid Camps, "What Are Centrikid Camps?" accessed September 7, 2020, https://centrikid.com/about/.

Colossians 1:16-17. Principle 2 of this gospel presentation is that "We sinned." The message here is that " we all choose to disobey God" and that "the Bible calls this sin. Sin separates us from God and deserves God's punishment of death." The scripture references for this point are Romans 3:23 and Romans 6:23. Principle 3 of the Centrikid presentation is "God provided." This is the heart of the message in which the child is taught that "God sent Jesus, the perfect solution to our sin problem, to rescue us from the punishment we deserve. It's something we as sinners could never earn on our own. Jesus alone saves us." The scripture for this principal is John 3:16 and Ephesians 2:8-9. The fourth principal in this presentation is "Jesus Gives." This means that Jesus "lived a perfect life, died on the cross for our sin, and rose again. Because Jesus gave up his life for us, we can be welcomed into God's family for eternity." The scripture for this point is Romans 5:8, 2 Corinthians 5:21, 1 Peter 3:18, and Ephesians 2:8-9. The fifth and final point in this presentation is "We respond." That means that "Jesus has given us this gift and we must accept this gift, Believe in your heart that Jesus alone saves you through what he's already done on the cross. Repent, turning from self and sin to Jesus. Tell God and others that your faith is in Jesus." The scripture that backs up this fifth and final point is John 14:6 and Romans 10:9-10, 13.[60] The emphasis is on keeping the points short, as far as the main idea (God rules, we sinned, God provided, Jesus gives, and We respond) but then to provide a biblical explanation, as would be appropriate for the individual child, based on the scripture provided.

Alvin Gan writes about the need to be intentional in avoiding some of the religious jargon that can even confuse adults at times, and certainly can be confusing to children attempting to grasp the concepts of salvation. For instance, a pastor might be tempted to say, "You should ask Jesus into your heart." But depending on the cognitive development of the child, that child may take that statement very literally and wonder,

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[60] Centrikid Camps, "How to Share the Gospel with Kids," accessed September 7, 2020, https://centrikid.com/how-to-share-the-gospel-with-kids/.

"how will he fit there?" Instead, the pastor should use the more direct language of "starting a relationship with Jesus."[61] Another example that Gan submits is that when someone tells a child that God is a "holy God" the child might actually think that means that God is full of holes and somehow in distress. Instead, Gan posits that it would be more effective to simply say that God is good and perfect.[62] There many other examples offered but the point is clear—one should know the level of cognitive development of the child with which he is dealing and then adjust his language appropriately based on the literal nature of the child's understanding of the language.

For yet another case study, one should consider Tommy (an actual child, but one whose name has been changed for purposes of this story.) Tommy is one of the children I referenced earlier in this dissertation who came to me as a ten-year-old during VBS and wanted to pray to receive Christ. I spoke with Tommy briefly and he seemed to answer all the spiritual questions correctly. I knew that Tommy came from a troubled home, his parents would divorce soon after this conversation, but I did not really consider how this situation might have played into Tommy's mindset. As I always did, when Tommy's mother arrived to pick him up, I asked if I could speak to her for a moment. I informed her of Tommy's inquiry to which she responded, "He's not old enough to make that kind of decision." Looking back, I now realize that her quick answer was an indicator that she had raised the subject before with Tommy and to be honest she did not want to have to fool with him in the moment. I did not handle the moment well. I simply said to her that she was his parent, and she should know him well enough to know whether or not he was ready and if she thought he was not, then I would not argue.

Had I understood and embraced the reimaged pastoral role for which I am

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[61] Alvin Gan, "Share the Gospel with Kids without Confusing Jargon," Let the Little Children Come, accessed September 7, 2020, https://www.letthelittlechildrencome.com/child-evangelism-resources/share-the-gospel-with-kids-without-confusing-jargon.

[62] Gan, "Share the Gospel with Kids."

advocating here, I would have been able to respond much more effectively. I would have asked her to allow me to have some more conversations with Tommy and then I would have shared with her some of my evaluations concerning both his cognitive and spiritual development. Hopefully that would have given her some confidence that this was a step that could be taken. I understand the desire on the part of a parent to do the right thing in this moment. If a pastor who is dedicated to matters of a spiritual nature has some hesitance and reticence in this moment, then how much more will a parent feel the weight of the moment? But that mom—and all parents—want to be sure the child is ready. Of course, the state of moral awareness and spiritual accountability comes to children at different ages, so some question will necessarily exist in this matter.[63] The pastor who is ready to fill this new role of spiritual and cognitive evaluation will be equipped to assail the apprehension of a parent concerned about having to conversation too soon.[64]

