

CHILD PROTECTION AND CARE

A CRITICAL PATHWAY INTO OUR FUTURE

Bible studies by Siera Bird

UnitingWorld
connecting communities for life



Children in Vanuatu



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INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is a serious and widespread issue, not just in the Pacific but globally. Unacceptably, far too many children worldwide are affected by such violence, yet it typically goes unacknowledged, in part because it is so commonplace.[1] In the Pacific, a rather grim and worrying picture was highlighted by the former President of the Republic of the Fiji Islands, His Excellency Ratu Epeli Nailatikau:

Overall public acceptance of violence against children as a suitable punishment for children remains high in Pacific countries. In countries where baseline data exist, more than 70 percent of adults admit to inflicting violent punishment on children at home… Only 10 percent of children in the Pacific are fully protected by law from corporal punishment. Children in the Pacific also experience high rates of bullying in schools and increasingly, online.[2]

Such a situation should, indeed must, raise serious concern for churches in the Pacific. These studies are meant to help churches begin to engage the issue from a biblical-theological perspective.

One main goal of these five bible studies is to try to improve the world for children so that they too can enjoy the abundant life that God intends for all creation, including humankind – men, women, boys and girls. Just as "equality between men and women begins with the very being and heart of God,"[3] so too is the dignity and equal humanity of all children. God's plan for human relationship is to respect and recognise the values of human dignity for male and female as well as children.

Let me highlight three theological insights:
Firstly, in the Genesis 1 creation story, procreation was part and parcel of the blessing God endowed upon men and women (Gen 1:28). Although it can be argued that childbearing is not the primary basis for entering into a marriage, it is an important function of a marriage union. In several places in the scriptures we read stories that speak of children given to couples as a blessing from God. Some examples include: Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18:1-15 & 21:1-7); Hannah and Elkana (1 Samuel 1 & 2:1-21); Zachariah and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-25 & 57-80) and many more. Nurturing of children is an integral part of a marriage union that produces them. It is worth stating here that children born into single parent families, are no less valued, no less a blessing given by God or bearing the image of God.

It is now understood that a child's brain develops more and faster in their first five years than at any other time in their life. The foundations for learning, health and behaviour throughout life are established at this early stage.[4] This means that one of the primary responsibilities for parents is to raise, nurture and train children to their full potential as intended by God. Needless to say, this is a huge responsibility and must never be taken for granted, or lightly.

Secondly, in the socio-cultural and religious world at the time of Jesus, children were not as equally important as adults. They were far lower down the social ladder, so it was completely unprecedented that children should feature in Jesus' ministry. Jesus' inclusion of children demonstrated that children were, and are, important in the alternative vision of the world that Jesus taught and lived, namely the reign or kingdom of God. Jesus pointed

1 United Nations Children's Fund, 2014, *Hidden in Plain Sight: A Statistical Analysis of Violence against Children*, UNICEF, New York.

2 Quoted in the United Nations Children's Fund, 2016, *Report on the Pacific Conference on Ending Violence Against Children*, UNICEF, Nadi-Fiji.

3 Cliff Bird 2017, *God's Vision for Human Relationships (Bible Study) Vol 2*, UnitingWorld, Sydney.

4 Lesson learned from a 1-month workshop on early-childhood at Pacific Theological College, July 1992. See also: https://raisingchildren.net.au/newborns/development/understanding-development/development-first-five-years

to children as examples, and even as teachers, of the kingdom of God. He defended them from the abuse of his own disciples. He cautioned would-be abusers and warned that anyone who abused little children would be better off thrown into the sea with a large millstone tied around their neck. In the eyes and mission of Jesus, child abuse was a serious offence!

Thirdly, children are equal members and participants in God's kingdom. Many of our cultural and traditional practices in church and wider society continue to see and treat children in very similar ways to the church and society in the time of Jesus. And children being children, they are not usually in a position to counter such views and practices. Their voices are rarely heard amongst those who wield power over them. Jesus, however, elevated the status of children. He used a child as an illustration to answer his disciples' question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Jesus laid his hands on the little children and blessed them, and by doing so challenged the prevailing societal attitudes and treatment of children. Instead of dismissing them he called for the recognition of their human dignity. If God, through Jesus Christ, welcomed and accepted children, then people and communities who claim to follow Jesus must do likewise.

– SIERA BIRD

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Siera is currently working with UCSI to lead the implementation of the Gender Equality Theology project while supporting the ecumenical Solomon Islands Christian Association to open the theology to all churches in the Solomon Islands. Siera is married to Rev Dr Cliff Bird, is mother to five children and comes from Gizo Island in the Solomon Islands while also valuing her Kiribati heritage. She is a valued teacher, preacher, mentor and friend to many of the Pacific women leading similar projects within their churches, as well as the UnitingWorld team.

BIBLE STUDY METHODS

Two methods are used in these bible studies. The first of these is the contextual method – the same one that is used in the Gender Equality Theology bible studies booklets 1 and 2.[5] This method is presented below. The second is what is known as the '5Rs Approach.' This is a contextual pedagogy method which is developed by Boyung Lee in 'When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy.'[6]

1. CONTEXTUAL BIBLE STUDY METHOD

This method follows contextual methods and is adapted from two sources: *Tamar Campaign Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence,*[7] and *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual.*[8] The method involves four steps of engaging the biblical text. These steps are outlined in the following.



STEP 1 **Reading in front of the text**

This step provides the space for participants to share their thoughts freely. Each person is encouraged to share what she/he thinks the text is about. It is an open kind of sharing. The focus is not whether an answer or opinion is right or wrong; rather, it is to enable each person to share their opinion about what the text is saying and telling him/her directly.

STEP 2 **Reading inside the text**

This step provides the space for participants to look more closely into the text and to do some analysis. This closer focus on the text allows it to 'have its own voice' among the voices of the participants.[9] Questions will be provided to guide the group in looking into the text closely and critically. Some explanations may be provided alongside some of the questions.[10]

5 Cliff Bird, 2017 *God's Vision for Human Relationships (Bible Study) Vols 1 and 2*, UnitingWorld, Sydney. See: www.unitingworld.org.au/gendertheology/

6 Boyung Lee, 2007 'When the Text is the Problem: A Postcolonial Approach to Biblical Pedagogy,' *Religious Education.* Vol. 102 No.1 Winter.

7 Fred Nyabera and Taryn Montgomery, (eds), 2007, *Tamar Campaign: Contextual Bible Study Manual on Gender-Based Violence*, The Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and The Horn of Africa, Nairobi.

8 Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre Staff, 2007, *Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual*, Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, Johannesburg.

9 Ibid, 9.

10 Ibid, 9.

STEP 3 Reading behind the text

This step provides the space to identify, highlight and discuss the background and context of the text. This is collated and provided in the study itself by the author of the bible study. It is important that this contextual background is provided because it helps readers understand the situation that the text was originally written in and, therefore, the context in which its meaning must be sought.

STEP 4 Appropriating the text

This step provides the space for participants to seek appropriate interpretation(s) and meaning of the text for today. It is a return to *in front of the text* (step 1) but with a difference: "to examine what the text now projects to us as participants, only to discover that this is deeper, fuller, more meaningful or even quite different to our first reading of the biblical text!"[11] These steps could be illustrated as in Figure 1.

The fourth step is included under the "present" (*in front of the text*), which is adapted in these studies as *appropriating the text* within the present context of the readers.

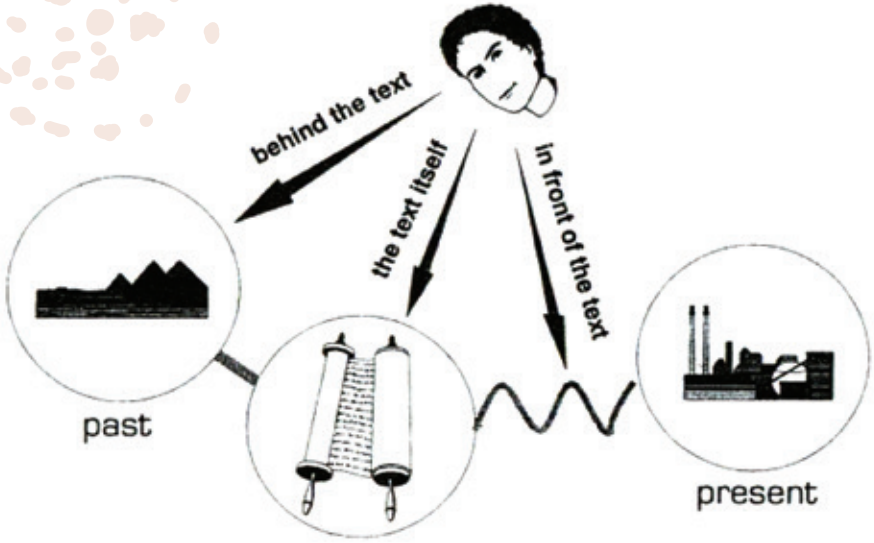


Figure 1: Contextual Bible Study Method by Gerald West and Ujamaa Centre Staff. (See West, 8)

11 Ibid, 9.

2. THE 5Rs APPROACH

The '5Rs' model by Boyung Lee consists of five steps or processes to approach the text and help us consider issues more broadly and justly: Readying the Ground, Remembering, Reflecting, Reinterpreting and Re-Searching.

