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## ANIMALS AND INNOCENTS

### Theological Reflections on the Meaning and Purpose of Child-Rearing

JOHN WALL

The Anglican theologian Adrian Thatcher has argued that children today are the new socially "oppressed."<sup>1</sup> Perhaps nowhere in the developed world is this more evident than in the United States. In the early 1970s, children overtook the elderly as the poorest group in the country.<sup>2</sup> During today's relative affluence, 16.9 percent of American children under eighteen years of age (12.1 million children altogether) live below the poverty rate, \$13,003 per year for a family of three.<sup>3</sup> Approximately ten million children have no form of health insurance.<sup>4</sup> From a different angle, the amount of contact a child has with her or his parents has declined since the 1970s by an average of about ten hours per week.<sup>5</sup> Well over half of all children born in America today will spend some or all of their childhood living separately from one of their parents.<sup>6</sup> The number

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<sup>1</sup>Adrian Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity: Christian Marriage in Postmodern Times* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 132.

<sup>2</sup>United States Census Bureau, "Census 2000," P60-210 (available on the census web site, www.census.gov). ix. See also the Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2000 *Kids Count Data Book* 32 (child poverty in the United States in the late 1990s was around 21 percent, a figure 50 percent higher than in any other developed country).

<sup>3</sup>United States Census Bureau, "Census 2000," P60-210, vi.

<sup>4</sup>Sylvia Ann Hewlett and Cornell West, *The War against Parents: What We Can Do for America's Beleaguered Moms and Dads* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1998), 250.

<sup>5</sup>Victor R. Fuchs, *Women's Quest for Economic Equality* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 111.

<sup>6</sup>Sara McLanahan and Gary Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 2-3; Frank F. Furstenberg and Andrew Cherlin, *Divided Families: What Happens to Children When Parents Part* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991). Living apart from a parent is also shown in these writings to be a contributing factor toward problems like child poverty, physical and emotional illness, truancy and poor performance in school, and sexual abuse.

of children born outside marriage has risen dramatically in the last thirty years from 5.3 percent to 32.8 percent,<sup>7</sup> while the percentage of households that contain children has dropped from about one half of all households to one third.<sup>8</sup> In addition, despite greater public awareness of the issue, 2.5 million children in America are sexually abused each year, and probably one in four girls is physically or sexually abused by the time they reach the age of eighteen.<sup>9</sup> For teenagers, the 1990s saw significant increases in depression, drug use, homicide, and suicide.<sup>10</sup> And the teen birth rate in the United States is now twice that of any other developed nation.<sup>11</sup>

It is possible to attribute this almost Dickensian status of children in American society today to a variety of cultural, economic, and political factors. Certainly we are a country that increasingly has come to value individual autonomy, freedom, and competition for resources, and this ethic is likely to sideline children, given their special vulnerability, neediness, and dependence on others. But children are also the objects of deliberate social attack, for example through the recent movement to create "child free" zones in restaurants and public areas, the targeting of children by the movie and television industries for violent entertainment, and diminishing government support for schools and families. Although there is much rhetoric about children as the promise of America's future and although parents themselves generally work hard to raise their own children well, we have not as a society developed the language or commitment to address child-rearing as a public moral concern.

Unfortunately, this same neglect of children's issues extends to much of contemporary theological ethics. Despite the fact that children are a prevalent theme in Christian scriptures and despite childhood having received sustained attention from theologians all the way from the early church fathers up through the Middle Ages, the Reformation, and into modernity (as, for example, the recent collection of essays edited by Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought*, shows), theological ethical debate in the late twentieth and now early twenty-first century has rarely considered children to be a viable or important subject.<sup>12</sup> This relative marginalization of children in more recent theological discourse has subtly played into a postindustrial culture that views child-rearing as for the most part only a private concern, inordinately values the world of

<sup>7</sup>David Popenoe and Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, *The State of Our Unions 2000: The Social Health of Marriage in America*, Report of the National Marriage Project, Rutgers University (2000), 33 (website at marriage.rutgers.edu).  
<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>9</sup>Michael V. McKenzie, *Domestic Abuse in America* (Lawrenceville, VA: Brunswick, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>Hewlett and West, *The War against Parents*, 46–50.

<sup>11</sup>Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Kid's Count Data Book*, 28 (the teen birth rate in the United States in the late 1990s was about six births per thousand females aged 15–19).

<sup>12</sup>Marcia J. Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). See also Nonna Verna Harrison, "Raising Them Right: Early Christian Approaches to Child Rearing," *Theology Today* 56 (2000): 481–94.

work over families, and emphasizes adult agency over human vulnerability.

Specifically, public debate today could benefit from a Christian ethical perspective on child-rearing's deeper *meaning* and *purpose*, by which I mean, broadly, what we think we are doing as we seek to raise and educate children into society. Loosely following Aristotle's four "causes" or explanations (formal, final, material, and efficient), we should ask (1) how to understand children as they come into the world, (2) what should be child-rearing's aim or end, (3) by what means this aim should be accomplished, and (4) who should bear what responsibilities for these means.<sup>13</sup> Such a child-rearing ethics will concern more than *just* parenting, even if parenting remains a key factor; the Christian traditions have generally, as we will see, placed child-rearing also within the vital contexts of extended family, community, church, the state, and so forth. Indeed, part of what we see when we immerse ourselves in the Christian tradition is how far today the child-rearing task has become privatized in the home. In addition, child-rearing ethics asks slightly different, although not unrelated, questions than those involved in children's spiritual formation. In this essay, I am less concerned with how children become mature Christians than with how Christians can speak publicly about the social and moral tasks of child-rearing in general. Finally, this approach allows us to adopt what Don Browning and Ian Evison have called a "middle way" in family ethics that incorporates *both* the typically conservative focus on cultural solutions to family issues *and* the typically liberal concern with economics and social justice.<sup>14</sup> As I hope to show, the Christian tradition itself reveals ways to combine both approaches in what could be called a public theology—or as I will call it, a Christian ethics—of child-rearing.<sup>15</sup>

To these ends, this article first develops a typology of three of the most significant alternative approaches to child-rearing in the Christian tradition, those of Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Friedrich Schleier-

<sup>13</sup>Aristotle, *Physics* II.3 and elsewhere. Questions (1) through (3) have to do primarily with *teleological* questions of child-rearing's direction and purposes; question (4), with *deontological* considerations of obligation and responsibility.

<sup>14</sup>Don Browning and Ian Evison, "The Family Debate: A Middle Way," *Christian Century* 110 (July 14–21, 1993): 712–6. See also Don S. Browning et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground: Religion and the American Family Debate*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000).