Creating Disciples

One of the keys to a pastor being able to act in this manner when dealing with children is his ability to see the matter of conversion as more than simply a finish line to be crossed. Quite often the goal of church programs and pastoral efforts has been the production of "decisions." It has been rightly said in response to this drive toward decisionism that pastors must be aware that the charge of the Great Commission is not a charge to make decisions, but rather a charge to make disciples. The tendency is to truncate the gospel in such a manner that a decision is made, but a disciple is not developed. Certainly, the pastor holds out some hope that there will be a point at which the convert will be discipled, but there is some solace in the pastor's mind that "at least

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[63] Robert Wolgemuth and Bobbie Wolgemuth, *How to Lead Your Child to Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2005), 6.

[64] Tommy did not pray to receive Christ. He has had a troubled life through his teens and to my knowledge has never made a profession of faith in Christ to this day.

they're saved now."[65] The pastor must cease to see their responsibility as simply getting a child to make a decision. They need to see their role as part of a long process that will result in the child becoming a disciple of Christ. Knowing where the child is cognitively and spiritually is invaluable in this effort as the pastor determines how to lead the child in the process.

This desire to create disciples and not decisions even of the youngest candidates for conversion has led many pastors to make a distinct separation between conversion and baptism. Jason Allen advocates a much more measured approach to having a child baptized after he has prayed to receive Christ: "A healthy understanding of conversion means we need not rush children to the baptistery, and a healthy understanding of baptism means that we shouldn't. The effects of *true conversion* will not evaporate like the morning dew. When in doubt about as to whether a child is ready for baptism, it is best to give it time."[66] Trevin Wax affirms the need to be cautious in the matter of the child's baptism because baptism is the child's entryway into church membership, so it is crucial that the profession of faith be credible. But this conclusion should not be interpreted in any way as casting aspersions toward the validity of the child's decision. Wax notes, "Because Scripture does not shackle us to a certain age or make clear prescriptions in this area, we must exercise restraint in making dogmatic assertions regarding the 'proper age' for baptism. It's wisdom we are after, not uniformity."[67] For some pastors, to separate the baptismal experience significantly from the conversion experience might take some of

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[65] Samuel R. Schutz, "The Truncated Gospel in Modern Evangelicalism: A Critique and Beginning Reconstruction," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 33, no. 4 (October 2009): 296.

[66] Jason Allen, "On Sprinkling Infants, Baptizing Children, and Recovering Regenerate Church Membership," accessed July 24, 2020, https://jasonkallen.com/2015/05/sprinkling-infants-baptizing-children-recovering-regenerate-church-membership/.

[67] Trevin Wax, "Should We Baptize Small Children?," The Gospel Coalition, accessed July 24, 2020, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/trevin-wax/should-we-baptize-small-children/.

the sense of "rushing" out of the process. As the child grows and develops physically and cognitively, as well as in his walk with Christ, he will understand more of the depth of his conversion and his baptism will be even more meaningful as a marker of his genuine conversion.

It should be noted that the support for such a delay is far from universal and some would even say that it simply is not modeled anywhere in Scripture. John Starke expresses his discomfort with this trend of waiting to baptize a child, sometimes for years after his conversion. His explains, "I'm afraid that in the attempt to guard against false conversions, we have also prohibited obedience to Christ in following his command to be baptized. A child could go for years without being baptized, all the while confessing Christ and trusting in his gospel. This is a category of Christians that does not exist in the Bible, nor do I think it should today."[68] Certainly each pastor will have to come to his own conclusion concerning the appropriateness (or lack thereof) of waiting to baptize a child convert. It does seem, however, to have potential benefit in an effort to create in the child a disciple of Christ and not just one who has made what may or may not be a valid decision. If a pastor decides to wait to baptize a new convert, then he will be standing where early Christians stood historically. Literature predating 200 AD suggests that only adult baptism was a normal practice—early Christians baptized neither infants nor young children.[69] Historical records also show that during the third century a child was subjected to some three years of pre-baptism instruction and a similar time of probation. They were carefully instructed in matters such as Christian doctrine (including the Trinity, creation, and judgment) and in what it means to renounce Satan.[70] The pastor who chooses to

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[68] John Starke, "Should We Baptize Small Children: Yes," The Gospel Coalition, accessed July 24, 2020, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/should-we-baptize-small-children-yes/.

[69] Clifford Ingle, ed., *Children and Conversion* (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 71.

[70] Ingle, *Children and Conversion*, 72.

allow for this time of proving and maturing is looking toward a moment of meaningful celebration with a baptism farther down the road of the child's development. When the child has had years of growth and fruits of a genuine conversion, the baptism can be celebrated with great confidence and joy and the validity of the conversion of the child will be something that is beyond debate.