THE FIRST PROCESS Readying the Ground

This process provides the space for "the participants and the teachers to know each other, especially the socio-political background that they bring to the study of the Bible."[12] This first process is allowing the participants to locate their own stories. It establishes the space for all in the room to feel that everyone belongs to a group. It is a space where everyone can hear, recognise and realise that each person has their own story, which could be similar to the stories in the text.

THE SECOND PROCESS Remembering

This second process provides space for participants or group members to share their thoughts on the text. They share freely and briefly about their knowledge regarding the text – prior knowledge they had gained. What is the text about? There are no right and wrong answers. The focus is for everyone to participate and reflect on the text.

THE THIRD PROCESS Reflecting

This is a time for the leader to introduce different biblical interpretations of the text. There are various interpretations and different views on the text, so the leader should share as much as he/she can. If possible, provide historical background of the different interpretations and the traditional interpretations of scholars. This process enables participants to receive and understand why different scholars interpret or think that way.

THE FOURTH PROCESS Reinterpreting

This process "provide(s) a space to identify, highlight and discuss the historical background and context of the text."[13] It is a space to analyse the characters in the text or the author(s) who wrote it. This process allows the participants to re-visit the text in its own time and space.

THE FIFTH PROCESS Re-Searching

The fifth process should allow everyone in the room to come up with a new meaning of the text for contemporary Christians.[14] It is a space for participants to see new messages after having gone through a thorough and critical analysis of the text. This final process can provide insights and stimulate ideas and actions to challenge political, social, cultural and religious actions on issues, and should encourage individuals and faith communities to take action and to respond to such issues.

12 B. Lee, 2007

13 Cliff Bird, 2016, *God's Vision for Human Relationships (Bible Study) Vol 1*, UnitingWorld, Sydney

14 B. Lee, 2007

BIBLE STUDY 1: MARK 9:33-37 & 42

JESUS' PRIMARY CONCERN OVER THE 'LITTLE ONES'

Without children, life and faithfulness have no meaning beyond one generation… Christ is made known to the world through the worship, discipleship, service, learning, and witness of the people of God. When asked who is greatest in the kingdom of God, Jesus drew a child into the group of gathered disciples to teach them the ways of the kingdom.[15]

The statement above challenges a core aspect of our Pacific beliefs and how we live them out in families, churches and communities. We take for granted that children being children, should be subject to their parents and other adults, and are obliged to always listen to and obey them. Noting that this is the norm in many cultures across the Pacific, the words attributed to Jesus strike a clear countercultural tone and challenge similar cultures during his own time. He declared that the kingdom of God belongs to children and, in order to enter the kingdom of God, his disciples (then and now) need to learn from children.

The inclusion of children in the Gospel of Mark's account of Jesus and his public ministry is remarkable, to say the least. In general, children were not recognised and had no real status in society in the time of Jesus. This bible study will help us to re-look and re-examine what this text emphasises regarding children.

THE AIM OF THIS BIBLE STUDY:

- To look into the text and analyse the social context during Jesus' time and how Jesus encountered his socio-cultural world
- To analyse the purpose and aim of the author by including the children in the picture
- To re-look at the text seriously based on Jesus' reprimanding of his disciples
- To help us embrace Jesus' concern and strong emphasis on the 'little ones'
- To guide participants to see how and in what ways the good news about the 'kingdom of God' is related to children and can be put into practice.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE: MARK 9:33-37 & 9:42 (NRSV)

33 Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" 34 But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. 35 He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." 36 Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 37 "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

42 "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea.

15 Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse & Linda Cannel, 2005, *Children Matter: Celebrating their Place in the Church, Family and Community.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans.

1. READING IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

a) Read the text together by going around the room reading one verse each, or alternatively reading it together.

b) As an entry point to the text, invite members of the group to share their stories and experiences of how they were raised by their parents, guardians or elders. Are they considered and seen as examples or role models to encourage others? Were they recognised and valued in the family?

c) If group members have children of their own, do they recognise their children's values and the capacity they possess? Are their children's skills and talents utilised in the family, congregation or community?

d) Invite open sharing on what participants think the text is about. Ask members of the group what they understand about the text. There are no wrong or right answers here.

2. READING INSIDE THE TEXT

a) Who are the main characters in the text? And what does the text tell us about these characters?

b) Jesus used a child as an illustration to answer the disciples' question: "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" Does that mean that the disciples need to be childish in order to be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? Certainly not. However, by involving children and putting them in the centre of his ministry, especially in teaching the people about God's kingdom, Jesus underscores something radical and novel about God's kingdom. Jesus is saying to the disciples, 'look at the children and learn from them.' This narrative is instructive about the kingdom of God: God's kingdom requires a whole new perspective, a new frame of mind. In fact, God's kingdom is the new framing story, and to communicate and transmit this framing story, Jesus points to children, and by so doing elevates their common and equal humanity.

c) What could be learned from the child's lifeworld[16] in order to fulfil the desire of the disciples to be great? In one sentence, Jesus completely reverses their concept of greatness: "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all" (Mark 9:35). 'Great' is no longer primary and above. On the contrary, 'great' is least and lowest. Mark gives us glimpses into Jesus' definition of greatness by showing examples of service.[17]

d) Next, Jesus places a child before them (Mark 9:36). He puts before them a startling example of the least in their society. Children had the least social status.[18] The child was devoid of any legal rights and had no societal protection or maintenance except that which the parent could provide. The child could not offer patronage or other critical social benefits. Ultimately, children were dependent on the goodwill of others. S/he was completely vulnerable. To welcome such a one in Jesus' name not only welcomes Jesus, but the one who sent him (9:37). To welcome one such as this is honourable. This is 'greatness' according to Jesus.[19] As Micah D. Kiel says, "The kingdom of God assesses and assigns value differently than the human realm. God will receive those who receive the child."[20] A child, and indeed all children, are valuable as far as God's kingdom is concerned. As such, children must be afforded the respect, protection and care they deserve.

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16 By "lifeworld" is meant the world of a child's life and how a child looks at and experiences the world.

17 Raquel S. Lettsome, *Commentary on Mark 9:30-37*. See : https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2581, 25/7/18.

18 It is important to point out that while in various Pacific Islands countries child protection legal instruments are in place, most children still live in and experience these low social statuses.

19 *Ibid.* See also: Alyce M McKenzie, *Commentary on Mark 9:30-37*, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=393, 25/7/18.

20 Micah D. Kiel, *Commentary on Mark 9:30-37*. See: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2620, 25/7/18.

e) Jesus said that in order for the adult disciples to enter the kingdom of God, they will have to receive it as a little child. The roles are reversed – it is to the children that the Kingdom of God belongs, not to the adult disciples. Now it is the children who have become the teachers, and the adults who have become the learners! Children often look onto life with wonder and joy; innocent of the ways of the world that can harm, hurt and silence. Unmarred by the world, children have a tendency towards uninhibited honesty and openness. These are some of the very characteristics that increase their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Children deserve respect, honour and protection!

f) Jesus emphasizes the serious penalty for anyone who causes the "little ones" to lose their faith in him. It is in the nature of God to have compassion and loving-kindness for people not recognised and scorned by society: widows, strangers, orphans, the destitute, children, outcasts and sinners, etc. This is the side of God that Jesus declared and practiced as being part and parcel of God's kingdom. Disrespect and abuse of children is wrong and sinful as far as Jesus is concerned.

3. READING BEHIND THE TEXT

a) Of the four gospels, the Gospel of Mark was the first to be written and used by the early Christians. Mark's gospel is divided roughly into three main sections, which (roughly) correspond to Jesus' movements during his public ministry:

i) Mark 1:1 – 8:26 corresponds to the ministry of Jesus in the region of Galilee.

ii) Mark 8:27 – Mark 10:52 corresponds to Jesus' ministry as he is on the road toward Jerusalem.

iii) Mark 11:1 – Mark 16 corresponds to Jesus' ministry in Judea, especially in Jerusalem, including the death and resurrection accounts.

