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Christian Theology and Children's Development

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Abstract

The question of human development starts with children who are from time to time left out of the great thought of theological assessment. Many theological writings on anthropology in recent times ignore *païdo*-theology which centres on the concern about children. Scholars of this school of thought prefer to treat anthropological issues of sin, conversion, justification, and sanctification as well as Baptism and the Lord's Supper referring them only to adults. This paper aims at showing that children are God's gifts and they therefore constitute humanity. It also attempts to examine from theological points, how children convey the *imago Dei* otherwise known as image of God and the theological ways to build them up for future human development. It employs the descriptive research method which demands consulting theological materials in the light of Biblical analysis. The work concludes that moral education and other spiritual means of development should not be taken away from children.

Introduction

Christian theology explains the relationship that exists between God and His creation. This means that God is interested in every creature in the universe; the world with everything that is in it is well cared for. The natural universe which involves the created physical order and vegetation, aquatic world, the heavens and earth and invisible spiritual beings as well as the human universe are products of God. For Erickson in *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, "God has left evidence of himself in the world he has created" (35). He cited two Biblical references such as Psalm 19:1 and Rom 1:20 (35) from both Old and New Testaments

to illustrate his point. The first passage shows that the Heavenly bodies give praises to God as their creator and the second proves that the whole humanity cannot be excused from the worship of God. The emphasis in this paper is on human development with special attention to children. It is to show that God is concerned about human beings as part of God's creation. John Calvin illustrates that one of the reasons God created humanity is for worship and Praise: "praise is the best of all sacrifices" (Ps. 50:14, 23) and "the true evidence of godliness" (Ps. 11:468). This is to say that human beings who are God's creatures should express godliness and praise to the Creator by caring for the creation of God. Consequently, since children form part of God's creation, they need the care of adult humans in the light of God.

The paper also illustrates that children form part of humanity and the concept of the image of God is also fulfilled in them. On the issue of human development, this paper shows that children become the starting point. Children development entails involving a child in mental, physical, physiological and educational training with the aim of arriving at a set goal child development. Children development becomes an essential issue in the entire human development. This is due to the fact that children provide the only medium for the continuation and sustenance of human society.

The Focus of Christian Theology

Theology is derived from two Greek words, *Theos* (God) and *logos* (word), *logos* in contemporary sense means more than word. The meaning of *logos* also includes "discussion", "talk", "analysis", "study", "science" and the like. So the word theology may mean the "talk about God", "study of God" or "discussion on God". In elaborate sense, theology means the discourse about God and his relationship with the universe especially humanity. This still puts the subject in a general sense. But to relate the concept to a particular concept like Christianity, Millard Erickson in *Christian Theology* posits that:

Theology in a Christian context is a discipline of study that seeks to understand the God revealed in the Bible and to provide a Christians understanding of reality. It seeks to understand God's creation, particularly human beings and their conclusions and God's redemption works in relation to humankind (17).

This shows that theology has the capacity to influence human development spiritually, morally, and otherwise. In Christian soteriology, a branch of theology that studies salvation, human beings are transformed to a better state simply through what God does and not merely through what the human being does (Berkhof 416). If development strategy is human centered, then children development must be the starting point. The bad state of children will possibly and eventually influence the adult humanity and the entire state of the society if possible ways to exact change are not upheld. In this case, the discussion about human development may not be complete without the fact of raising up children.

Christian theology promotes correct doctrinal beliefs held among Christians in different denominations about one Lord, one Christ, one spirit, one baptism, as well as the basic issues of life such as who we are, what to be done, and what constitutes the ultimate meaning of the universe. Erickson argues that Christian theology is not an abstract study that leads to vain conclusion; rather, "far from being dry or abstract, Christian doctrine deals with the most fundamental issues of life: who am I, what is the ultimate meaning of the universe, where am I going?" (16). The meaning Theology gives to us about life is in the relationship "between the believer and God as well as with the entire universe of God" (Erickson, 16). Here the believer seeks to know and live his or her life to accomplish those things that will help in the development of the universe of God. Based on this, Christian theology promotes a theocentric relationship among believers as well as the relationship between the believer and non-believers. Everybody ought to be treated according to the will of God.