The need to evaluate a child cognitively and spiritually will make some uncomfortable. The call for a pastor to assess and evaluate is not a call for the pastor to make it harder for the child to come to Christ or in any way hinder anyone from coming to Christ. Even if a child is not ready to be counseled for conversion, the pastor still has a significant responsibility to the child. Never once does Christ or the Scriptures state or even hint that the truth of Scripture should in any way be held back from anyone—including a child. This suggestion is not a call to do what Scripture does not license and Scripture never gives one the authority to postpone seeking to bring a child to Christ.[71] This is simply a call for the pastor to see his role as one used by the Spirit of God to ensure that the gospel is being received and processed by one who is capable of both hearing and responding to the gospel message.

Plan of Action

What, then, is the action plan for the pastor faced with the question of how to counsel a child in the matter of his potential conversion? The action plan is a simple one that is a result of what has been presented throughout this dissertation. The first step is to lovingly submit to the working of the Spirit of God. As has been noted, ultimately God is sovereign in all matters, including salvation, so the leading of His Spirit should be enjoined first and throughout the process. This dissertation has demonstrated that indeed children are candidates for conversion and the Holy Spirit will be guiding and drawing them just as he would any adult seeking to be reconciled to God.

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[71] Lionel A. Hunt, *Fruitful Child Evangelism* (Chicago: Moody, 1951), 67.

Second, as the pastor meets with the child under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, the pastor should, through conversation and a look into the home life of the child, as much as possible, assess the cognitive level of development of the child. The pastor should be able to determine if the child is indeed developed enough to have a necessary understanding of the matters that lie before him concerning conversion (signposts of different levels of development have been discussed earlier in this dissertation).

If the child is cognitively and socially able to proceed, then the pastor can confidently proceed to the third step. The pastor should, as he would with anyone else, share the gospel of Christ. The language may have to be changed, as the presentation may need to be targeted more for a younger audience, but the content of the gospel cannot be in any way amended. Some things must be considered if one is to come to Christ and they must be considered whether the candidate is a child or an adult.[72]

There must be a biblically based presentation of the reality of sin, the result of that sin, and the remedy for sin that was given through the death of Jesus Christ. When presenting the gospel to the child, the pastor must be careful that he does not confuse the child with too many illustrations or lead the child into a commitment that he is not truly ready to make. The pastor should not just ask leading questions that can be answered simply by a "yes" or "no," but he should ask questions that require the child to express his understanding. A child can often be pressured into giving a "yes" or "no" answer that he believes an adult is looking for them to give. Just because a child is pressured into a "yes" answer to the question does not mean that they are truly ready or conversion.[73] After a clear presentation of the gospel, the child must then be allowed to respond. The pastor might ask if the child desires to pray and if he does then the pastor might inquire why he wants to pray.

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[72] Muriel Blackwell, *How Do I Become a Christian?* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 29.

[73] Daniel H. Smith, *How to Lead a Child to Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1987), 33.

Then, fourth, the child should be allowed to express what is on his heart as he calls out to the Lord for salvation. The pastor may have to help him in wording it, but the driving passion and sentiment should be the result of the heart of the convert, just as it would be for an adult. When the prayer is prayed, the pastor should encourage and celebrate, but not in a way that indicates this is the end of the journey. The pastor will continue to teach and guide as will others as the child grows in physical and spiritual maturity.

Whereas previously the pastor would have come to this moment hoping and somewhat wondering if the child was ready, he can be confident in this moment that in his reimaged pastoral role he has, as much as he is able, assured that the child was cognitively and emotionally able to make such a decision and having seen that he has walked through an honest and complete presentation of the gospel to which the child has responded in faith. At that moment it is the business of God to work in the matter of salvation.

The question to which this dissertation was addressed was, "Can a pastor confidently and effectively counsel a young child in the matter of conversion? The answer is, under these guidelines, a definite "yes." The child convert is a treasure of great potential as it gives him the potential of a lifetime of service to the Lord. That is likely why Charles Spurgeon once noted of children, "My conviction is that our converts from among children are among the very best we have. I should judge them to have been more numerously genuine than any other class, more consistent, and in the long run more solid."[74]

The importance of that moment when a pastor counsels a child in the matter of faith cannot be overstated. As the child comes to faith in Christ, he will be made a new creature and his transformation will be all-encompassing. However, as incredible as that moment is for the child, the implications go far beyond that moment. Massimo Lorenzini