The middle section, from which the reading is taken, presents Jesus moving from Caesarea-Philippi to Jerusalem, where he would spend his final weeks and days. In chapter 11, Jesus enters Jerusalem in what has become known as the "Triumphant Entry," on the day commonly known in Christian tradition as Palm Sunday.

b) The text is located roughly in the centre of the middle section of Mark's gospel. It comes immediately after Jesus speaks about his death for the second time (9:30-32) and shortly before he speaks about his death for the third and final time (10:32-34). The reading begins with a child as an exemplar (9:33-37) and ends with children being blessed by Jesus (10:13-16). This is important to note because found between these two child-focused passages is Jesus' warning against causing "little ones" to lose faith in him (9:42), and also his teaching on divorce (10:1-12). These are very important points to take into account because they provide the literary and narrative contexts for the appropriate understanding and interpretation of the text or reading. In other words, causing "little ones" to lose faith in Jesus and therefore, making them vulnerable to the whims of deceptive persons and powers, is just as bad as the potential for "little ones" becoming vulnerable in situations of violence in the home or of divorce – especially where clear protective and mitigating measures are not taken to protect them from being negatively affected.

c) According to Matthew's gospel, this same text and event took place in Galilee (18:1-5). For Matthew, the event was Jesus' last teaching to mark the end of his Galilean ministry before he entered Jerusalem in Judea in chapter 19. Therefore, it was like his farewell message to his own people. It is a common tradition throughout the Pacific that farewell messages are always treasured, as these help the families or communities to move forward into the future. For Jesus to end his ministry in Galilee with this message of protecting children from the unnecessary physical muscling by disciples is very significant indeed!

d) The status of children in Jesus' time was similar to or even lower than that of women. They were regarded as nobodies, they were not counted (Matt 14:21) and they were regarded as the property of their fathers. Children were expected to obey instructions from their fathers and elders. Therefore, in Mark's account of Jesus focussing on a child in his teaching of 'greatness' in the kingdom of heaven, Jesus is elevating the status and significance of children above the established culture. Boys had a kind of identity and life of their own in contrast to girls. Boys had the privilege of having some form of education, such as learning and reciting the Torah in synagogue schools. Girls had no identity or life of their own. A girl was under her father's authority in her childhood and youth (unmarried) years; under her husband's power and authority in her marriage years; and under her eldest son's power and authority in her widowed years (should her husband die). Similarly in many Pacific cultures, female children especially are "expected to behave in a particular way, to observe and comply with certain cultural values and practices, and to fulfil tasks meant only for girls."[21] The many "Do's" and "Do Not's" that they have had to live by were to meant to shape them to become good at working in the home and to be good wives. It must be greatly appreciated that changes are happening. It is interesting that in this passage, the gospel writer Mark does not mention the sex of a child. This could be as a way of including both boy-children and girl-children as of equal value in the eyes of Jesus and challenging the cultures of the time, and of today.

4. APPROPRIATING THE TEXT

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions:

1. Comparison: (a) List all the characteristics of a child that you can think of and compare or contrast these with those of adults. (b) List the characteristics expected of a male child and a female child and compare/contrast these with those of an adult male and female.
2. Share how children are expected to behave in your community, in the church, or according to your cultures.
3. What is your own church doing, if anything, with or for children in order to respect and protect them?
4. How do your responses to questions 1 – 3 above compare or contrast with Jesus' attitude and treatment of children?
   Discuss how these characteristics and the realities of local churches can make children both good 'teachers of adults' and vulnerable to abuse and exploitation.
5. How might the reign of God as proclaimed and practiced by Jesus be lived out in communities that include children of different age groups? Provide some practical actions or steps.
6. Draw up an action plan for how you intend to carry out some or all of the actions or steps identified in (5) above.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

There should be no doubt whatsoever that as far as Jesus is concerned, children are of paramount importance in the Kingdom of God. As such, every effort must be made by churches throughout the Pacific to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and strive to ensure that the church, the home and wider social spaces are safe for children; ensuring that every child is protected, and feels protected. This is integral to what it means to follow Jesus today.

21 See: Siera Bird, 2003, "A Widening Road: My Story of Becoming," in *Weavings: Women Doing Theology in Oceania,* 193.

NOTES



ENSURING CHILDREN ARE PROTECTED IS INTEGRAL TO WHAT IT MEANS TO FOLLOW JESUS TODAY.

– SIERA BIRD


Wallabies

BIBLE STUDY 2: PROVERBS 13:1 & 24, AND 14:3

THE ROD IS FOR PROTECTION AND PROVISION NOT PUNISHMENT OR ABUSE

The book of Proverbs is a poetic piece of literature written mostly by King Solomon.[22] The book offers messages on wisdom, knowledge and understanding, warnings and guidance, parental and marriage instructions, and more. In general, it is about moral instruction for everyday living that is suitable for all ages.

'Corporal' discipline is a form of discipline that is used commonly by many families, communities, schools and churches in the Pacific. Too often, however, this has led to child abuse. The biblical text for this study is often used to justify this form of physical or corporal discipline.

Generally speaking, many people understand the 'rod' in this text as referring to correcting, rebuking or providing wisdom through forms of physical discipline such as spanking or even using objects such as sticks and belts, etc. Many have taken the rod literally! This understanding of the rod takes it out of the context of the time and overshadows a meaning that always seems to be ignored or forgotten: the (rod) is that of a shepherd. From this perspective, the (shepherd's) rod is to re-direct sheep, to make sure the sheep remain within the sheepfold, to provide protection for the sheep from danger and to guide sheep to where they can enjoy greener, healthier pasture and sufficient streams of water.

THE AIM OF THIS BIBLE STUDY:

- To relook at the text and analyse the message in this poetic piece
- To reflect on our childhood and compare it to the text
- To analyse the use of 'rod' and how the message of this poem could apply to children today
- To guide participants to see how this poetic message relates to the kingdom of God

TEXT OF THE BIBLE: PROVERBS 13:1, 13:24 & 14:3 (NRSV)

13:1 A wise child loves discipline, but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke.

13:24 Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.

14:3 The talk of fools is a rod for their backs, but the lips of the wise preserve them.

22 Scholars have noted that Agur wrote chapter thirty and King Lemuel wrote chapter thirty-one, http://www.biblestudy.org/basicart/book-of-proverbs-overview.html, 11/05/18

1. READYING THE GROUND: LOCATING YOUR OWN STORY

a) Read the text above. You can read it together or each person in the group reads one verse each. The leader could also read aloud while the participants listen and follow through with their own bible.

b) Invite participants to share their own stories of experiences they've gone through themselves, witnessed, heard, read or watched on television; stories about family or community using corporal punishment to discipline their children. As an example, our first ministerial appointment was serving at a congregation that upheld communal discipline. One of the community's unwritten rules was that any person who acted disorderly due to drug or alcohol consumption would be brought to the middle of a community hall and adult men would enforce physical punishment using a rope, stick or leather belt to smack or whack the person really hard. One night around midnight, a bell went off and the community knew that the bell was to sound the alarm that somebody had broken the community rule, so they all ran toward the sound. I remember that the village elders put this young person in the centre of the village community hall as many people watched on. A huge man then beat him with a belt so hard that the young teen cried and begged for mercy, but the whipping continued. My husband, who was the church minister, confronted the village elders who were responsible for the community laws. He told them that this law is violence against children and youths, and that other non-violent ways should be used to discipline such behaviour in the community. Their response was, "you focus on your role as a minister and leave us to deal with non-compliance and bad behaviour in the community."

2. REMEMBERING: TO RECALL ALL THE MESSAGES YOU'VE HEARD BASED ON THIS TEXT

a) What is the text about? Invite participants to share what they already know about the text, whether they have heard this preached from the pulpit, taught in church or home, or elsewhere. Again, there are no right or wrong answers here. It is a space for participants to share and unpack what they already know. (The leader can write on the board; this will show how much the participants already know about the text).

b) After focusing on the text, have any new meanings emerged through discussion?