Moreover, the focus of this belief in the light of children's development is mainly to treat children as fellow human beings and mainly as part of God's creation; they must be treated in a way that pleases God.

Christian Anthropology

Etymologically, anthropology is derived from two Greek words namely *anthropos* meaning man as a general gender or humanity and *logos* which means word or study. Anthropology is the study of human beings. Since humanity is central in the world, at least, many disciplines study it, but in the way it is peculiar to them. In theology, anthropology refers to humanity as *imago Dei*, humanity in the likeness of God. Theology refers to it as the image only to human beings not animals. Many passages of the scripture convey the idea about the *imago Dei*; Genesis' account of creation shows that God created humanity in his own image and likeness and in the same image and likeness he created them male and female, children and adult (Gen 1:26).

For Louise Berkohf, humanity means that we are created by God in his image and likeness through a conscious, purposeful act by God not through a chance process of explosive evolution (202-210). He asserts:

The idea expressed by the two words (image and likeness) is that of the very image of God. The doctrine of the image of God in man (humanity) is of the greatest importance in theology, for that image is the expression of that which is most distinctive in man (humanity) and his (or her) relation to God. The fact is that man (humanity) in the image of God distinguishes him (or her) from the animal and from every other creature (Berkhof 206).

It means that since human beings are created by God, in God lies the ultimate reason for their existence, a reason which lies in the intension of the Creator. It means that the image of God is intrinsic in all humans both adult and children. Erickson in *Introducing Christian Doctrine* adds that the image of God is universal in all human beings. The universality of the image of God commands

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human dignity in all ranks and files of humanity. The adult human beings cannot discover their real meaning by regarding themselves and their happiness over the value of children. The same God who created adult and children desires that children should be cared for. The adult should have a development plan in the light of God for children to include mental, physical, moral and spiritual development.

Children's Development from Biblical Perspective

The Bible illustrates that the concept of children development is that of acceptance and dignity and not abuse. It shows that children are God's gift and blessing. Danfulani Kore acknowledges that "children heritage is from the Lord" (Psalms 127:5); he quotes some Biblical passages to illustrate God's method of developing children. He runs a commentary on Deuteronomy, Chapter six Verses four to nine to show that God's commandment for parents is to transmit spiritual truth to their children. He adds that the parents' faith in God and their conviction will lay a strong foundation on which spiritual truth can be built into the lives of children (82). Also, that children must be taught the godly way of life is contained in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20). These commandments relate human beings vertically with God and horizontally with human beings. In the horizontal relationship, no one is to be ignored because he/she is a child.

Discussing further on Biblical method of developing children, Proverbs Chapter Twenty-two, Verse Six states: "Train up a child in the way he (she) should go and when he (she) is old, he (she) will not depart from it" (NKJV). Here, to "train" or "train up" refers to the Hebrew *chanok* which refers to a faithful commitment to the art of child training, to show him/her the right part of life, to tell him/her the expected and the blessing that follow obedience to God. Also, to tell him/her about the dangers of disobedience to God which lead to death. Adam Clarke in *PC Bible* adds that *chanok* also translates initiation and dedication. The two terms are

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used for consecrating something, house or person, in this case, children to the service of God. The *chanok* use of dedication shows that the child should first be consecrated to God, then nursed, taught and disciplined as God's child.

In the New Testament, the gospel of Mark Chapter Ten, Verse Fourteen serves a great deal. In this passage, Jesus blesses children; but when his disciples heard that little children were brought to Jesus for him to touch them and they spoke harshly to them. When Jesus saw these things, he rebuked his disciples and said to them, "for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs" (NRSV). Here, Jesus demonstrates that both children and adult were created in same image and likeness of God; so they do not have to be separated and deprived of God's blessings. Though children have no serving faith, there is a difference between the children whose parents are believers in Christ and the ones whose parents are not. It is possible that children grow up with what is impressed in them. The believing parents who follow the precepts and examples of Jesus Christ can learn same to their children. They should not hesitate to offer them for blessing by God. In the Epistle to Ephesians, Paul draws emphasis on "fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord" (6:4). Father here represents both parents and in Africa, it means those older than the child, all adults in the home, church and the community where the child is found. "All of them are to be tenderhearted in dealing with children rather than exasperating them" (*African Bible Commentary*, 1463). Children need to be loved and trained to grow, by parents, society, and the church.

