

Children in the Gospel of Luke

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the teachings and ministry of Jesus towards children in the Gospel according to Luke. This article will try to discover what the Gospel of Luke teaches about child theology. The research was done through exegesis and analysis of selected scriptures from the Gospel according to Luke about children and the teachings and ministry of Jesus towards children. Major commentaries, dictionaries and child-related books were used to develop this research. Previous studies on children and childhood have focused on the metaphoric expression of children in the Gospels. Children are considered as a means to teach adults about discipleship. However, this research has identified that children are part of the body of Christ and equally valued as adults. Thus, adults should know that welcoming children are welcoming Jesus and they should follow the teachings and ministry of Jesus towards children. This study has identified that Jesus is the friend of the outcast, such as children. The value of this article is theoretical, to add knowledge to the believing community about Jesus's teaching and ministry towards children. Practically, this article will present a guide based on the teachings of Jesus so that adults may welcome and serve children, considering them as part of the body who have equal value as the adults.

Introduction

This article focuses on the exegesis of texts related to children and childhood in the Gospel according to Luke. Thus, it will present an exposition of Jesus's interactions with children and his view of childhood as portrayed in the Gospel according to Luke. The objective of the article is to identify and formulate

perspectives from the Gospel of Luke about children and childhood, which can give insight into what believers' attitudes towards children ought to be. These perspectives can help the Christian community, parents and denominations to elevate the status of children in the life and ministry practices of their local churches.

The Gospel of Luke forms, with the Gospels according to Mark and Matthew, the Synoptic Gospels. These three gospels have much in common with each other (Muddiman and Barton 2010:134; Grobbelaar 2012:88). However, the Gospel according to Luke includes many episodes which are exclusive to it, such as the birth narratives of John and Jesus (Luke 1:5-2:52). The lengthy section (9:51-19:27) about Jesus's ministry in Galilee and on his way to Jerusalem covers ten chapters that make it in many ways different from the other gospels (Walvoord and Zuck 2000:np). Moreover, Jesus draws a lesson from the game children played (Luke 7:31-35) and also teaches his disciples that their disposition towards God is affirmed by the care given or not given to children (Luke 9:46-48; 18:15-17). Luke also emphasises the universal message of the Gospel more than the other gospels, focusing in this process on women and children and their faith (Knight 2005:4).

Although the presence of children among Jesus's followers is not recorded independently because of the low status of children in the social structure of that time, Luke's narrative reveals their persistent presence as part of the community who were following Jesus (Bunge 2001:44).

Jesus and Children

Luke mentioned Jesus in relation to children in the following passages:

- Jesus raised a widow's son from death (Luke 7:11-17);
- Jesus healed the 12-year-old daughter of Jairus, the ruler of the synagogue (Luke 8:41-42, 49-56);
- Jesus healed a boy with an evil spirit (Luke 9:37-43);

- Jesus refers to children in his teaching as illustrations of entering the kingdom of God and turns the service of children into a sign of greatness in the kingdom of God (Luke 9:46-48).

All of the above-mentioned narratives form part of Jesus's ministry in Galilee to indicate that children were included in the ministry of Jesus right from the beginning.

Jesus also welcomed the little children (Luke 18:15-17). This passage is the only interaction of Jesus with children that occurs in Jesus's journey to Jerusalem (9:51-19:44), where he will suffer and finally be crucified. It seems that Jesus wanted his followers to keep in mind that they should keep on accepting the little ones, the children.

The researcher will attend to these texts in more detail in section 4.

The Terms ‘Child’ and ‘Children’ in Gospel According to Luke

Children and childhood are social concepts that may overlap and fluctuate in the mind and imaginations of people (Green 2013:111). Therefore, it is important to attend to the different terminologies Luke used regarding children. The terms ‘child’ and ‘children’ are mentioned in various parts of the Gospel of Luke to signify different things. The Greek terms used for a child in the Gospel according to Luke, are the following (Guthrie 1990:65; Zodhiates (ed) 1991:176; Barton 1992:100-103; Fortress 2005:1; McNeil 2005:1; Danker 2009:74; Utley 2011:272)

- brephe (βρέφη)
- paidion (παιδίον)
- pais (παις)
- tekna (τέκνα)

These concepts are explained in the following paragraphs.