3. REFLECTING: DIFFERENT TRADITIONAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE TEXT

a) Most often, the words in the text are taken as encouraging physical discipline of children. Physical discipline was commonly practised and recommended in Israel and the Ancient Near East as a way to raise and nurture citizens who were wise.[23] Throughout history, physical discipline was commonly practised in families, schools, churches and communities on the assumption and understanding that this would raise wise and well-behaved citizens.

b) "Discipline was critically important,"[24] and those children who "did not allow discipline on themselves were immediately suspected as fools."[25] It was believed that children who were willing to receive advice and listen to their parents' instructions had great reverence for their parents and were therefore considered to be getting wiser.

c) The focus in verse 24 is often taken to be on physical disciplining of children. The reasoning goes something like his: every human being born into this world is a sinner because of Adam's original sin. The Apostle Paul elaborates on this in Romans 5:12-21. Therefore, children need to be corrected of their wrongdoing. While Proverbs 22:15 states that it is normal for children to do silly mistakes, it is taken that the 'rod' will drive those silly mistakes far from them, and hence the use of the rod is for discipline (Proverbs 22:15). The problem with this understanding is that it does not consider the pain, hurt or fear that comes with physical discipline and the trauma that the child goes through. More crucially, this line of reasoning shows a misunderstanding of the concept of the 'rod.'

d) Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman (2018) point out:

At first glance, these verses (Proverbs 13:24 and Proverbs 22:15) seem to be in strong support of the use of corporal punishment, but do they really? Through a close examination of the Hebrew word for "rod" (shebet) one can see that in the Hebrew dictionary it has various meanings; a stick for walking, writing, fighting, ruling, and punishment. The word "shebet" is most frequently used when referring to shepherds who are tending their flocks. The shepherds used the stick to fight off predators and to gently guide wandering sheep, not to beat them.[26]

Reyburn and Fry (2000: 201) also argue that although, "most modern translations make it clear that to 'spare the rod' means avoiding bodily punishment, … not all (translations) express physical punishment."[27] If the shepherd was to use the rod to strike a sheep, the sheep would respond by running away from the shepherd and, sheep being sheep, the rest of the flock would follow and also run away. This image undermines the idea of guiding children towards wisdom through physical punishment. The rod of which the text speaks is used to gently guide the child away from incorrect paths and towards wisdom, not to physically punish the child. Jack Wellman (2015) expresses the same argument: "In this proverb, it is talking about discipline and not using a literal rod to beat a child. By the way, this doesn't give the person using the rod a free license to inflict harm…"[28] The spirit of the 'rod' in the text is to guide and steer – and doing so gently, not violently!

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23 Tremper Longman III, 2006, *Proverbs.* Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 292.

24 Longman T, 2006, 291.

25 Longman T, 2006, 291.

26 Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman, 2018, "Biblical Perspectives on Spanking." See: http://www.thomashaller.com/PAbiblicalperspectivesonspanking.html, cited 24/07/18.

27 William D. Reyburn & Ellan Mch. Fry, 2000, Proverbs. New York: United Bible Societies, 201.

28 Jack Wellman, 2015, *What is the Difference Between the Rod and the Staff? A Bible Study,* See: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/christiancrier/2015/07/24/what-is-the-difference-between-the-rod-and-the-staff-a-bible-study/, cited 31/7/18

e) Wellman also points out, "In the covenant that God made with David, the Lord said of Solomon, 'I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son (2015). When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men' (2 Samuel 7:14). So we know that God does not want to beat Solomon with an actual rod, but God was using this word as an expression of God's discipline of Solomon when he would need it (and he would!)"[29] An example of such discipline by the rod is God coming close alongside Solomon's father, King David, to comfort, console and say the words of wisdom at the right time (Psalm 23).

f) Thomas Haller and Chick Moorman (2018) point out that "Christian parents frequently seek the Bible in their effort to raise Godly children. They believe that there is a biblical mandate to spank, and they fear that if they don't spank, they will commit the sin of losing control of their child."[30] However, by taking *'spare the rod, spoil the child'* literally, "they misunderstand the concept of the rod."[31] This common misunderstanding and literalistic interpretation of the poem is prevalent throughout churches in the Pacific and is also underpinned by strong cultural views about the place and role of children in the family and community.

4. REVISITING: REVISITING THE POEM OF KING SOLOMON AND PHYSICAL DISCIPLINE IN OUR OWN CONTEXT

a) Haller and Moorman call on readers to remember that these verses (13:24) "come from a book of poetry. Writers of poetry use familiar words of the day to represent concepts that the people to whom they are writing can create an image of what they are writing about."[32] The book of Proverbs is poetic literature, and as such, the messages are hidden and need to be discerned according to the worldview and cultures of the time. Its purpose has been described as "a book of instructions on how to live a life pleasing to God and how to be more peaceful with all of mankind" (humankind).[33] The question is: are these instructions still relevant and applicable in our times, more than 3,000 years on? Solomon's proverbs in our text appear to contradict the purpose of Proverbs both then and now: how can children live peacefully in their own homes in the midst of pain and hurt from physical discipline? How can they live peacefully in an environment of fear of physical punishment? Children need to live a life that allows them to develop in a healthy environment and for them to express themselves freely instead of living in fear. We should not encourage a lack of discipline, but be advocates for non-violent forms of discipline that teach lessons, lead to wisdom and enable each child to grow into who God created them to be. This is far superior to discipline based on fear, that demands conformity by causing harm.

b) Solomon's Father – King David – says in Psalm 23:4: *'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; your rod and staff, they comfort me.'* The rod here was used for several purposes: providing protection from danger; preventing falling off the cliff; guiding sheep back to the sheep-fold; and guidance to greener pastures, so the sheep can be guided to where food and water are available. In this Psalm, it is because of the shepherd's rod and staff that David is comforted and not fearful or afraid. In other words, the rod and staff (used interchangeably sometimes) provide comfort, protection, security and guidance – not inflicting punishment, fear and discomfort.

29 Ibid

30 Haller and Moorman, 2018

31 Ibid

32 Ibid

33 See: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2018/02/the-purpose-of-proverbs/

c) Many people tend to take Solomon's Proverb literally and use it to justify and encourage their actions on physical discipline, which can lead to child abuse. Moreover, this action of physical discipline is used by husbands as well to physically whip, punch, hit or smack their wives or partners, supposedly to discipline them.

d) The text encourages children to respect their parents and to listen to their teachings and advice because parents have more experience of life to share with their children. It's like a saying on a magnet on my fridge door: "A Father is someone you look up to, no matter how tall you are." The Ten Commandments also state that children are to *'honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you'* (Exodus 20: 12). However, the respect and honour are also to be reciprocated by parents to their children, and as such, parents must understand their children.

e) The text is not an instruction to parents to physically discipline their children, but for parents to provide the most loving, healthy and safe environment for the children in their homes, communities and churches to enable them to grow and flourish. Parents are to provide love and to nurture the development and growth of their children.

5. RE-SEARCHING: THE BIBLICAL MEANING OF DISCIPLINE

a) The text is about family relationship. It recognises close relationships between parents and children.

b) It is about dignity and respect, it's about children valuing and recognising the parent's experiences and wisdom as a guide for them and for the parent to continue playing their part in providing instructions and guidance for their children.

c) The text is about parents providing basic needs for their children: food, water, health, education. The text is about parents providing protection and care for the children. For children to develop in a safe and healthy environment in the home, school, community, church and society.

d) It is about parents teaching and giving instructions to children in a non-violent way.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is physical discipline still practiced in your context? If yes, what are the reasons?
2. Share your experiences of when you went through physical discipline, whether at home or school. How did you physically and emotionally feel during that time? Do you think this type of discipline is good for your loved one?
3. Reflect on how your church is using and interpreting this text. How might you introduce some of the new insights from this bible study?
4. How are children cared for and protected in your church and community?
5. List some of the practical steps that your church and community could and should do to help the children live in a safe and healthy environment.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

My husband and I co-facilitated a workshop on 'parenting' a congregation in our country (Solomon Islands). The first activity we did was to divide the congregation into four groups: men, women, youth and children. Each group was asked to identify and list down their fears and concerns, and to identify and list their hopes or expectations within their family. The feedback from the children at the plenary was enriching and unforgettable. Given their own space and voice, two of their biggest fears were '*daddy's hands and mummy's mouth*.' Physical discipline and verbal abuse came out top of the list for the children.[34]

34 The final study in the series will delve a bit more into this and other related issues, especially with the uses and misuses of hands.

NOTES



WE SHOULD NOT ENCOURAGE A LACK OF DISCIPLINE, BUT BE ADVOCATES FOR NON-VIOLENT FORMS OF DISCIPLINE THAT TEACH LESSONS, LEAD TO WISDOM AND ENABLE EACH CHILD TO GROW INTO WHO GOD CREATED THEM TO BE.

– SIERA BIRD



BIBLE STUDY 3: PROVERBS 22:6

HOLDING CHILDREN'S HANDS FOR A MOMENT BUT THEIR HEARTS FOREVER

This text is well known to many church people because it is often used in church activities, especially during events like celebrating birthday anniversaries. It is a text that is used to highlight the commitment and roles that parents, families and church people have in looking after and raising their children.

Christian families believe that the bible is the inspired word of God, so taking their babies for baptism and dedication services and raising them with Christian teachings are seen as 'training their children' in loving and knowing God. However, an upbringing that focuses on nurturing the innocent or uncorrupted inclinations of a child, and on his/her behavioural changes and adaptations, go a long way in helping a child enter and follow *'the way she/he should go.'* This is in the hope that the child makes good choices in later life and cultivates attitudes and relationships that are life-affirming and life-giving.