<sup>15</sup>There are also deeper methodological issues that this paper can only illustrate without arguing for explicitly. I adopt a "critical hermeneutical" approach along the lines of that developed by the French thinker Paul Ricoeur, which combines a Barthian sense for the uniqueness of the Christian message with a Tillichian view that this message must be correlated with the contemporary situation. See Paul Ricoeur, "Philosophy and Religious Language," in Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995). An implicit contention of this article is that in order for Christian ethicists to think more clearly about child-rearing today, one must reject equally both a traditionalist view that seeks merely to recapture past ways of thinking and a progressive view that simply adapts the Christian message to the times. Christian approaches to children have in fact, as we will see, varied dramatically over time, and our task is to reform this tradition once again so as to develop a Christian child-rearing ethics that can speak meaningfully about the unique concerns faced today.

macher.<sup>16</sup> These models are examined not only because of their enormous influence over Western child-rearing attitudes, but also because they present us with often sharply contrasting alternatives, for example over the sinfulness or innocence of children as they come into this world and the relative roles of parents and society. I then put these models to critically constructive use by developing some outlines for a renewed Christian ethics of child-rearing for today centered around what I call society's *critical covenant* with children. In this way I build the case for a new model of Christian child-rearing ethics focused around the responsibilities of a broad web of adults and social institutions to cultivate children's unique and sacred gifts into mature contributions to the common good.

### THOMAS AND THE REALIZATION OF NATURE

Thomas does not have as much to say about child-rearing as Calvin or Schleiermacher, but he has more to say than one might expect, and his views, for better or worse, have been highly influential in the west. In the *Summa Theologica* and *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Thomas develops a model of the central meaning and purpose of child-rearing based on the teleological end of the *realization of human nature*. Combining insights from Aristotle and Augustine, Thomas views child-rearing essentially as taking the raw potential of human nature and cultivating it into realized human, social, and theological goods. It is a model that applies both a human and a divine teleology through Thomas's hallmark ethics of natural law.

True to his times, Thomas saw young children as starting out life akin to "irrational animals."<sup>17</sup> The youngest of children does not yet possess what he calls "the use of reason."<sup>18</sup> In a remarkable passage that systematizes a traditional medieval typology of the stages of childhood, Thomas argues that in the first seven years of life a child "neither understands by himself nor is able to learn from another," in the second seven years "can learn from another but is incapable by himself of consideration and understanding," and in the third seven years, starting around the age of fourteen, becomes "both able to learn from another and to consider by himself."<sup>19</sup> Cristina Traina has called Thomas's view, therefore, a "devel-

<sup>16</sup>I will especially make use of the recent excellent volume edited by Marcia Bunge, *The Child in Christian Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), in which a wide range of historical Christian views of children is explored. My essay builds upon Bunge's book by focusing not on general understandings of the child so much as on the specifically ethical issues surrounding the problem of *child-rearing*. Also, unlike Bunge's book, my article will develop detailed and specific comparisons of different approaches, as well as framing a constructive approach of my own.

<sup>17</sup>St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1948), II-II, Q. 10, a. 12.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, III, Supplement, Q. 43, a. 2. It is not for another seven years, around age twenty-one according to Thomas, that one can learn to apply full reason not only to "things concerning [one's] person" but also to "the things outside [one's] person." *Ibid.*

opmental" view of children,<sup>20</sup> and in this sense Thomas is something of a forebear of the twentieth-century secular developmental perspectives on child-rearing found in Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson, and Lawrence Kohlberg. In Thomas's case, development is from an animal state of irrationality and disorder toward ever greater capacities to order one's own existence using ever more specifically *human* reason.

The subtle play between the child's initial irrationality and its gradual development of rational capacities can be seen in Thomas's reasons for supporting infant baptism. According to Thomas, infants and young children cannot strictly speaking be said to "act," since they do not yet have the use of reason.<sup>21</sup> However, they are still participants in "original sin" and, likewise, can still "receive grace through Christ."<sup>22</sup> This is because, though they are still forming their capacity to act for themselves, children *can* be infused, through the act of the church, with theological "habits" (that is, "dispositions" or "potentialities" for theological virtues).<sup>23</sup> For this reason, baptized infants can go to heaven despite not yet being able to act for themselves, whereas unbaptized infants go to limbo instead of to hell because their actions are not yet their own.

More than many others in the Christian tradition, Thomas believes that the task of child developmental should fall principally upon parents. The community and the church have mostly *indirect* roles to play in child-rearing, supporting parents and providing for the administration of sacraments. This high level of parental responsibility comes partly from Thomas's medieval understanding of children as parents' property. But Thomas also believes parents are the persons best ordained for child-rearing by nature. Like Aristotle, Thomas views parents as having the greatest amount of their own well-being invested in the future well-being of their children. According to natural law, this unique interest confers upon parents not only a special affection but also a special *obligation* toward children. In his famous discussion of "the order of charity," Thomas argues that parents should love their children more than anyone else, including their own parents, because children are naturally a greater "part of themselves."<sup>24</sup> Next to God, parents in turn are the child's primary "principle" and means of "support."<sup>25</sup> Parents' love for children is in fact the original natural bond upon which all other social bonds are formed.<sup>26</sup> Here we can see Thomas's theology of natural law at play in the most intimate of human relations.

Thomas is especially concerned about the father's role in child-rearing, partly because fathers of his time enjoyed greater power than mothers, not

<sup>20</sup>Cristina L. Traina, "A Person in the Making: Thomas Aquinas on Children and Childhood," in Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought*, 103-33.

<sup>21</sup>Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, III, Q. 68, a. 9.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.* For Thomas's general concept of "habit," see *Ibid.*, I-II, Q. 49, a. 4; Q. 51.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, II-II, Q. 26, a. 9.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, II-II, Q. 101, a. 2.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, II-II, Q. 26, a. 8.

only outside but also within the home. Thomas also saw what evolutionary biologists today have just discovered: Because of the way human procreation works (with gestation occurring in the mother's body, not the father's), men generally have less certainty than women do about their natural relatedness to their children and so need greater persuasion to take up their parental responsibilities. It is for these naturalistic reasons that Thomas views child-rearing as inextricably bound up with marriage. Following Augustine, Thomas views children—*proles* (offspring, descendants, posterity)—as one of the three fundamental "goods" of marriage, one of the three basic reasons for which marriage exists (the other two being sacrament and fidelity).<sup>27</sup> Human beings marry in part because two parents are better able to fulfill the long, complex task of developing a child's use of reason.<sup>28</sup> If children were naturally ordained to remain irrational animals, marriage would not be necessary; but in fact children need at least fourteen years of devoted, loving nurturance and care in order to gain full human rationality, and marriage is the most natural and effective way to make sure fathers play their part in this task. Interestingly, "fornication," or sex outside of marriage, is a sin not just because it breaks fidelity between partners, but just as importantly because it jeopardizes a proper upbringing for any potential offspring; it violates what Thomas calls the "love of neighbor" owed to one's future possible child.<sup>29</sup>

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***"The disciplining of sin really means that children's unruly human nature should be educated for participation in the life of God's social covenant."***

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Unlike later theologians, Thomas has remarkably little to say about the rest of society's role in child-rearing. This omission could be due in part to this role simply being assumed, given the close associations in his time among extended family, church, and the agrarian feudal community. It could also be because Thomas's theology as a whole posits a grand unity given by God to all human ends, and so does not see child-rearing and social ends as necessarily coming into conflict. But it is also because, in Thomas's view, the child is not entirely part of the human community until its use of reason is fully developed. Parents play something of a mediating role between the child's animal state at birth and its rational participation in social affairs in youth and adulthood. Human nature has to be ordered

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., III, Supplement, QQ.44, 49.