***Brephe* (βρέφη)**

The term *brephe* is mentioned eight times in the New Testament in which six of them are in Luke. In ancient Greek literature, *brephe* is used to describe both human and animal babies. (Schenker 2006:np; Allen 2016:71, 74) The term is used in Luke to refer to unborn babies and infants (Luke 1:41, 44) and an older infant in Luke 2:12, 16; and then again when people bring infants to Jesus so he might touch them in Luke 18:15 (Zodhiates (ed) 1991:1698; Danker 2009:74; Utley 2011:272). *Brephe* is also defined as a newborn baby or a very small child, baby or infant (Vine 1985:np; Danker 2000:34). Luke probably uses *brephe* to stress the dependent condition of children.

***Paidion* (παιδίον)**

Paidion refers to children from a very young age up to the age of seven years (Danker 2000:1411; Fortress 2005:1). The term *paidion* is used more often in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:59, 2:21, 40) than the other terms mentioned when referring to a newborn child (Schenker 2006:np; Green 2013:111). At the time when Jesus was teaching on prayer, he used parents and children (*paidia*) in his teaching as an object lesson (Luke 11:7). *Paidia* is also used for the demon-possessed boy who was freed by Jesus (Luke 9:38, 42), seeing him as a little child (Betsworth 2015:np).

***Pais* (παις)**

Pais refers to a young person normally below the age of puberty although it is sometimes used to denote someone who is young, a servant and one's own immediate offspring (Danker 2000:1412; Schenker 2006:np). Hippocrates labels *pais* as the second stage of development just after *paidion* and therefore, applies it to children from seven to fourteen years old (Fortress 2005:1; Zodhiates 1991:1744; Vine 1985:np). *Pais* can also refer to a child age range from a newborn to the time of youth (Danker 2009:263; Betsworth 2015:np). Luke, when mentioning the boy Jesus, attending the Passover with his parents (Luke 2:41-51), used the Greek term *pais* because Jesus was 12 years old. Furthermore, Jairus's daughter (Luke 8:51, 54), a 12-year-old girl, is also referred to using the word *pais*.

***Teknon / tekna* (τέκνον / τεκνα)**

Teknon refers to children in general, figuratively or literally, mostly interpreted as related to descent (Fortress 2005:1; Schenker 2006:np). In Luke 3:8 John the Baptist used the term children (*tekna*) to indicate genuine descendants of Abraham. Jesus used children (*tekna*) in his teaching in Luke 7:32 to refer to the generation of his time and in Luke 7:35 children (*tekna*) are described figuratively as followers of wisdom (Allen 2016:73, Vine 1985:np). Luke (2:48) also addressed Mary calling the child Jesus *tekna* (Zodhiates (ed) 1991:1761). In addition, Luke used *teknon* when speaking about Elizabeth and Zachariah, mentioning that they had no child (Luke 1:7). *Tekna* is also used in Jesus's teaching on forsaking everything for the sake of the kingdom of God (Luke 14:26 and 18:29). When the Sadducees asked Jesus about marrying a brother's wife after his death without having a child in Luke 20:9, the term *tekna* is used.

All these Greek terms mentioned above, except *tekna*, are used in the Gospel of Luke to refer to non-adult children.

Interpretation of passages about children

This section will focus on the interpretation of different passages which mention children in the Gospel according to Luke. The literary context where the words child and children occur shows that Luke was concerned with the marginalised in society such as children, the poor and outcasts (Utley 2011:2; Moessner 2005:149).

The researcher will start to examine the first two chapters of the Gospel to discover what the infancy narratives about Jesus and John the Baptist, and Jesus as a 12-year-old in the temple disclose. Then the only son and daughter mentioned in Luke 8:40-56 and 9:37-43 will be examined. The passages on the child in the midst of the disciples stated in Luke 9:46-48 and the bringing of the children mentioned in Luke 18:15-17 will also be examined.

Although Luke does not mention children directly in every part of his book, the presence of children is evident throughout Jesus's adult ministry at homes of various people. Jesus's ministry at Simon's home (Luke 4:38-41), Martha and Mary's home (Luke 10:38-42), in Jesus's teaching about prayer (Luke 11:5-7), and the visit to Zacchaeus's home (19:1-10) are some of the passages that may

imply the presence of children as part of the community. The researcher will not discuss these texts, but the view of the possible presence of children in these passages may be an important fact to take into consideration in trying to discern Luke and Jesus's views of children.

Luke 1 and 2

The first two chapters of Luke contain unique information about the birth of the Messiah and John the Baptist (Richards 2015:41). The birth of the two babies and the joy that several individuals experienced are stated in this section (Luke 1:46-55, 68-79; 2:14; 29, 32).