THE AIM OF THIS BIBLE STUDY:

- Analyse the poetic text and seek to discern its message
- Move beyond the common and traditional understanding of the words 'to train' and attempt to arrive at its proper meaning
- Highlight the social-cultural background of the text to help better understand it
- Analyse the text to help us to acknowledge and appreciate individual gifts and talents
- Affirm that children have an identity and human dignity that are rooted in God
- Guide participants to realise that children are contributing to God's kingdom and vision for human relationships.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE: PROVERBS 22:6

Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray. (NRSV)

Teach children how they should live, and they will remember it all their lives." (GNT)

Train children to live the right way (in their/or his path; referring either to children or to God), and when they are old, they will not stray (depart) from it." (Expanded Bible)

1. READYING THE GROUND: LOCATING YOUR OWN STORY

a) Read the text above together. Or the leader can read it aloud while the participants listen and follow through with their own bible.

b) Invite participants to share their own stories: experiences they might have gone through themselves; incidents or events they witnessed, heard, read about or watched on television; stories about their own childhood that reflect their parents' teaching even when they were not around. Or invite participants to discuss how they think parents pass on their cultural or traditional knowledge, skills, etc. to their children.

2. REMEMBERING: RECALL WHAT YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS TEXT

a) What is the text about? Invite participants to share what they already know about the text, whether they heard it taught at home or in church, preached from the pulpit, or through other events. There are no right or wrong answers here, it is a space for participants to share and unpack what they already know. (As they share, the leader can write on the board or on paper the responses that show prior knowledge of the text).

b) In Pacific contexts, training can also refer to children or youth learning from older people who have experience and expertise. We find examples of this in Christian scriptures: Samuel lived under the guidance of the Prophet Eli and his teachings; Timothy travelled with Paul to learn how to continue the mission work he was called to. Similarly, in all cultures throughout the Pacific, children learn from their parents and elders. Historically, the practice has been that young girls learn from elder women and such education helps to shape and prepare them to become capable wives and mothers; boys learn from their elder men on outdoor work in order to shape them to be providers and protectors for the wellbeing of their families. Where this is often still the way today, it raises questions about reinforcing gender stereotypes and limiting opportunities for children as they grow. We must now critically rethink this kind of upbringing and learning in light of both renewed interpretations of Scripture and enormous changes in socio-cultural, educational and employment life-worlds. This is especially important when addressing gender role stereotypes and how we place value on such roles. For apart from strictly biologically specific roles, all other roles are socially-culturally constructed and can, indeed must, be redressed in light of renewed interpretations of Christian scriptures and social change. However, it must also be acknowledged and encouraged that children—both boys and girls—have much they can learn from both of their parents, and such education is a valuable source of wisdom and guidance.

c) After focusing on the text, have any new meanings emerged through discussion?

3. REFLECTING: TOWARDS A MORE ACCURATE INTERPRETATION OF THE TEXT

a) According to Christine Ray Yoder (2009: 224), the verb *"to train up"* (NRSV) elsewhere in the Old Testament always means "to dedicate," a temple or a house.[35] Yoder points out that the Hebrew word 'naʹar' used in the text, commonly refers to a "youth" whose age may vary from childhood to adolescence … (and argues that) the parent is to dedicate the youth "in the right way" (NRSV), literally "according to his own way." The possessive suffix indicates the "way" is specific to the youth, not a uniform or universal path.

35 Christine Roy Yoder, 2009, *Proverbs.* Nashville: Abragon Press, 224.

Each child's way is different and uniquely created by God, and parents are called to know their children and guide them in their specific way. The sense is that parents must orient and commit the youth on the way that best ensures his or her maturity into wise adulthood and a blessing of wisdom in which, "even when old … the youth will not stray from it."[36]

b) To train up the child "in the right way" or "according to his own way" requires that parents discern what **her or his** *particular way* is to be able to train the child along *that* way. This means that parental instructions must take into serious consideration a child's natural inclinations along each development stage and apply their training accordingly. Steinmann (2009: 441) says approaches "that best suit the child will help him (her) hold on to the truth and not depart from it."[37] The effective way of learning takes place if parents teach their children based on the child's natural inclinations (or "the way that he/she should go") and their ability to learn.

c) Proverbs teaches that parents should consecrate, discipline and educate their children accordingly in the way of wisdom. This training is holistic in the sense that it helps a child grow into the life she/he are inclined toward and thus enables them to live a meaningful and fulfilled life.

4. REVISITING: REVISITING THE POEM OF KING SOLOMON FOR OUR TIME AND CONTEXT

a) The book of Proverbs is poetic literature and as such the messages are not always immediately clear or known, and the huge time gap does not help. It is commonly understood that "Proverbs is a book of instructions on how to live a life pleasing to God and how to be more peaceful with all of mankind" (humankind).[38] The book is mostly advice given to families, schools, to leaders, wise persons and to kings.

b) It is claimed that the author was the wisest person during his time, and his messages were hidden behind his actions and words. But was he, really? The so-called wisest person appeared also as the most foolish in some of his actions. Take for instance the story of two women who argued for ownership of a live infant (1 Kings 3:16-28). Solomon, attempting to find out the real mother suggested for the child to be cut in half and share the two halves between the two women. Although his so-called "wise solution" settled the dispute between these two women, it was a foolish and inhuman suggestion and could be regarded as violence against children.

c) Children in the biblical era (and most of the ancient world) were at the bottom of the social ladder. The bible contains stories of atrocities against children. There are stories of male children killed following orders from the state authorities (see Exodus 1:8- 2:1-10 and Matthew 2). The status of girls was regarded far lower than that of male children. Against this background King Solomon's call to train a child in the way that he or she should go sounds radical, countercultural and contradictory all at the same time.[39]

d) The first part of chapter 22 is a series of contrasts between "the wise way and the fool's way."[40] The text contains wise sayings for parents to be successful in their roles and responsibilities in raising their children and was meant to benefit the child's identity and development for now and

36 Yoder, *ibid.*

37 Steinmann, 2009, 441.

38 See: https://www.patheos.com/blogs/leithart/2018/02/the-purpose-of-proverbs/

39 While Solomon's instructions were all very good, he would have been better off if he had heeded his own instructions… For Solomon seemed to stray from his very own teaching as he got older, and not wiser. See Wise, T (2017) https://www.quora.com/What-is-the-purpose-of-the-book-of-Proverbs. Sited 15/05/2018.

40 See Harper Collins: Study Bible.

the future. Now, in our day, we have the benefit of child development theories and practical guides as well as the insights, freedoms and prohibitions stipulated in international legal frameworks such as the *Convention on the Rights of a Child*.

5. RE-SEARCHING: THE MEANING OF PROVERBS 22:6

a) Pacific islanders also have their own traditional proverbs, such as the Kiribati saying always said by my grandfather, "It is easier to bend a small tree rather than a grown and mature tree." This Pacific proverb is similar to Proverbs 22: 6. It is easier to teach and mould a child while they are still young than to wait until they become more mature, more rigid and fixed in their thoughts and actions.

b) Train the child in the way that he or she should go, and when they are older, she or he will never depart from it. My husband likes to tell how his father taught him how to make a spear as an illustration to research the meaning in this text. A young tree is always best to make a spear. To a keen and trained eye, every tree is different, and each tree has its own general straightness (or orientation toward straightness). Sure, it is not perfect and there are bends and warps here and there, but when analysed carefully each young tree has a straightness about it. The way to make it go along its own inbuilt straightness (to make a very good spear) is to heat the warps or crooked areas over a fire just enough so it does not burn, remove it from the heat and apply just enough pressure on the heated areas, bending it toward its general/inbuilt straightness. Firstly, this needs to be done gently and carefully, in order to not break the stick. Secondly, the carver or spear-maker must take care to not bend the stick according to the way they want it to become or look like; rather they must ensure to bend and work on it according to its original straightness and integrity. This spear-making activity is similar to the image "to train a child in the way he or she should go." The training must be done in view of the child's natural and inbuilt orientation, or a child's best, and not according to the way(s) parents want the child to go, regardless of how noble such intentions may be. The integrity, dignity and identity of the child takes primacy, and the goal of parental training and teaching is to ensure that God-oriented inclinations in the child are brought to life and fruition.

c) 'Training' in the text does not mean spanking, hitting, or any other form of corporal or physical punishment (see Study 2).

d) This text is about providing tender care when training a child. The goal of such training is neither the creation of a universal definition of a Christian nor a universal image of a model child. Rather, it is the child's best grown self, unique, gifted, confident, and ready to live out God's special call on their particular life.

e) The text is about empowering and encouraging a child to reach for and become the person they feel called to become, not what parents or guardians want him or her to become.

f) Training also involves guarding and protecting a child from harms that can prevent them from fulfilling God's plans or intentions for their life.

g) This text is about recognising and enhancing God's gifts and talents to every person and ensuring that these are utilised.

h) Christian teaching of children is important for our time because children are also the hope and the future of the family, community, church and nation.