Impacts of Christian Theology on Children's Development in Nigeria

Theology and its influence on the development of children in Nigeria can best be appreciated through the examination of some theological modes of operation. They are as follows:

Infant Baptism and the Roles of Parents

Infant baptism is one of the major doctrines which impact significantly on the development of children. Baptism is derived from the Greek words, *baptizo* and *bapto* meaning to wash, to bath and “to purify by washing” (Berkhof, 630). It means the outward expression or mark of belonging to the household of God in Christ. Every Christian denomination practises baptism following the Biblical injunction: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Bruce Milne asserts:

Baptism is an experience of communication with Christ (Col 2:12). The candidate is linked by faith with the Lord in whose name he or she is baptized so as to enter in some sense, into the very death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 6:3-5) (286).

From this postulation, it is noted that faith is required for baptism. The baptism of infants or children is known as *paidobaptism*. Παιδία (*Paidia*) is the Greek word which stands for children or infant human beings. But since faith is prerequisite for baptism, there exists the argument whether children and infants should be baptised. Scholars of theology notably, Berkohf and Grudem hold different positions.

Berkohf in the book, *Systematic Theology*, is a strong defender of *paidobaptism*. His view is based on the fact that “baptism is intended only for properly qualified rational beings, namely, for believers and their children” (631). He accepts adult baptism and a profession of faith before such an adult is baptised (631-632). For him, infants of believing parents should not be denied baptism because they “belong and share in the benefits of the new covenant and therefore are receivers of “circumcision” as a sign and seal (633). This is arising from the fact that in Old Testament, God's covenant with Abraham included children; therefore, the new covenant in Christ should not exclude children. Although with slide differences, many church traditions accept this position. Erickson opines that baptism is conceived as a

UNIUYO Journal of Humanities Volume 20, No 2, January - December, 2016, Special Edition means of grace. He adds that, this view is held by traditional Catholics and classical Lutherans who believed that baptism results in the remission of sins. Children or infants of believing parents are baptised for the remission of their original sins (346).

The Reformed/ Presbyterian Tradition in full support to Berkohf's view, conceives baptism as a sign and seal of the covenant which God has established with humanity in Christ. Timothy Palmer, a Reformed theologian, asserts that “a sacrament (of baptism) is a holy ordinance instituted by Christ in which the grace of God is signified (or pictured by a sign) and sealed for believers” (111). As a sign, baptism pictures how the sins of believers are washed away and as a seal, God seals the baptised person in Christ. Since baptism is an initiation rite into the family of God, in the Reformed Tradition, the covenant of baptism fulfils the Old Testament covenant of circumcision just as the Holy Communion replaces the Old Testament Passover celebration. Infants who are baptised within this tradition are initiated into the family of God to enjoy the covenant relationship between God and humanity.

However, Wayne Grudem argues against *paidobaptism* not on the ground that children do not have faith but that they lack saving faith and that those who form church membership should be adult. He goes on to refute the *paidobaptists'* view which is based on covenant and household baptism of the New Testament. He writes thus: With regard to Peter's statement at Pentecost that “the promise is to you and to your children”, we should note that the sentence continues as follows, “for the promise is to you and to your children and to all that are far off, every one whom the Lord our God calls to him” (Acts 2:39). Moreover, the same paragraph specifies not that believers and unbelieving children were baptized (978).

This paper argues in favour of *paido-theology* as a whole and *paidobaptism* in particular. It is necessary to note that children confer true humanity and true image of God; not even in baptism

that their rights as humans should be denied. Also, children form part of the church membership. If it is through church membership, baptism is gained, children should be treated with dignity, and the means of grace in sacrament should not be denied them. It can serve as an index of growth and development.