<sup>28</sup>Thomas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1956), III, ch.122, paras.6–8.

<sup>29</sup>Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q.154, a.2.

and realized in actual human virtues before the child truly enters the social world.

Likewise, Thomas is less anxious than later thinkers about the need for society to intervene in child-rearing. He places a great deal of faith in the natural potentialities of children and the natural affections and powers of parents. Again, this emphasis reflects something of his teleological theology of grace. It also makes Thomas a precursor of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Catholic "principle of subsidiarity," as applied to families—the notion that smaller elements in society like families should be supported by the rest of society, but not interfered with as they perform their special functions.<sup>30</sup> He is much more likely to speak of the "common good" to which child-rearing contributes than of the need for the community to contribute to the rearing of children.

### CALVIN AND THE DISCIPLINING OF SIN

A quite distinct, although not unrelated, view of child-rearing can be found in John Calvin. In his extensive discussions of child-rearing in both the *Institutes* and *Commentaries*, Calvin rejects Thomas's naturalistic developmentalism, creating instead a kind of amalgamation of Augustine and Martin Luther. His view of child-rearing can be summarized as *the disciplining of sin*. While this phrase can be and has been distorted to mean that children should be treated harshly and punitively, in fact in Calvin it requires that children be treated with special warmth and respect. The disciplining of sin really means that children's unruly human nature should be educated for participation in the life of God's social covenant.

Whereas Thomas saw children as born like animals and only gradually acquiring the elements of human reason, Calvin saw children as born fully human. For Calvin, this means that children are born with the "seeds of sin," which children's natural development only gives increasing capacities for turning into actual "fruits" of sin.<sup>31</sup> These greater capacities for sin come first around the age of seven, with the development of reason, and second at puberty, with the development of sexuality (an interesting transfiguration of Thomas's seven-year stages). But in the end, as Calvin puts it, echoing Augustine's *Confessions*, "even infants bear their condemnation with them from their mother's womb"; "their whole nature is a seed of sin."<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup>The principle of subsidiarity was first applied in official Catholic doctrine to working life by Pope Pius XI in *Quadragesimo Anno* (*Forty Years After* [*Rerum novarum*] (1931), based on Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (*On the Condition of Workers*) (1891). See also National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (Washington, DC: U.S. Catholic Conference, 1986).

<sup>31</sup>Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.15.10–11 (references here and subsequently in *Institutes* are to book, chapter, and section). See also Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, 46 volumes (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843–55), reprinted in 22 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), Commentary on Gen 8:21.

<sup>32</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.10.

Child-rearing is chiefly concerned, for Calvin, with the disciplining of children away from this naturally sinful state. Discipline is intended to help children learn to prevent sin from "dominating," "ruling," or "overwhelming" them.<sup>33</sup> It includes being obedient to elders, table manners, participating in regular work, attending church, and so on. But discipline also has the positive connotation of teaching children to live according to the "promise of God," the promised covenant.<sup>34</sup> Being disciplined is a sign of grace and election. It is also the means by which the common social order is secured for God.

Calvin's reasons for infant baptism stand in telling contrast to Thomas's. For Calvin, infants do not need baptism in order to be saved from limbo. Infants are born sinful, but they are also born either a member of the elect or not, and baptism does not change this fact.<sup>35</sup> Infant baptism instead functions in various ways to support the education of children into God's social covenant in this world. For one thing, baptism is an "assurance" or "sign" for the child herself as she grows older that she is a recipient of God's mercy.<sup>36</sup> Having been baptized as infants will make older children "fired with greater zeal for renewal."<sup>37</sup> For another, infant baptism helps all of us see that, "since we are born sinners, we need forgiveness and pardon even from the time in our mother's womb."<sup>38</sup> It further functions as a symbol of God's promise that, even if it does not erase sin, it at least helps prevent sin from "dominating" and "overcoming" us as we grow up and move through the world.<sup>39</sup> In addition, infant baptism introduces into the child a "tiny spark" of "that grace which they will enjoy in full."<sup>40</sup> In this sense, it serves as an alternative "seed . . . of repentance and faith" that will assist the growing child in resisting the flowering seeds of iniquity.<sup>41</sup> Finally, infant baptism keeps parents and other adults from negligence in instructing their children as full "members of the church."<sup>42</sup>

Because the function of discipline is to help children embrace their proper role and function within the social covenant, Calvin places significantly less emphasis than does Thomas on the role of parents and a correspondingly greater emphasis on the roles of church and society. Indeed, for Calvin, parents' love toward their children is, like everything human, deeply "corrupted" by original sin.<sup>43</sup> The command for children to "honor your mother and father" is interpreted by Calvin less as the

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 4.15.11.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 4.6.18; 4.15.20.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 4.16.9; 4.16.21; 4.16.32.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 4.16.20.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 4.16.22.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 4.15.11.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., 4.16.19.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 4.16.20.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 4.16.32.

<sup>43</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Commentary on Gen 8:21.

recognition of a natural bond of affection and more as a training or discipline in the child's reduction of pride and "submission" to God.<sup>44</sup>

Parenting has the limited role of what Calvin calls "holy discipline."<sup>45</sup> Holy discipline, including such things as prayer, work, and obedience, "transmits" to children in the home "their rightful inheritance" as members of the church.<sup>46</sup> The chief duty of parenting is the "preaching of grace, which so subdues men to the fear of God, that they, being afflicted and famishing, may hasten unto Christ."<sup>47</sup> As Barbara Pitkin has pointed out, this parental duty is related to the reformer's high concern for promoting and maintaining social order.<sup>48</sup> Calvin urged parents to discipline their children to value individual wants less than the common good.

The true center of child-rearing, however, is less the parents than the church and society. Since children are regenerated even before birth, it is really the church and society, as guided by the church, that rightfully lead the way in their education. The church may first get involved at infant baptism, but the church should also diligently direct children's public education, impart social mores, consult on child-related laws and lawsuits, and provide spiritual and moral guidance for parenting.<sup>49</sup> Indeed, Calvin calls the church the true "mother" by which we "enter into life."<sup>50</sup> Much of the job of Calvin's Geneva Consistory was to handle children's education and health, run orphanages, arrange apprenticeships for boys and dowries for girls, and mediate domestic disputes. Child-rearing is chiefly guided by Calvin's larger theological ethics of forming a covenantal society amidst the sinfulness of the world.