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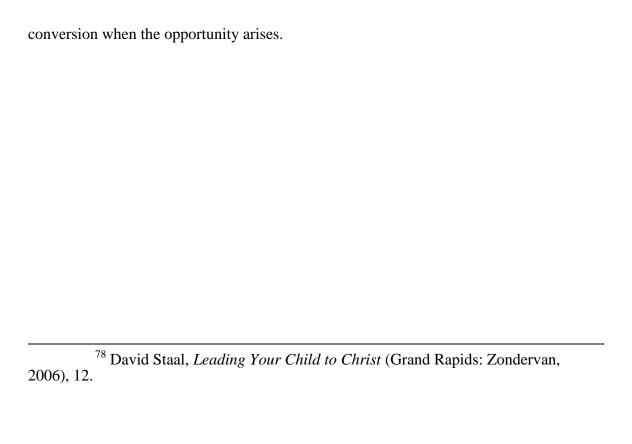[74] Charles Spurgeon, quoted in Davis, *Childhood Conversions*, 12.

notes that this subject matters: "For the honor of Christ, the truth of the Gospel, the eternal souls of children, the happiness of parents, the purity of the church, and the sake of those outside the church who are repelled from Christ because of the hypocrisy of false Christians."[75] In the face of such an important moment, the pastor can and must confidently make the call as to whether an inquiring child should indeed be counseled for salvation, or should be counseled to wait and mature a bit first. Not only can the pastor be confident in this moment in the matter of conversion, but he can also be confident in the moments and matters that follow, including baptism, church membership, participation in communion, and the discipling of the child. Indeed, the confidence derived from a disciplined, spirit-led, biblical approach to the matter of children and conversion will enable the pastor to better serve not only these members but all members of the congregation throughout his spiritual journey.

This conclusion—that the pastor can confidently and effectively minister to children in the matter of their potential conversion—is affirmed in the writing of C. S. Lewis. He once noted, "There is nothing in the nature of the younger generation which incapacitates them for receiving Christianity. If anyone is prepared to tell them, they are apparently ready to hear."[76] The goal of this dissertation was to equip the pastor to be ready, in that most crucial of moments, to effectively "tell them." An unprepared pastor risks squandering this priceless opportunity. The research of George Barna confirms what many have already observed based on experience[77]—if children have not come to Christ before they reach their teenage years, then the chance that they will ever do so is very slim.[78] The pastor can and must be ready to confidently counsel a child on the matter of

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[75] Massimo Lorenzini, *Child Evangelism—A God-Centered Approach for Genuine Conversion* (Charleston, SC: Frontline Ministries, 2008), 1.

[76] C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 115.

[77] George Barna, *Revolutionary Parenting* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale Publishing, 2010).

conversion when the opportunity arises.

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[78] David Staal, *Leading Your Child to Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 12.

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ABSTRACT

A REEXAMINATION OF PASTORAL THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE
CONCERNING CHILDREN AND CONVERSION

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This dissertation argues that a pastor can confidently and effectively counsel a child in the matter of conversion. Chapter 1 deals with the formative experiences of the author which led to the study, as well as with an examination of existing writing on the subject. A survey of current literature reveals that while many authors deal with the subject of children and may make vague references to their souls or their salvation, very little exists that would inform a pastor on how to proceed when counseling a child through this time of decision. Chapter 2 focuses on the scriptural passages that provide the foundation for this study. The study is based primarily on four biblical texts: Matthew 18:1-14, Mark 5:21-43, Mark 10:13-16, and 1 Corinthians 7:12-14. These texts provide confirmation that indeed children are spiritual beings who have the capacity, as drawn by the Spirit of God, to be converted. Having established that, the study then turns to the cognitive and social development of the child, which is the topic of chapter 3. Recognized experts in the field of child psychology, such as Erikson and Piaget, offer insights into what a child can reasonably be expected to process at various levels of development. While there is often a perceived conflict between psychology and theology, this study combines the two fields of study. A proper understanding of a child's cognitive and psychological development can prove of great value to the pastor. A pastor need not undergo extensive psychological training to properly counsel a child, but a basic understanding of the cognitive and psychological development of a child will enable the

pastor to more effectively communicate with the child and guide him through this process. Once the scriptural and cognitive psychological foundations are laid, this study turns, in chapter 4, to a basic discussion of soteriological matters, to ensure that there is no confusion as to what the various terms are referencing. In chapter 5, all of this information allows the development of certain signposts of development for which a pastor can watch. Children should be seen as candidates for conversion. The pastor who is able to properly analyze the child's development can then effectively consider how to minister to the child in this most crucial of moments. This study aids the pastor in that pursuit and informs the pastor on how he should proceed through the process of counseling a child in the matter of salvation.

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