QUESTIONS

1. Why is it important to train children? When should training or teaching begin?
2. Share your cultural ways of training and teaching as these apply to different age groups in your society.
3. Reflect on your church's activities and programs. Do they encourage the development of each child uniquely in ways that they will remember it all their life? If yes, how? And if no, why?
4. Does your church have a program plan and activities for your church that includes more inclusion of children? Why not make one?

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Family is an institution that is unique and possible to manage. It is the basic building block and institution that keeps the wheels of our societies turning. The family is the foundation of our societies, and children are leaders of tomorrow and today. They are our future and our present. By training them in the way that they should go, we begin to write the history of both our future and their future as well.



NOTES

BIBLE STUDY 4: MATTHEW 19:13-15

JESUS EMBRACED AND BLESSED CHILDREN DESPITE SOCIO-CULTURAL NORMS AND EXPECTATIONS

Let the children come to me, and do not stop them, for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs.[41]

These words of Jesus are often quoted during children's birthdays, dedication services (when a child first attends a church service) and infant baptismal sacraments. Are these words by Jesus meant just for such occasions? Are we allowing the children to be blessed and be co-sharers in God's kingdom? How often do we turn our full attention to children? Are these words by Jesus reflected in our daily relationships with children who live with us and are in our midst? How would our churches change if the entire congregation—not just the children's Sunday school teachers—took seriously Jesus' admonition to welcome children? What places and activities of importance to adults need to be opened to children?"[42]

There are so many questions regarding children because many socio-cultural norms don't treat children with the respect they deserve and the dignity they have within themselves. Children are often treated as inferior, as objects, as voiceless, and so on. This, despite each child having their own identity and each bearing the image of God just like all other adult human beings.

By locating this story at the beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, Matthew underpins the significance of children within the reign of God and suggests that caring for, nurturing and protecting children is an integral part of discipleship and following Jesus Christ. He sees children as part of the community and the church. They are part and parcel of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Children are both the now and future of the church. They need to be included and accepted into the church and wider society as Jesus accepted and embraced them in his ministry.

THE AIM OF THIS BIBLE STUDY:

- Analyse the poetic text and seek to discern its message
- Move beyond the common and traditional understanding of the words 'to train' and attempt to arrive at its proper meaning
- Highlight the social-cultural background of the text to help better understand it
- Analyse the text to help us to acknowledge and appreciate individual gifts and talents
- Affirm that children have an identity and human dignity that are rooted in God
- Guide participants to realise that children are contributing to God's kingdom and vision for human relationships.

41 Matthew 19:14, *New Revised Standard Version*.

42 Scottie May, Beth Posterski, Catherine Stonehouse & Linda Cannell. *Children Matter: Celebrating their Place in the Church, Family and Community.* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans. 2005. P134.

TEXT OF THE BIBLE: MATTHEW 19: 13-15 (NRSV)

'Jesus Blesses Little Children'

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

1. READING IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

a) Read the text above. You can read it together as a group, one person may read it, or divide the text according to how many speakers are in the text. E.g. in the text there are two speakers, the narrator and Jesus.

b) The picture (below) shows the scene when children at a United Church in Solomon Islands went to the front to receive blessings from the minister during one of the Holy Communion services.



As the children went forward the pews became empty! There were a lot more children than adults in the service.

- Analyse the photo briefly and share your insights.

c) Invite open sharing on what participants think Matthew 19: 13-15 is about. Ask members of the group what the text is telling her/him directly? There are no wrong or right answers. This is a space for people to share what they know and understand about this text.

2. READING INSIDE THE TEXT

a) Who are the actors/actresses in the story? What are their characters and relationships like?

b) Why do the disciples scold those who bring their children? Are they jealous of the children? (Just few verses earlier, Jesus uses a child as an illustration to answer the disciples' questions. He confronts them, saying, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.")[43] Or perhaps they do not want their master to be disturbed by these little ones. What do you think?

c) Douglas Hare (1993: 224) argues that at a literal level, "the text is treasured as evidence of Jesus' attitude towards children … Jesus insisted that children are just as valuable to God as adults."[44] Jesus had an attitude of love and compassion for all who were burdened, overlooked and on the

43 Matt 18:1-5 (NRSV).

44 Douglas RA Hare, 1993, Matthew. *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching.* Louisville: John Knox Press,224.

margins of society. For example, at the feeding of the four thousand in Matthew 15:32, he said, "I have compassion for the crowd… I do not want to send them away hungry" and he provided food for them. Contrary to Jesus' attitude toward children, many programs in our churches in the Pacific focus on adults. We need to include children more so that our ministry as 'followers of Jesus' can be truthful to God's compassion for all people.

d) Who were these people who brought their children to Jesus? Were they parents (cf. Mark 10:13-16)? Why did they want Jesus to bless the children? What were their intentions for wanting Jesus to bless the children? Was there something wrong with the children for Jesus to bless them? Laying of hands was associated with healing (see Matt 8:3; Matt 20:34) but in this text it had to do with blessing. Whatever the reasons, Jesus welcomed and blessed them. This countercultural action by Jesus was clearly a challenge and call to the society; where children were on the lower rungs of the social ladder, Jesus welcomed children as important in the kingdom of God. They were to be recognised as God's children and respected for who they were. They should have been allowed the freedom to learn and express themselves as children in the kingdom of God.

e) Jesus reprimanded the disciples and said, "let the children come to me, and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." Jesus told his disciples, "unless you change and becomes like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:3). Children are a part of the kingdom of heaven. They are neither on the outside nor on the periphery of God's kingdom – they are at the heart of it.[45] The text clearly describes that contrary to the prevailing view of children as not fitting to be in the presence of older and so-called important men – Jesus invites, embraces and blesses children.

f) Margaret Davies (2009:151) argues that the disciples' behaviour represents "a misunderstanding of the previous teaching, (see Matt 18:1-9) which could have implied a denigration of children."[46] She suggests that Jesus' accepting, welcoming, and blessing of the children, could be seen as an act of "reminding the disciples of his previous teaching about their (children's) similarly powerless status"[47] in chapter 18 of Matthew. In other words, Jesus is reinforcing the idea that children need protection because of their vulnerable status.

3. READING OUTSIDE THE TEXT

a) The gospel of Matthew was written much later than Mark's gospel. While many of Mark's narratives are also present in Matthew, he had a different audience in mind. Matthew's gospel can be divided into four main sections:

- 1:1 – 4:11 Jesus' birth to Jesus' baptism and temptation
- 4:12 – 18:35 Jesus' public ministry in Galilee
- 19:1 – 20:34 Jesus' journey to Jerusalem
- 21:1 – 28.20 Jesus' final days in Jerusalem, his resurrection and ascension.

Our text places Jesus at the beginning of his journey onto Jerusalem. According to verses 1-2, Jesus left Galilee and went to the territory of Judea and a large crowd of people followed him. This crowd could have followed him from Galilee, with more people from the Judean territory joining him and his disciples on their way to Jerusalem. The inclusion of children at the very beginning of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was very important for Matthew to stress that discipleship begins with, and through, children.

45 It is important to note here that according to the narrative in Mark's gospel (9:33 – 10:16) protecting and caring for children, or accepting and welcoming them, is an integral part of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus. Refer to Bible Study 1.

46 Margaret Davies, 2009, *Matthew*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 151.

47 Ibid, 151.

Hare (1993) states, "it seems probable that Jesus' saying was understood by Matthew and his church as authorizing the practice of including children and young people in the corporate life of the church."[48]

b) At the very start of Matthew chapter 18, Jesus takes a child with all the qualities that he/she has as a demonstration to challenge the disciples' attitude. In our text, Jesus lays his hands on the little children and blesses them as an invitation to the disciples and crowd to accept them into society and recognise their human dignity. These actions by Jesus with children (Matt 18:33-42 and Matt 19:13-15) are set within the broader narrative of relationships in a family, especially within the husband-wife relationship. Jesus reminded the Pharisees of God's intention from the very beginning of creation that the, "marital bond is so intimate that the two become one flesh."[49] The wellbeing and health of such a marital relationship (Matt 19:1-12) is sandwiched between Jesus' two interactions with children (Matt 18:33-42 and Matt 19:13-15). This narrative structure gives interpretative guidance to the idea that honouring children is vital to healthy family relationships.

c) Speaking of children in general, they were not recognised and had no real status in society in the time of Jesus. To be sure, boys had an identity and life of their own in contrast to girls. Boys had the privilege of having access to some form of education, such as learning and reciting the Torah in synagogue schools. Girls had no identity or life of their own. A woman was under her father's authority in her childhood (unmarried) years, under her husband's power and authority in her marriage years, and under her eldest son's power and authority in her widowed years, should her husband die. Therefore, I would say that the blessing of children is a "call to respect the dignity of the image of God in every human being."[50]

d) Children encountered great difficulty in Jesus' time because of deeply embedded and prevailing socio-cultural norms, as well as adult's expectations of them. While it can be argued that much progress has happened in our time, many similar challenges continue to be encountered by children today. Various organisations and groups across the globe continue to address issues of abuse and violence against children in different and related ways:

- United Nations Convention on the Rights of Child
- Churches commitments to children, such as 'Pikinini Play Group' by the Presbyterian Church in Vanuatu
- Child protection theologies, such as this one, and others developed by the World Council of Churches.[51]

However, sometimes the best efforts put in place to help children can also contain threats and create more problems for children. For example, protective measures practiced in cultural traditions such as restrictions on a child to not move beyond their home territory also hinders them from positive learning through interaction with other children. Or where it's culturally expected that children be silent, it makes it hard for them to be heard when their vulnerability leads to abuse. Thus, it is vital for churches to recognise the vulnerability of children and put protections in place to ensure their safety. Care and caution must always be taken for the best interest of children.