Calvin's distinctness from Thomas also can be seen in his contrasting view of marriage, a hallmark of Reformation ethics if ever there was one. While Calvin does not abandon the classic idea of children as one of marriage's goods, he views marriage not as a couple's personal sacrament under God and commitment to their children, but as a very *public* enactment of God's covenant in society. As John Witte has pointed out, marriage under Calvin became not just a vertical relation of the couple to God but also a horizontal covenant between the couple and various of God's "chosen agents" on earth, including the state, the church, the couple's extended families, and witnesses from the community.<sup>51</sup> Marriage so understood promotes the good of child-rearing, not just in the interests of parents and children, nor just as a personal relation to God, but also for the sake of the entire social and moral order. Because of Calvin's

<sup>44</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.8.35.

<sup>45</sup>Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries*, Commentary on Ps 127.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., Commentary on Ps 78:6.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid., Commentary on Gen 18:19.

<sup>48</sup>Pitkin, "The Heritage of the Lord": Children in the Theology of John Calvin," in

Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought*, 167.

<sup>49</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.15.20.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid., 4.1.4.

<sup>51</sup>John Witte Jr., *From Sacrament to Contract: Marriage, Religion, and Law in the Western Tradition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 95.

relative distrust in the teleology of natural law, he could not relegate the crucial task of child-rearing to imperfect parents alone, but instead placed it within a thick web of social and ecclesiastical interests and commitments.

#### SCHLEIERMACHER AND THE CULTIVATION OF INNOCENCE

A third and again quite different theological perspective on the meaning and purpose of child-rearing can be found in the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher. Schleiermacher probably spilled more ink on this subject than any other Christian theologian to date, but I focus here on his two main works on children, his early novella *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation* and his mature series of sermons collected under the title *The Christian Household*. If Thomas's model of child-rearing enjoins the realization of human nature and Calvin's the disciplining of sin, Schleiermacher's demands what could be called *the cultivation of innocence*. Of the three, Schleiermacher's arguably has the greatest currency in Western culture today, but for this reason it also plays into some of the reasons Christian ethics today has trouble, when it comes to child-rearing, finding its public voice.

Schleiermacher emphasizes the idea that children are innocent gifts from God. The real problem of child-rearing is not that irrational nature can fail to be rationalized or that natural sin will take over without discipline. It is that a child's natural goodness and innocence can be corrupted by society. Schleiermacher's is not a thoroughly developmental model of child-rearing as is Thomas's, because if anything it is adults who ought to try to become more like children, not the other way around. Nor does it assume that human nature is thoroughly corrupt, as in Calvin. There is something precious and holy in children that parents, the church, and society ought to cultivate and nurture so that it may shine through ever more surely and securely as the child matures and enters into the world.

This view is beautifully expressed in Schleiermacher's *Christmas Eve: Dialogue on the Incarnation*, a novella relating the conversations that take place during a fictional Christmas Eve party. The ten- or eleven-year-old girl who is the center and focus of the story, Sophie, is compared by the adults gathered to the infant Jesus, whose birth is about to be celebrated. Sophie's mother likens herself to Mary and describes her daughter as, like Jesus, "the pure revelation of the divine."<sup>52</sup> The other adults marvel at Sophie as a living embodiment of the incarnation of Christ in her "perfectly natural" and "inner" capacity for joy and goodwill.<sup>53</sup> Overall, Sophie turns out to be the true "gift" of Christmas, the gift of sheer "joy" in life that "reflects" God's "greater gift" to humanity.<sup>54</sup> The novella concludes when an adult friend of the party-goers bursts in and declares:

<sup>52</sup>Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve: Dialogues on the Incarnation* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1990), 36.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 45.

"I cannot but laugh and exult like a child. Today all [people] are children to me, and all are dearer on that account. . . . To my good fortune, I too have become like a child again. . . . I feel at home, as if born anew in a better world."<sup>55</sup> This religious feeling that children embody is likened to the musical "harmony" of "the great chords of our inner nature."<sup>56</sup> It makes Christmas a kind of "baptism" for adults into the divine life of the child, into children's "immediate union" with the divine.<sup>57</sup>

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#### *"Children understand the feeling of absolute dependence on God intuitively and immediately . . ."*

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This theme of childhood innocence and spirituality is further developed in Schleiermacher's later sermons on the Christian household, but with a certain increased realism about the child-rearing task, probably due to his having in the meantime begun his own family of six children. Here, the greater closeness of children to God and innocence is explained as the fact that children understand better than adults "the feeling of absolute dependence," a feeling that is the hallmark of Schleiermacher's larger theology.<sup>58</sup> Children feel implicitly that their existence is dependent upon higher powers than themselves, a feeling that naturally meshes with their dependence on parents and other adults. As a result, children are able to exhibit a "pure reverence" for the divine at which adults can only marvel and wonder.<sup>59</sup> Children understand the feeling of absolute dependence on God intuitively and immediately, and so are closer than adults to what Schleiermacher calls the "sacred sphere of nature."<sup>60</sup> This Romantic association of nature with purity stands in stark contrast to both Thomistic animal irrationality and Calvinistic original sin.

The inevitable corruption of children as they enter the world is in fact due less to their nature than to their parents and society. What is "natural" in child-rearing is for parents to give children their love and for children to respond with "reverential trust" in their parents.<sup>61</sup> However, parents inevitably fall short of providing children a full and pure "example" of natural love.<sup>62</sup> The central reading Schleiermacher chooses for his sermons on child-rearing is Paul's admonition: "Fathers, do not provoke your

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 55, 62.

<sup>58</sup>Schleiermacher, *The Christian Household: A Sermonic Treatise* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 69, 82.

<sup>59</sup>*Ibid.*, 39, 46-8, 81-2.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 40-1.

children, lest they become discouraged."<sup>63</sup> For Schleiermacher this means that child-rearing is a process of *not* corrupting children's innocence, a process of maintaining natural love instead of giving in to frustration, impatience, anger, and the use of "authority" and "force."<sup>64</sup> Children are still further corrupted when the outside world is allowed to intrude on the household's inner sanctum.<sup>65</sup> "May it be our sole, earnest desire," Schleiermacher intones, "to remove anything whereby love can be disturbed and open simplicity may be wounded."<sup>66</sup> The conclusion to Schleiermacher's sermons on child-rearing contains the following warning: "Let us be sober and watchful that no provocation may disturb natural love."<sup>67</sup>

The primary responsibility for child-rearing therefore falls upon parents, because parents are at least less corrupt than the outside world. In fact, true to Schleiermacher's early nineteenth-century era of industrialization and rising separate spheres for women and men, the primary responsibility for child-rearing falls squarely upon mothers, who are viewed as the guardians of the private moral realm of the home. In contrast to Calvin's thought, Schleiermacher claims that parents and especially mothers must be trusted deeply and that the structures of society must be kept at bay or must play at most only a secondary role in child-rearing. In contrast to Thomas's thought, for Schleiermacher parents are primary not because they have greater biological investments in their children, but because they are closer to the private world of the children they are charged to protect. And the mother is given centrality instead of the father, as in Thomas, because she is thought to be the closest of all.