Parents play vital roles during the baptism of their children. The under-listed roles of parents help in the development of the baptised children. During the baptism of children the parents are asked questions in the church to affirm their doctrinal, spiritual and moral capability in growing the children. With the questions as vows they are expected to pledge or promise before God and his people that they will take strong responsibility for the development of the baptized children. These vows are summarised in the book of services of the churches that affirm this tradition. In the *Book of Services* of the Presbyterian Church of Nigeria such vows are as shown below:

- In bringing forward your child (children) for baptism, do you anew profess your faith in God as your heavenly Father, in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour, and in the Holy Spirit as your Guide and Upholder throughout life?
- Do you promise to behave that your child (children) will have in you a good example of Christian living?
- Do you undertake to bring up your child (children) in the knowledge and love of Jesus Christ as the Lord of Life? (67).

Members of the church in partnership with parents in children development are also asked to show commitment by taking the vow shown below:

Do you the members of this congregation, promise to receive this child (these children) in love as fellow member (s) of the church and to pray for him (her, them), and help him (her, them) by your

example of Christian living? (68)

The conscious parents who take these vows in the affirmation on behalf of the children try as much as possible to keep to the vows. They are ready to put all their time, energy and resources to develop the baptised children.

Christian Home/ Children's Training

For a durable human development in any given society, home/children's training can not be over-emphasised. Today's parents have more to contend with since our world has become more advanced in science and technology, as well as in vices. Some parents make the gross mistake of depending on formal training only for their children. However, the development of a child is a combination of various influences from his/ her immediate environment, that is, the parents, his school, peer groups, religious background and the mass media. The aforementioned make their inputs at various stages consciously or unconsciously. For Wilbur O'Donovan, when a child is born, the child's mind is like a blank state. He/ she depends solely on parents and other care givers for virtually everything (206). In their first two months, children are already aware of the things happening around them, though it may not be obvious to the people around that they notice anything. Hence, the words spoken and the actions of the adults around them register on their blank state (their minds) which at this stage is highly impressionable. To this end, we see that child training for sustainable development must begin from the cradle and must be given by the parents at home. Charity, they say begins at home.

Parental Responsibility in Children's Training

Parents have the responsibility of providing holistic training to their children. The training should be all-encompassing, that which involves body, soul, spirit and mind. To be sure, it is not enough to train a child to be an intellectual while the parents are spiritually bankrupt, morally battered and socially bedridden. Mention must be made however, that nowadays most parents have

abandoned this responsibility. According to A. E. Kolawole, poor parenting is discovered to be a common cause of child trafficking in Africa (268). Many homes have large family sizes, polygamy, and lack of good upbringing of children. Some parents neglect their responsibility to cater for their families leaving the children to fend for themselves or be used as instrument to make money, thus they are being trafficked. In most homes, most men abdicate caring for their families and abandon the task to women. Parents should not abandon the training of their children to school teachers or to youth pastors in the church. They have a greater role to play in the up-bringing of their children. They should know that no teacher could teach children from experience like the biological parents. Parents have natural affinity with and know the temperament of their children better than anyone else.

In children's training therefore, parents must aim at character and spiritual development. In character development, parents should teach the children how to develop good manners, good way to communicate with elders, positive way about their emotions such as pride, guilt and embarrassment and good judgment of others. In the area of spiritual development, Kore opines that, "the scripture holds parents responsible for the spiritual development of their children" (101). It is in this understanding that parents have to be particularly careful not to put too much pressure on the children. They should simply point their children to the Saviour, Jesus Christ as clearly as they can urge them to accept Him for their own benefits and allow them to make decision. They should pray for them ceaselessly. Relationship with God has to be patiently nurtured, not forcefully imposed on children. In fact, some children who feel excessively sermonised and pressurised by their parents may even choose to dare their overbearing parents by doing exactly what will annoy them. It is when the spiritual foundation of the child has been laid that parents should therefore go on to train their children intellectually by sending them to school. It is the responsibility of

parents to provide for the academic training of their children so that they will not turn out to be miscreants in the society. Education is the bedrock for human development. Parents should give their children qualitative education. Ideally, this formal education complements the educational influence on the home and the society, making for the harmonious integration of the Nigerian child's physical, social, intellectual, moral, economic, political and national development (Gamade, 50).