48 Douglas, R. A. Hare, 1993, 224.

49 Cliff Bird, 2016, *God's Vision for Human Relationships (Bible Study) Vol 1*, UnitingWorld, Sydney, 2017.

50 Lydia Mwaniki, 2017, "Stand up for Human Dignity": Fellowship of the Least Coin.

51 See: https://www.oikoumene.org/en/what-we-do/wcc-child-rights-engagement

4. APPROPRIATING THE TEXT

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions:

1. Discuss and list down issues that affect children in your community and church today. Include the "tabu" issues.
2. List down impacts of these issues on children.
3. How will you address such issues at the personal level, congregational level, community level, etc?
4. List down roles that are stereotypically expected of boys and girls.
5. Study the list in question 4 above. Which of these could be said to hinder children (girls and boys) from enjoying God's fullness of life as declared by Jesus in God's kingdom?
6. Discuss some practical steps that you, your family, your church and your community could take to protect and care for children now and into the future.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

Jesus, and the kingdom of God that he declared and practiced, were countercultural. He was born a vulnerable child, and as he grew, he lived as a child in a social structure where his status was near the bottom. He knew what it felt like to be seen and treated not as an equal and how his status was less important to adults, especially adult men. During his short period of ministry, he not only elevated the level of children but also presented them as a central part of the kingdom of God. He was adamant that children be treated with dignity and respect, even warning would-be abusers that the fitting punishment for them would be to be thrown into the sea with a millstone tied around their neck. Jesus was for the protection and care of children and so should everyone who claims to be his follower.



NOTES

BIBLE STUDY 5: EXODUS 2:1-10

HANDS: FOR PROTECTION AND CARE OR ABUSE AND TORMENT?

The story of baby Moses is a very familiar one amongst all churches in Oceania. It is one of the children's favourite stories. The situation surrounding the birth of Moses and that of Jesus seem to resonate, especially in relation to the murder of young children.

In the Moses story, Pharaoh responds to the increasing population of the Hebrews by giving orders to kill any Hebrew newborn who was a boy (Exodus 1:8-22, NRSV). In the Jesus story, after being tricked by the wise men, King Herod "was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under" (Matt 2:16, NRSV).

There's so much that can be learnt from the Exodus text. However, this bible study will be focusing only on one part of the human body, namely the hand – a part of our body which we use in everyday life.

Specifically, we will analyse how the hand is used to save and protect children from danger and harm.

Firstly, let us reflect on the hand by studying his image. A hand has 27 bones and 33 muscles (see diagram to the top right of the page).

Focus on your own hands. Isn't it amazing how they enable you to do good and helpful things for yourself and for others? Take time to appreciate this truth. As pointed out by medical doctor Bradon J Wilhelmi, "The anatomy of the hand is complex, intricate, and fascinating. Its integrity is absolutely essential for our everyday functional living. Our hands may be affected by many disorders, most commonly traumatic injury."[52]



There are various representations of hands displayed by the characters in our story. Hands that wield power, hands that slaughter, hands that provide care and protection, hands that are on the lookout, hands that are still, and hands that are vulnerable and dependent on other hands for wellbeing and survival.

THE AIM OF THIS BIBLE STUDY:

- To learn from the story and analyse various tasks that can be done by using our hands
- To learn to appreciate purposes and uses of our hands in ways that glorify God the maker
- To encourage the use of our hands wisely in ways that affirm, give and transform life
- To bring out our gifts and talents in order to care for and protect our children
- To warn about the potential to use our hands in harmful and abusive ways.

52 Bradon J Wilhelmi, "Hand Anatomy". See https://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1285060-overview. Cited 31/05/18

TEXT OF THE BIBLE: EXODUS 2:1-10 (ESV) 'THE BIRTH OF MOSES'

1 Now a man from the house of Levi went
and took as his wife a Levite woman.
2 The woman conceived and bore a son,
and when she saw that he was a fine child,
she hid him three months. 3 When she
could hide him no longer, she took for him
a basket made of bulrushes and daubed it
with bitumen and pitch. She put the child in
it and placed it among the reeds by the river
bank. 4 And his sister stood at a distance to
know what would be done to him. 5 Now the
daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe
at the river, while her young women walked
beside the river. She saw the basket among
the reeds and sent her servant woman, and
she took it. 6 When she opened it, she saw the
child, and behold, the baby was crying. She
took pity on him and said, "This is one of the
Hebrews' children." 7 Then his sister said to
Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and call you a
nurse from the Hebrew women to nurse the
child for you?" 8 And Pharaoh's daughter said
to her, "Go." So the girl went and called the
child's mother. 9 And Pharaoh's daughter said
to her, "Take this child away and nurse him
for me, and I will give you your wages." So
the woman took the child and nursed him.
10 When the child grew older, she brought him
to Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her
son. She named him Moses, "Because," she
said, "I drew him out of the water."

1. READING IN FRONT OF THE TEXT

a) Read the text together by going around the room reading one verse each.

b) As an entry point to the text, share any story that relates to it. Here's a birth story of the first ever Prime Minister in Solomon Islands, the late Sir Peter Kenilorea, that I extracted from his autobiography. He was born in 1943 during World War II.

Peter Kenilorea recounts in his book:

… the bombing created such alarm within the community that the entire population decided to take cover. Amidst this great excitement I almost became the sole casualty. My mother, bless her soul, was trying to run for safety like everyone else. She was nine months pregnant and about to give birth, but the fear of the planes was a greater problem at the time. Then, suddenly, she was in labour. Though the timing of my arrival was less than perfect, she momentarily forgot about her own safety, took time off to deliver me and thinking it would be the safest place, she quickly bundled me and the after-birth into a bamboo cluster on the edge of the village. While her intention was very noble and well meaning, she did, in her haste and distress, overlook a simple fact: bamboo clusters are normally ideal homes for black ants. And so, for a brief period, these ferocious black ants became my midwives. When the fighter raid ceased and Mum caught up with Dad, he noticed a change and asked her where she had been. It was then that she confessed that her newly born baby boy was hidden, not in a basket like baby Moses of the Old Testament, but in the bamboo clump! Dad rushed back with some midwives of a more traditional kind to attend to me. In 1943 no medical service facilities as we know them today existed for Solomon Islanders. My life rested entirely in the loving skilled hands of the women folk in that isolated community. There were also many prayers offered that day for my survival. Much to my parents' relief and delight, I survived my introduction to this unkind world.[53]

53 Peter Kenilorea, 2008, *Tell It As It Is: Autobiography of Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Kenilorea, KBE, PC Solomon Island's First Prime Minister.* Center for Asia-Pacific Area Studies: Taipei, 25

c) Participants are invited to share. It is a space for everyone present to feel that they belong to a group and a space for everyone to hear and recognise that we all have different stories.

d) Invite open sharing on what participants think the Exodus text is about. Invite participants to share what they already know about the text – whether they heard it preached from the pulpit, in church, at home, etc. Again, there are no right and wrong answers here. It is a space for participants to share and unpack what they already know. The leader can write on the board for all participants to see the list of associations we have with the text.

2. READING INSIDE THE TEXT

a) Who are the main characters in the text? And what does this text tell us about these characters and their relationship with each other?

b) Focusing on characters in the story, what positions of power do they have? Identify characters that have the greatest power down to those with the least power.

c) Identify different uses of hands in the text – hands of characters in the text. What are they doing, or what are they using their hands for in the text?