What, then, is child-rearing's goal? While Schleiermacher does speak, like Calvin, of parental "discipline," what he means is the cultivation of natural love in the child so that she or he learns to "stand on [their] own" as they enter further into the social arena.<sup>68</sup> Discipline develops in children a "wholesome self-knowledge" that allows them to follow their natural "inclinations and talents" as God created them.<sup>69</sup> In one telling metaphor, Schleiermacher describes children as born with a "kernel of truth" that must slowly shed its protective "childish husk" in order for children to emerge with a strong, mature feeling of their own for what is good and right.<sup>70</sup> Schleiermacher advises the "discipline" of not only "instruction and exercise" but also "companionship and play."<sup>71</sup> And the true purpose

<sup>63</sup>Col 3:21. Discussed by Schleiermacher in *The Christian Household*, 38-53.

<sup>64</sup>Schleiermacher, *The Christian Household*, 45.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>66</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, 60-1, 63.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*, 62.

of discipline is not to learn the ways of the world so much as to "manifest [in the world] the workings of the divine Spirit."<sup>72</sup>

Like Thomas and Calvin, Schleiermacher believes that child-rearing is best undertaken within the context of marriage, but for different reasons. While Thomas views marriage as a way to bond the resources of the father to the child and Calvin as a way to consolidate the resources of the community, Schleiermacher views marriage as providing the child with the sharpest possible "example" of mature natural love. Marital love is both the foundation of child-rearing and the ultimate earthly goal one hopes the child will reach. Marriage is "the foundation for all other human relationships, whether more simple or more complicated."<sup>73</sup> It is therefore of the utmost importance that a child be raised by parents who model "the innermost depths of love," "the sacred relationship between Christ and the community," "the power of the Spirit," and the truly natural and spontaneous expression found in marriage of "genuine life in common."<sup>74</sup>

Although the roles of church and society in child-rearing are secondary to the roles of parents, if the ultimate goal of child-rearing is for children to leave the home and contribute their gifts to the larger world, then church and society do have a legitimate interest and stake in the raising of children. While Schleiermacher supports infant baptism, he views the child's *true* entry into the church as the gradual cultivation over time of a mature "longing for communion with God."<sup>75</sup> The church supports and extends the parental function of strengthening the child's inner spirituality. Just as parents nurture the child's capacity for love within the home, the church subsequently nurtures the child into loving "fellowship."<sup>76</sup> As for the larger society outside the church, Schleiermacher hardly mentions its role at all, instead emphasizing the need for children to become "responsible for their own actions" so that they are not swept up in the social tide of greed and ambition.<sup>77</sup>

### A CRITICAL COVENANT OF CHILD-REARING FOR TODAY

No one of these models alone can provide a sufficient child-rearing ethics for us today. Each has a certain internal coherency in its own right, as is shown in the following table. But each model also has problems we simply cannot avoid addressing from our contemporary point of view. This does not mean, however, that we must construct an entirely new moral theology before we can begin to speak about child-rearing. Each of the thinkers discussed, especially Calvin and Schleiermacher, developed their larger systematic theologies in part *in response to* working out their thought about children. As shown by Christian thinkers like Paul Ricoeur,

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 54, 64.

<sup>73</sup>*Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 3, 6, 7.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>76</sup>Schleiermacher, *Christmas Eve*, 83.

<sup>77</sup>Schleiermacher, *The Christian Household*, 86-7.

A TYPOLOGY OF THREE CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES  
ON THE MEANING AND PURPOSE OF CHILD-REARING

	Children's Starting Point	Child-Rearing's Purpose or End	Means toward This End	Primary Agents of Child-Rearing
<i>Thomas:</i> Realization of Nature	raw natural potential	human, common, and divine good	development of virtues	parents (and society)
<i>Calvin:</i> Disciplining of Sin	sinful nature	participation in social covenant	social and spiritual discipline	church (and society)
<i>Schleiermacher:</i> Cultivation of Innocence	natural goodness and innocence	mature goodness within fallen society	nurturance of gift and protection from society	parents (and church)

David Tracy, and Don Browning, Christian ethics involves not only applying a system of general or traditional beliefs to the present moral situation, but also allowing the specific problems of our own situations to shape and animate our more general beliefs. Doing so is particularly important for thinking about child-rearing today because contemporary Christian ethical theory generally has not succeeded in placing children at the center of its moral concern. Perhaps by focusing again on children we may, as Schleiermacher suggests, learn something about Christian life as such (although this latter task remains beyond the limits of this essay).

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***“However much children participate in original sin, they are also still more, like all of humanity, originally created good.”***

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The notion of a *critical covenant* of society with children can take us part of the way toward developing a more rich and cogent public theological ethics of child-rearing for today. In a sense, the term “covenant” places one closer to the Reformed theology of Calvin than to either contemporary Thomism or the liberal theologies that came out of Schleiermacher, simply by virtue of being a term more fully developed in that tradition. But the term “critical” adds two fundamental elements. First, the covenant we have with children should go beyond Calvin to address also what Thomas views as parents’ and society’s *natural ties* to children, as well as the sense from Schleiermacher that children are innocent *gifts from God* to the larger community. Second, this covenant should accommodate contemporary liberationist and feminist perspectives concerning children’s social and political marginalization. A critical covenant involves an obligation on the part of adults both to empower children in the face of their own special vulnerability and to restructure the social order itself so as to

liberate children from the systematic oppressions to which they are currently subject.

In order to develop a new perspective on child-rearing along these demanding lines, let us take up three of the four fundamental questions we carried through our analyses of the thinkers above: how children start out in the world, child-rearing’s purpose or end, and who should be responsible for these purposes or ends. I will skip a detailed discussion of the *means* by which child-rearing ends may be accomplished, in part because these means are to some extent implied in what I will say about who is responsible for them, and in part because they have to do with more practical questions than this broad sketch can address.

### HOW CHILDREN COME INTO THE WORLD

All three of the above perspectives have rich views of how children come into this world, that is, of the starting point from which child-rearing should first take its bearings. It is possible that not all views of child-rearing begin with such a beginning (for example, deterministic sociobiologists might look to larger genetic evolution), but Christianity generally stands on the view that children appear in the world needing care and concern in their own right as children. Here, however, the agreement often ends. As we have seen, a Calvinist view greatly emphasizes children’s original sinfulness; in sharp contrast, Schleiermacher insists on children’s first innocence and holiness, their being pure gifts from God; and in a somewhat more neutral vein, Thomas sees children as being born with certain God-given, but not yet realized, natural potentialities.