William F. Kumuyi summarises the basic pattern of children development in training to include the lifestyle and habits of parents that get easily transmitted to their children (14). The parents' practice of bad habit will induce waywardness in the child while avoidance of evil deeds and wrong habits will teach the child to live a morally clean life. The roles of parents to children also involve:

(i) Parental Example: Children do not get trained solely by instructions; they learn by observing and imitating what they see adults do. So, parents need to get their acts right, put their relationship in order and impact their children positively. Moreover, the adage, "do as I say, not as I do" does not work with children. Children are not very good at following instructions, but they are very good (i) imitators of what adults do. Parents must exemplify the change they want to see in their children.

(ii) Parental Discipline: Parents must discipline their children when they do bad and wrong things. The roles of the father, mother, and the extended family in the discipline of children are extremely important because discipline is such a key factor in the development of children. Good discipline normally prepares children to become useful citizens (Kore 110). Proverbs 19:18 says, "Discipline your son (daughter); for in that there is hope. Do not be a willing party to his (her) death". Again, Proverbs 29:15 says, "Discipline your son (daughter), and he (she) will give you peace; he (she) will bring delight to your soul".

Also, Proverbs 29:15 says, "The rod and re-proof give wisdom, but a child left to his (her) own way brings shame to his mother (father)"; therefore, by chastisement, a child may be saved from both physical and spiritual death. A disciplined child will be able to discern right and wrong as well as have self control. Parents should avoid what Jay Adams calls "underdiscipline" (107) in child training. Equally, what Kore calls "extreme discipline" (123) where children are cruelly treated as if they are not human beings, denying children food, clothing, school fees and at times exiling them from their homes, should be avoided by parents in children's training.

(iii) **Parent-Child Relationship:** For a child to progress and climb higher in life, as well as achieve his (her) goals and realise all his (her) dreams he/she needs to have a healthy relationship with his (her) parents. A healthy relationship in the home is not only beneficial to those directly or indirectly associated with that family. Also, the right relationship between parents and their children have the possibility of leading those children and others around that family into a lasting relationship with God and humanity.

Certain problems that plague many Christian homes today come as a result of cracks in the relationship between parents and their children. Through these cracks, the enemy comes into the home and begins to wreak havoc. To avoid these cracks, Kore opines:

Interest, intimacy and regular counselling should be the daily routine between a father and his children. By spending time together, the father becomes more aware of what is happening in the life of his children and thus he is best able to discipline and instruct them according to God's design (114).

Though Kore's proposition enjoins only the father to relate well with the children mainly because most mothers maintain

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better relationship than fathers, cordial relationship with children is the priority of both parents.

(iv) **Parental Communication:** Child development cannot thrive where there is poor communication between parents and their children. Communication between parents and children is generally poor because in many cultures children do not sit together with their parents, especially their fathers. So children fear their fathers because of threatening punishments due to the great communication gap. However, parents should have good communication with their children. They should give listening ears to their comments, answer their inquisitive questions, (i) and clarify issues that they need clarification on. All these go a long way to bring up children to be wise, knowledgeable and intelligent in the light of true humanity of God.

(v) **Parental Encouragement:** Children are prone to mistakes because of their limited knowledge. It is the place of parents to give their children encouragement at such times. This will instill courage, commitment and determination in the lives of the children. Therefore, as they grow up, they will be able to face challenges in life, succeed in their endeavours and be accomplished in life. For this Kumuyi posits: If a child lives with encouragement, he learns to be confident.

If a child lives with appreciation, he learns to appreciate things and people. If a child lives with fairness, he learns justice. If a child lives with security, he learns to have faith. If a child lives with acceptance and friendship, he learns to find love everywhere he (she) goes when he (she) becomes older (100-101).

Parents should know that children thrive on positive encouragement; they are not spoiled by it.

Sunday School, Mission School and Church Influence

The Oxford conference of 1937 came up with a detailed outline of the duties of the church to the state to include the following, among others:

(i) That of cooperating with the state in promoting the welfare of the citizens and of lending moral support to the state when it upholds the standard of justice set forth in the word of God.