CHARACTERS

i) **Amram – Moses' father (Exodus 6:20, Numbers 26:59)**

The text does not tell us about what Moses' father was doing to save the baby. He is completely silent in the text. However, the fact that he was "a man from the house of Levi" (v.1), a designated priestly tribe, hints that he feared God more than King Pharaoh. We can, therefore, guess that he was also involved in trying to save his baby from being thrown into the River Nile. As a God-fearing man and father, he would have cared for the safety of his son and would have done what was within his power to save him.

ii) **Jochebed – Moses' mother (Exodus 6:20, Numbers 26:59)**

Moses' mother is the main character in our story. She could not allow her baby to be thrown into the Nile to drown or be eaten by river creatures. She hid the baby for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she created something to save him. It is clear from the brief description of how she built the basket and the material she used that she was very skilful with her hands and very knowledgeable. Clearly the basket she built was watertight.[54]

She used her hands to weave the basket and placed her baby carefully in it, making sure he was safe and protected inside. Born and raised as a Levite, in a priesthood background, she would have done the preparations prayerfully, with heavy heart, hoping and asking God to save her baby. She placed the basket among the reeds on the bank of the river. At three months old, babies can already turn and roll over. She placed the basket on the river bank, where it was shallow and close enough for care and feeding, and the safest option. She expected that the reeds will hold the basket in balance and prevent it from capsizing if the baby rolled and turned.

We can only imagine how overwhelmed she must have been when her daughter Miriam came running with excitement that the Princess wanted a nurse to look after baby Moses. Jochebed was providing all the care and basic necessities of the child. She raised, nurtured and cared for the child with freedom. Though she experienced separation from her son the second time when she gave him for adoption, she knew that the child was old enough to maintain his first teachings.

54 Bulrushes or papyrus was a thick, strong, and tough reed on the Nile; slime was the mud of the Nile which, when hardened, is very tenacious; bitumen or pitch-mineral tar. See: "Exodus 2: 1-10 Birth and Preservation of Moses," https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/exodus/exodus-2.html. Cited 7/8/2018.

iii) **Miriam – Moses' sister (Exodus 15: 20, Numbers 26:59)**

Miriam would probably be a girl of ten or twelve years of age at the time,[55] given that the siblings were mentioned twice in the bible. Miriam is mentioned in Exodus 15:20 as Aaron's sister, and in Numbers 26:59 all three of them are mentioned. In Exodus 15:20 she is referred to as "the prophet Miriam."

Even at puberty, she was smart to watch the basket *from a distance* so people would not be suspicious of it. The River Nile was a hostile and unsafe environment for any infant to be hidden away. There are more reptiles than just the famous Nile crocodile, along with ferocious fish. Miriam would have used her hands to wade her way through to see the basket, knowing that there were dangerous reptiles and fish under the water. Yet, she did all for the sake of making sure the baby was safe. Perhaps just as risky, she approached the Princess of Egypt and offered to find a nurse to look after the baby for her.

iv) **The Princess (Pharaoh's daughter)**

Bathing in the river was an occasion of religious solemnity. Particular sacredness was attached to the sections of the Nile which flowed near the temples. The water was fenced off as a protection from the crocodiles and likely the princess had an enclosure reserved for her own use.[56] Jochebed seemed to know the road to it. Providentially it was the Princess and not King Pharaoh himself who went to bathe in the river at the time. Imagine if it was Pharaoh who went to the bathing ritual and found Moses!

Opening the basket with her hands, the Princess saw the baby crying and she knew his identity as a Hebrew boy. Yet, she had compassion on him, knowing very well her father's decree to throw all the Hebrew baby boys into River Nile. The Princess agreed with the girl's suggestion and promised to give payment to Jochebed for feeding, raising and nurturing the baby.

v) **Servant woman (Princess' maid)**

The servant woman or the Princess's maid was there, obeying orders and getting the basket to the Princess. How would this scenario have ended differently had the maid decided to open the basket? Yet, the hand of providence resulted in the safety and wellbeing of the baby Moses.

vi) **Baby Moses**

The story of baby Moses makes small boys and girls sad, knowing the danger that small boys encountered during those times, especially as it was caused by decree of the authorities. When decisions and actions (or inactions) are based on greed and self-preservation, innocent children are often the victims. Children are the most vulnerable in society.

Moses was granted safety and protection by the hand of providence through the Princess. In the end, he was a free person and a royal son. There was no need to hide him any longer!



55 "Birth and Preservation of Moses," commentary by Robert Jamieson https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/jamieson-fausset-brown/exodus/exodus-2.html Sited 07/08/2018.

56 Ibid.

3. READING BEHIND THE TEXT

The text must be located in its wider social and historical context in order to move toward a more appropriate reading and interpretation for us today.[57] The story of baby Moses is placed within the context of King Pharaoh's decision to throw all Hebrew baby boys into the river Nile. The Israelites outnumbered the Egyptians and were now seen as a threat. The king therefore advised the two midwives Shiprah and Puah to kill baby boys of Hebrew women and save the baby girls. In ancient Israel, ethnicity was primarily patrilineal, so eliminating boys was an efficient way to wipe out the people.[58]

i) **King Pharaoh**

This Pharaoh did not know about Joseph, who saved Egypt and the world from a terrifying famine (Genesis: 39-47), so when Joseph died, the status of Israel in Egypt also died with him.[59] Israel's God forfeited them to marry other tribes who worship other gods, so the tendency to grow rapidly was very high. This population growth was seen as a threat by the King (Ex 1:8-10) because the Israelites could grow in number and join the Hittites to fight against his people. He also recognised the Israelites strength and wanted to keep their valuable labour to continue building his pyramid city.

Being the King, he did not hesitate to take many innocent young lives. He used his leadership role to take lives and to destroy the future of these baby boys. He had no respect for human identity and life. Often, power and greed allow people to dehumanise others, compromising our human dignity.

ii) **People of Egypt**

The ancient Egyptians were infamous for their proud sense of identity and racial superiority over all other people. It isn't surprising to see them fearful and persecuting a minority group in their midst, which looked as if it would not be a minority much longer.[60] Therefore, the command from the King to throw all Israelite baby boys into the Nile was largely not challenged by the people. The Egyptians aggressively forced their way into the homes of the Israelites and followed Pharaoh's orders.

iii) **Shapirah and Puah**

These two midwives received an order from the King to kill the baby boys of Hebrew women. Shapirah and Puah feared the God of Israel more than King Pharaoh, so they let the baby boys live. When they were summoned, their excuse was that the Hebrew women were different from the Egyptian because they gave birth before the midwives reached them. Whether or not they told the truth to the King is another matter! These two women had compassion for the Hebrew baby boys and allowed them to live. They also had passion for the value of life. Every birth they administered, they saw as a miracle and knew that as God gives life – they had no right to take it from the boys.

The God of Israel was pleased with them and therefore multiplied their families.

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57 See: Cliff Bird, 2016, *"Human Dignity and Gender Equality from a Biblical-Theological Perspective (Framework Paper)"*, UnitingWorld, Sydney, https://www.unitingworld.org.au/gendertheology/

58 HarperCollins Study Bible. Full Revised and Updated. HarperOne, 2006.

59 Enduring Word. Exodus 1: Israel Multiplies in Egypt. https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/exodus-1/. Sited 22/08/2018.

60 Ibid.

4. APPROPRIATING THE TEXT

To help the group appropriate the text for today's context, discuss the following questions:

1. Reflect on the characters above. Identify the characters in the story whose hand could represent your hand in relation to children.
2. The hand does most of the things that we think and feel for the children. We display and demonstrate skills, gifts and talents with our hands. We hold, cuddle, hug our babies to express that we love them and that we are there for them. We bathe babies, change their diapers, carry them when they cry and feed them with our hands to meet their needs. Yet, it is also with the same hand, that we physically hurt them by hitting, slapping or whipping them. Look at your hands. Thank God for your hands. Ask God to help you use your hands to be more creative, protecting and caring, more loving and affirmative. Use your hands in ways that are beneficial to children in your family, church and community. List down what you can do with your hands positively and constructively.
3. How can your church ensure the protection and care of children? Can we achieve this by ourselves, or by holding hands together?
4. Draw up a plan for the development of a child protection policy in your church. **The Child Protection Policy should include:**
   - Your organisation's commitment to child protection
   - Goal / objective
   - Context
   - Relevant definitions
   - Recruitment practices
   - Code of Conduct
   - Use of children's images
   - Reporting and response to situations of abuse and harm
   - Relevant laws
   - Staff (and stakeholder) training
   - Periodic review of the Policy[61]
5. Ask if a child protection policy is something that the whole church could hold to.

61 UnitingWorld's PowerPoint presentation @Tanoa International Nadi 28th June-1st July; DFAT Australian Aid Child Protection Policy 2013 – ACFID Webinar.

CONCLUDING REFLECTION

It is sad and indeed regrettable that the hands that:

- love are the same ones that hate.
- heal are the same ones that hurt.
- hold are the same ones that push away.
- give life are the same ones that take life.
- nurture life are the same ones that diminish.

Just as God fashioned and continues to fashion us according to God's own image and likeness, so we must use our hands to ensure that our children are safe, protected and cared for as best as possible. This is also what it means to live out our being created in God's image.



NOTES

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JESUS NOT ONLY ELEVATED CHILDREN, BUT PRESENTED THEM AS A CENTRAL PART OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

– SIERA BIRD



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