One of the few books on the theology of child-rearing in recent years is Herbert Anderson and Susan Johnson’s *Regarding Children*, an excellent analysis of the difficulties children face today and how churches should respond. This book is representative of the strong influence Schleiermacher exerts over how we think about child-rearing in the United States today, a view in which “each new life becomes a miracle, a unique gift to be protected and nourished.”<sup>78</sup> The great virtue of this view and of Schleiermacher’s view, it seems to me, is that they respect children as unique gifts of God despite—indeed because of—their innocent vulnerability. Neither Thomas nor Calvin captures so well children’s singular worth as human beings both in themselves and as fresh infusions of grace into society. As Anderson and Johnson argue, we may have lost touch with the deep regard children so understood should receive from all of us. Indeed, I would add, it may be more theologically apt to say that, however much children participate in original sin, they are also *still more*, like all of humanity, originally created good.<sup>79</sup> This is suggested in Genesis

<sup>78</sup>Anderson and Johnson, *Regarding Children: A New Respect for Childhood and Families* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 9.

<sup>79</sup>Such a theology of humanity’s original sinfulness but even more original goodness can be found, for example, in the French Protestant thinker Paul Ricoeur in “The Problem of the Foundation of Moral Philosophy,” *Philosophy Today* 22 (1978): 175–92.



1:26-31, which, read in the context of Genesis 3, affirms that *before* the fall, humanity was first created in God's image and seen by God as "very good." In the case of children, we are invited by Schleiermacher to recognize the innocent gift of grace, the spiritual message from God, at work in each child's energy, intensity, and sheer joy at living.

Nevertheless, it is also important to understand children's participation in and struggles with sin. Modern westerners are on the whole perhaps too comfortable with viewing children as innocent and pure. We are prone to put children on a pedestal, much as society did to women in the nineteenth century. Among other things, this approach allows us, as in Schleiermacher's thought, to confine the child-rearing task almost exclusively to the privacy of the home, where the impurities of the world can most easily be kept at bay. As Dawn Devries has pointed out, Schleiermacher's highly romanticized view of children is what one might expect a bourgeois provider father like himself to come up with.<sup>80</sup> Going beyond Schleiermacher, we need to be able to think of children as also part of the social arena and of humanity's common struggle against sin. Every child has to contend with both personal sin (selfishness, pride, anxiety, unruly passions, and so on) and sin absorbed from its surroundings (racism, sexism, bigotry, and the like). Indeed, children have to struggle with sin without yet having the advantage of either adult intellectual capacities to reflect on it or adult emotional capacities to aid in resisting it. An honest understanding of children as both innocent *and* sinful leads to a more balanced view of children as more fully *human*.

How, though, do we develop a notion of childhood sin without reverting to the strong Calvinistic thesis (not necessarily embraced by Calvin himself, but evident in some of his Puritan and Victorian successors) that children are inherently evil and uncivilized? A closer look at Calvin suggests that children come into this world with the same kind of "seeds of sin" that lie in all of us. The difference is that children have to deal with sin from an immature and inexperienced point of view. For Calvin, the onset of puberty, for example, is not a time to assume that children have an inborn capacity for the good, but rather a period of special vulnerability in which adult guidance or discipline becomes all the more important. Although Calvin surely did not grasp as well as Schleiermacher the sense in which children and adolescents are also instruments of grace for society, he does show that children struggle with sin as much if not more than the rest of us. The tantrums of a two-year-old should be viewed as not just a childish phase but also, theologically, part of the universal human battle with our unruly, selfish, and oppressive natures.

It is important also to add into this mixture of innocence and sinfulness Thomas's naturalistic perspective, in which children come into this world with potentialities not yet imbued with mature reason. In a certain sense,

Thomas is a precursor of the twentieth-century developmental views of children found in Jean Piaget, Lawrence Kohlberg, Eric Erikson, and others. These views share the idea that children's capacities develop along some kind of teleological cycle with their gradual growth into adulthood. One drawback to Thomas's developmentalism—and possibly also to its modern psychological equivalents—is that a developmental view of human nature may not provide sufficient grounds for recognizing children as *fully human* from birth. "Humanity" may be overridden with mature adult capacities. Both Schleiermacher and Calvin (albeit in different ways) suggest that we should view children as just as fully human as adults (in Schleiermacher's case, perhaps even *more* fully human).

But an insight that Thomas's developmentalism offers is that children enter the world with already inherent biological possibilities. Human "nature" is not just a pure realm of the divine (Schleiermacher) or a world of sinful passions (Calvin). Rather, it points to natural developmental teleologies in children's lives that child-rearing should take into account. For example, as Thomas argues, unlike the children of other mammals, human children have a long period of dependency on adults. As a result, they require large amounts of parental and social support just to survive their first few years. This naturalistic angle is not necessarily inconsistent with viewing children as innocent gifts, for, as Thomas argues, natural law too is given by God. And a developmental view also can include a sense of childhood sin, since childhood potentials can be turned against the natural ends for which they were made. However, it may also be fair to say that a developmental view alone does not adequately capture either the heights of the childhood gift of innocence or the depths of the childhood struggle with sin.

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***"Children must face the universal human dilemma of the effort to be good amidst sin in an especially sharp and exaggerated fashion because of their limited intellectual, physical, and emotional resources."***

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A more balanced Christian perspective on how children enter this world, therefore, turns out to suggest a great deal of complexity that is often lost in discussions of children today. It may be paradoxical, yet true, that children both bring new infusions of grace to our world and also must struggle with the reality of sin in realizing their greater human potential. In this regard, Christian ethics contributes the view that children must face the universal *human* dilemma of the effort to be good amidst sin in an especially sharp and exaggerated fashion because of their limited intellectual, physical, and emotional resources. While exhibiting some of the greatest heights of human joy, innocence, and wonder, children are also

<sup>80</sup>Devries, "Be Converted and Become as Little Children": Friedrich Schleiermacher on the Religious Significance of Childhood," in Bunge, ed., *The Child in Christian Thought*, 339.

especially vulnerable to their own and others' capacities for selfishness, pride, and oppression. The starting point for a truly Christian ethics of child-rearing is to recognize the great seriousness of the task it sets before us.

#### WHAT CHILD-REARING SHOULD HOPE TO ACCOMPLISH

What, then, given the foregoing starting point, can Christian ethics contribute to understanding what should be the *end* or *purpose* toward which child-rearing is directed? Debate on this question in the United States today is shot through with deeply utilitarian premises. Public debate among policymakers, educators, and even parents is often limited to the language of training children for maximum social productivity. As Jürgen Habermas has put it, the human lifeworld—within which one can include child-rearing—is increasingly “colonized” by the values of the marketplace.<sup>81</sup> Along with this economically based utilitarian ethic is another ethic, especially powerful in the United States, of politically based libertarian individualism: Children will be useful members of society the more they perfect and hone their individual capacities for personal gain. The clarification call for “excellence” in schools, for example, famously championed as a broad social policy by Ronald Reagan, is often assumed to mean maximum individual achievement—an individualistic meritocracy that is a far cry from the original meaning of excellence as a translation of Aristotelian *aretē*, or excelling in one's contribution to the *common* good. Does Christian ethics have anything meaningful to say in this era of market-oriented, individualistic child-rearing aims?