(ii) That of permeating the public life with the Spirit of Christ and of training up men and women who as Christians can contribute to this end (Olham 101).

From the above expected duties of the church, credit must be given to the churches which have contributed to promoting welfare of citizens, lending moral supports to the state, and training up men and women from their childhood to contribute to the public life with the Spirit of Christ and the standards set forth in the word of God. To such churches, their effort of positive influence on the training of children is highly commendable.

Taylor describes Christian education as an “effort to introduce persons into the life and missions of the community of Christian faith” (12). The purpose of Christian education obtained in Sunday School, mission school and through the church's influence is total development of children and the entire humanity. Particularly to children, it is known to be “child-centred education fulfilling four major educational purposes: physical, moral, spiritual and mental development” (Agha 250). This is holistic training and children who receive this kind of training are prepared to become God's children, good citizens and future leaders in the family, church and the society as a whole. Through Sunday school service and mission school environment whereby children are exposed to the word of God and godly morality early in life, many children have grown up to become good citizens in their different nations. Sunday school is where every Sunday, children in a church are gathered together and taught the word of God through Biblical moral lessons, bible stories, bible quiz, songs and hymns, drama, etc. so as to train them up in the way of the Lord. Some also have children church, children department with children pastors, teachers, counsellors, workers etc. who labour tirelessly to mould

the character and spiritual life of children. Moreover, children who have been introduced early in life to church's programmes such as Sunday worship service, bible study meetings, and others have been influenced to grow to be God-fearing people, respectful to elders and constituted authorities and successful in many facets of life endeavours. From Sunday school, a Christian child will graduate into mission school for basic primary and secondary academic knowledge creamed with godly morality. In the mission school, the children are carefully graded and properly guided according to their moral and religious needs so that their knowledge with God should be deepened. It is in the light of the above, they are taught other disciplines.

Parents and adult, therefore, should know that the things they do have a ripple effect on not just their immediate offspring, but generations to come. For this reason, parents and adult must endeavour to set good examples for children to follow, as well as leave behind good and lasting legacies for them. One such legacy is for an adult to be frontliners in leading their children to church where the word of God is taught and where else the children could be influenced positively. Moreso, churches which are working tirelessly to the good upbringing of children should not relent in their efforts. By these, we will give our children the needed total human development now in our generation and the generations to come.

Conclusion

The paper clearly shows that raising either godly or ungodly children depends on parents, the church, government and other institutions of the society that manage the fragile part of humanity known as children. Hence, good parenting is required to prevent juvenile delinquency. It is instructive to all parents that instead of exposing our children to damaging movies, nolly and hollywood films; television screens with obscene and insane programmes; night clubs and parties; modern dance steps of *Etighi, Awillo, Azonto* etc, our children should be taken to church,

Sunday schools and mission schools and other places where their lives could be influenced morally, spiritually, mentally and spiritually. The church needs to re-examine its mode of operation and be set free from less attention to *paido*-theological composition of human development, namely, the mission schools, Sunday schools and children churches. They should be well equipped. Godly qualified and trained personnel should be employed to train the children. The church should spend her resources to acquire modern teaching aids for children training. It should be deepened in the sensitivity that the feeble ones are properly cared for as unto God.

Other institutions of the society, the state and non-governmental organisations should get involved in developing children today so that our society tomorrow may be a peaceful and habitable one. Government should support mission schools to give our future leaders in various spheres, the required training for proper human development. The command from God: "Train up a child in the way he/ she should go, and when he/ she is old, he/ she shall not depart from it" (Prov. 22:6) should be obeyed by every home. It is easier to build a child than to repair an adult; that is why children development should be given top priority in human development and it should begin quite early. This work has shown that the primary purpose of children development is to provide children with wisdom so that they can see things from good and bad, temporal and eternal perspectives. Children learn how to act in the world by what they see others do. Therefore, let parents, the church, government and indeed all human institutions arise to this responsibility of human development for the wellbeing of our children and society.

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