One could do worse than begin with Calvin. The purpose of child-rearing for Calvin is basically to form children into contributing participants in God's social covenant. Child-rearing directs children's naturally unruly natures toward a divinely based concern for the larger common good. Because, unlike Calvin, we are aware of the dangers of not separating church and state, and because of the real religious pluralism in America, we can no longer identify this capacity for participating in the common good simply with the realization of the Christian church. Nevertheless, a broader sense of the covenant being aimed at can be developed along less exclusionary lines. Just as the term “covenant” is now applied sometimes in public discourse to marriage, it also could be applied to the goal of child-rearing to mean developing in children a sense of commitment and responsibility toward larger social ends.

Such a view receives some support from Thomas, who similarly insists that the potentialities of children are to be realized not just in personal gain for the individual child, but also in the deeper sense of becoming a participant in the larger social good. Like Aristotle, Thomas recognizes that because we are social animals, the individual and the common good

are part and parcel of one another. We desire not just *individual* happiness, but happiness within friendships, marriages, communities, professions, and the like. Although Calvin would put the end of child-rearing less naturalistically than Thomas, they share the broad view that raising children is an education into meaningful participation in the goods of society. The larger social goal of child-rearing receives support from Lisa Sowle Cahill's recent book, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective*, which argues for a view in which child-rearing is directed to include ends beyond those of the family alone, such as caring for the poor.<sup>82</sup>

Even Schleiermacher, despite his great distrust for society, views the cultivation of innocence in children as having its end in making society as such a better place. Child-rearing is intended to help children stand firm on their original inner feeling for the good so that they can bring grace to the fallen order of the world. If there is a unique value to Schleiermacher's perspective on this question, it is its insistence that children can bring sacred gifts to the community that the community itself does not already possess. An extra openness to each new child helps in the sacred task of cleansing away the impurities that build up in the course of adult public life. More than Calvin and Thomas, Schleiermacher would deplore today's market-oriented ethos that views child-rearing as grist for the mill of adult economic production. The *true* common good—the common good promised in our covenant with God—means each person being treated with a superabundance of fellowship and love. Schleiermacher adds the important idea that the common good toward which child-rearing is directed should *itself* be open to redefinition and reshaping by the divine gifts and talents brought into the world by children themselves.

Thus, although they approach the goal of child-rearing from different angles, all three Christian perspectives discussed support the idea that child-rearing should aim to develop not just individual expertise and competitiveness but, more importantly, children's capacities to shape and contribute to the common good. For all three, albeit in different ways, this aim includes spiritual formation toward moral ends. In terms of the broader social ethics of child-rearing with which we are primarily concerned here, a mature faith must include a sense of social responsibility. Whether one puts this in terms of realizing natural and theological virtues (Thomas), participating in God's redeeming covenant (Calvin), or bringing to the world a fresh sense of grace (Schleiermacher), in each case children are to develop beyond mere concern for personal gain and to find ways to transform society, in the face of sin, toward its ever more loving, communal, and covenanted possibilities.

Contemporary liberationist and feminist perspectives also can embrace this broader social perspective for child-rearing. Liberation theology (not to be confused with libertarianism) is concerned with the transformation of the deepest structures of society so as to bring about a closer temporal

<sup>81</sup>Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2, *Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason* (Boston: Beacon, 1987), 325–7, 355–8, 367–73.

<sup>82</sup>Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

approximation of the just equality of the kingdom of God. A liberationist ethics of child-rearing might be concerned not only with liberating children from oppression, important though this is, but also with educating children to become active contributors themselves to the transformation and liberation of society. Likewise, Christian and other feminists often point beyond the ethics of autonomous individuality to emphasize persons' mutual bonds and responsibilities to one another. A feminist theological ethics of child-rearing might embrace the idea of raising children to value and enhance their bonds of relationship in the community. In each case, Christian ethics demands resistance to the present cultural ethos of raising children to seek just their own personal gain and insists on forming children's capacities to contribute to the common good.

### THE COVENANT OF RESPONSIBILITY

As we have seen, our three perspectives diverge significantly on who should bear primary responsibility for the child-rearing task. Schleiermacher is probably closest to the prevailing view today that child-rearing is predominantly a task for the parents. The implication, at least for Schleiermacher, is that the larger society cannot be trusted to nurture children's inherent goodness. In addition, Schleiermacher unfortunately lends support to the continuing perception in the United States, despite much rhetoric to the contrary, that the primary raisers of children should be their mothers. It is still predominantly women who are expected to make the huge sacrifices of time and labor that child-rearing requires, and mothers are still widely viewed as somehow naturally more in touch with childhood innocence. If anything, the nineteenth century cult of motherhood that Schleiermacher played into is more alive today than ever, as witnessed in the increasing absence of fathers from the home and the shrinking role in child-rearing played by communities, civil society, and the state.

One important question, therefore, is whether Christian ethics has anything to say about fatherhood. Even Schleiermacher envisioned fathers as intimately involved in the lives of their children, on the grounds that children grow best spiritually and morally when they see a good "example" of love between their mother and father and that fathers can find few better avenues than child-rearing for bringing grace into the world. But we can find more robust images of the roles of fathers in Thomas and Calvin. For Thomas, as we saw, fathers are required for sharing in the many sacrifices necessary for turning helpless infants into capable members of the community. Thanks in part to feminism, we no longer can accept Thomas' view that fathers have a special role because they alone are the embodiment of mature rationality. But we can perhaps still agree—and much recent social scientific evidence suggests<sup>83</sup>—that children raised by

<sup>83</sup>McLanahan and Sandefur, *Growing Up with a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps*; Judith Wallerstein, Julia Lewis, and Sandra Blakeslee, *The Unexpected Legacy of Divorce*:

both their natural (or adoptive<sup>84</sup>) parents are generally in fact better off. For Calvin, similarly, fathers should be intimately involved alongside mothers with the "holy discipline" of instructing children in their membership in God's social covenant. Although, as Steven Ozment has noted, Calvinist Europe accepted a division between mothering of young children and fathering of older ones,<sup>85</sup> at least both genders were intimately involved in the home. In Calvin's case, the importance of fathers is connected less to their *natural* ties to children than to their *covenanted* ties, shared with the entire community, as priests for the kingdom of God.

What we can take from Thomas and Calvin is a renewed sense of the central importance of fathering for children, a view that rejects both the contemporary dispensable father and the so-called "traditional" nuclear father, who functions chiefly as only a protector and breadwinner. Fathers in both Thomas and Calvin have similar functions to mothers in their responsibility for direct and intimate investment in the maturation of the vulnerable child. While for Thomas this vulnerability is seen as the child's natural *irrationality* and for Calvin as its natural *sinfulness*, in both cases fatherhood becomes crucial because children require a great deal of specialized adult attention in order to attain their God-given ends. Today, fatherhood is all the more important because we cannot assume, as Thomas and Calvin could, a central role in child-rearing for communities, churches, and extended family. Whatever may be the differences between mothers and fathers—and in my view today we follow Schleiermacher in *over-emphasizing* these—a Christian ethics of child-rearing at least can say that fathers bear *equal* responsibility with mothers for child-rearing as a sacred and socially vital task.

In this connection, all three of the Christian traditions we have examined tie parenting into the context of marriage. The reasons differ somewhat, but the overall idea is more or less the same: Children do better when their parents are bonded to each other not just emotionally and romantically but legally and ecclesiastically as well. For Thomas, marriage is a sacrament that is meant in part to ensure that fathers have the same intense commitment to their own children that mothers acquire naturally (in his view) through pregnancy. For Calvin, marriage not only bonds parents to one another in their child-rearing task, but also explicitly and publicly brings to their aid the entire covenanted social order of extended family, church, community, and state. And for Schleiermacher, as we have seen, marriage is the embodiment of the kind of divine natural

A 25-Year Landmark Study (New York: Hyperton, 2000); Linda Waite and Maggie Gallagher, *The Case for Marriage: Why Married People Are Happier, Healthier, and Better Off Financially* (New York: Doubleday, 2000).

<sup>84</sup>For insightful affirmations of adoption from different Christian perspectives, see Stephen G. Post, *More Lasting Unions: Christianity, the Family, and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) and Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Family: A Christian Social Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000).

<sup>85</sup>Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

love that the child should imitate and toward which the child should grow. If Christian ethics is to defend marriage today, it should do so, as Don Browning and others have argued, with a strong commitment to equality between spouses and without stigmatizing single and divorced parents.<sup>86</sup> But if marriage itself erodes as a social institution, the Christian tradition suggests this will have dire consequences for children, for whom in large part western marriage was explicitly designed. Adrian Thatcher has even argued from a liberationist point of view that Christians should support the marriage of gays and lesbians on the grounds that here, too, the sacred and legal bond of marriage is generally going to make better off any involved children.<sup>87</sup> The fact that debates over gay and lesbian marriage focus almost exclusively on adults shows how marginalized children today have become.

But this bond between parents is for Calvin and Thomas, at least, only part of the story, and for Calvin in particular not the most important part. If anything can be learned from the Christian traditions above concerning who should take responsibility for child-rearing, it is that a strong commitment is required from the entire community. Here Calvin's language of "covenant"—now referring not just to the *ends* of child-rearing, as above, but also to its *means*—is particularly useful. Thomas has little to say about child-rearing beyond the role of parents, perhaps because in his feudal-agrarian times he could simply assume an intimate role for the community. In theory, natural law appears to support embedding child-rearing in larger church and community responsibilities. Schieffelmacher may be useful in heightening our sensitivity to children as innocent gifts from God, but surely today we can no longer remain so sanguine about the power of the private realm of the home to shoulder child-rearing alone. To repeat what is now a well-worn phrase, it does in fact take a village to raise a child.

What this means from Calvin's perspective is that social institutions in different ways should take child-rearing as a sacred, covenanted obligation. The extended family, the church, schools, the community, professionals, and the state all have important responsibilities in child-rearing because it is in childhood that crucial moral and social capacities are formed. Today, this suggests that the state, for example, should not just protect the rights of children, important though this activity is, but also actively invest in promoting children's growth and maturation into contributing members of society. Public schools are perhaps the best example of how this is currently being done, but even here, the majority of schools in America are underfunded and increasingly geared toward technical and professional rather than also social and civil capacities. Further privatizing schools through competition and vouchers misses the larger issue, which is the need for a renewed financial and moral commitment by society as a whole, including the state, to its own future common good. Children's

<sup>86</sup>Browning et al., *From Culture Wars to Common Ground*.

<sup>87</sup>Thatcher, *Marriage after Modernity*, 294–302.

health care, similarly, should be wrested from the marketplace and given to children as a sacred obligation. The deep poverty of children should spark a political, cultural, civil, professional, and moral movement similar to the civil rights, feminist, and environmental movements of the last century, with the churches again among its leaders. As Pamela Couture recently argued, overcoming children's poverty should be seen as one of the most profound spiritual challenges facing the church today.<sup>88</sup> Overall, if the social covenant we are called upon to uphold with children is taken seriously, children's wealth, health, education, and well-being should not depend so entirely upon the resources and capacities of their parents alone, but should be taken up (as they were in Calvin's time) as challenges to the very structures of society itself.

The church has a central role in such a social covenant with children in several respects. Most obviously, its mission should involve supporting parents directly through child care, spiritual and social education (of both children and parents), and generally accepting that child-rearing is not just a private task of the home but also a public responsibility in which the church can make a significant difference. A larger role for the church is through the wider community, in such things as providing children's services, contributing support and finances to community projects, developing playgrounds, advocating for adequately funded schools, and so on. In addition, the church should speak out for children's concerns in the public and political arena. No "social justice" ministry could be more important than fighting for universal children's health insurance coverage. And struggles over abortion and homosexuality should not be allowed to sideline the equally profound issues of children's poverty and education. Most of all, the church should once again—as urged by all three theologians examined—take up child-rearing as one of the most sacred obligations placed upon the Christian community as stewards of God's covenant with the world.

The unique problems faced by children in our society today require a profound rethinking in Christian communities of child-rearing's very meaning and purpose. The notion of our critical covenant with children helps to form various dimensions of Christian child-rearing traditions into a cogent critique of ingrained contemporary attitudes and to point a constructive way forward. This covenant reflects adult society's sacred obligation to nurture the inherent goodness and innocence of children so that they can stand up to sin, both in themselves and in society at large. In this way, society can help children realize their God-given capacities for contributing meaningfully to the common good. God's original covenant with God's "children" likewise responded to sin, yet called them to rebuild the sacred bonds of society. So also should we today nurture and cultivate the gift that is each child, so that children may learn what it means to contribute toward and participate in a larger social covenant.

<sup>88</sup>Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God*.

**ABSTRACT**

This article develops a Christian ethics of child-rearing that addresses the plight of children in the United States today. It seeks greater clarity on what Christians should view as child-rearing's larger meaning and purpose, as well as the responsibilities this meaning and purpose impose on parents, communities, churches, and the state. The article first explores three major but quite distinct models of child-rearing ethics in the Christian tradition—those of Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and Friedrich Schleiermacher—and then proposes a new “critical covenant” that appropriates these traditions, in conjunction with feminist and liberationist critiques, into a publicly meaningful Christian ethics of child-rearing for today.