The structure of the first two chapters of the gospel according to Luke is: Prologue (Luke 1:1-4); Annunciations of the two miraculous births (1:5-56); and the births of the two children (1:56-2:52). The prologue to Luke's gospel (Luke 1:1-4) deals with the importance of the events the author is describing and establishing a guide for his work. It also shows Luke's ability to gather information from other writers and his own investigation to transfer knowledge to others (Parsons et al. 2010, 1). Bovon (2002:1) and Parsons et al. (2010:16) state that Luke's reference to preceding writers and his own effort to gather the real story about Jesus, claim to be a narrative with a didactic purpose.

The rest (Luke 1:5–2:52) is organised into two sections focusing on John the Baptist and Jesus as children: the annunciations (Luke 1:5-56) and their births (Luke 1:56–2:52). Each part closes with a complementary episode: the visitation, (1:39-56), and the second part with the boy Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:41-52) (Parsons 2015: 39). This shows that there is a similarity of structure present in these two parts. Constable (2005:20) opined that this similar structure of the birth narratives of John the Baptist and Jesus enables comparison between the two boys. The similarity of the structure can be presented as follows: Introduction of the parents (Luke 1:5-7; 1:26-27); the appearance of an angel (Luke 1:8-23; 1:28-30); giving of a sign (Luke 1:18-20; 1:34-38); and pregnancy of a childless woman (Luke 1:24-25; 1:42).

The stories of the two miraculous births are marked with prophetic and angelic witnesses and the joy that several individuals expressed, including the joy of the unborn John who leaps at the coming of the pregnant Mary (Luke 1:41-44,

46-55, 2:14, 29-32). Children are used by God to accomplish His eternal purpose to save humanity. Utley (2011:5) confirms this idea saying that the arrival of John and Jesus shows a new beginning in salvation history and the fulfilment of God's promise to save humanity. That is why Jesus is mentioned as the promised Messiah in the words of Simeon and Anna (Luke 2:34-35). The prophecy of the angel Gabriel about John the Baptist and Jesus's life and ministry showed that children are important and that God has a plan for their lives. The first mention of children in the Gospel of Luke is "no children" (Luke 1:7).

The Greek term used in connection with the conception and birth of the two miraculous births, John and Jesus, is *brephe*, a term used to refer to unborn babies and infants as indicated above. After the angel announced Mary's conception, she went to Zachariah's home to visit Elizabeth. At that moment, the child within Elizabeth leapt and then she shouted out in joy. The child is referred to with the Greek term *brephe* (1:41, 44). It also signifies an older infant (Luke 2:12, 16) and the infant John just after birth and at his circumcision (Luke 1:59, 66, 76, 80). In the announcement of Jesus's birth to the shepherds, Luke again uses the word *brephe* (2:12.16). This shows that even infants who were not counted and considered as equal members of the community were accepted by the adults. They were also mentioned as a means of joy for the adults (Luke 1:58).

Unlike Matthew, Mark and John, Luke's first section contains birth and infancy narratives. Luke mentioned children in his first section to emphasise the value of children. Allen (2016:343) affirms that although the Mediterranean context does not consider children important, Luke mentioned children in chapters 1 and 2 to show that God has fulfilled his promise to his people using children. Therefore, Luke's focus on pregnancy and babies was to show that God is also concerned with the babies in the womb and after birth. Luke also wants to show that although both babies did not know anything about their future, God knows and speaks to their parents about their future and how he will use them. Jesus's birth in a manger may represent children who are from poor families but are also considered as of equal value as any child from a socially high status.

In general, the narrative about the birth of the two babies seems to show that even babies are important to God and are welcomed by God.

Jesus at the age of twelve (Luke 2:41–51)

The story about the boy Jesus at the age of twelve attending the Passover with his parents in Jerusalem and visiting the Temple (Luke 2:41–51) is unique to Luke. Luke connects the childhood story of Jesus with a much older custom linked to the commandment to go up to the central holy place for the three pilgrimage festivals (Exodus 23:14-17; 34:18-23 and Deuteronomy 16:1, 9-10, 16-17). Jesus and his parents travelled to the festival city as part of a procession of pilgrims, including children, journeying from their homes to Jerusalem. After the Passover festivities, while Mary and Joseph make their way back to their home in Nazareth, the 12-year-old Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. It seems that Luke mentioned it to disclose Jesus's insight, as a child, of his special relationship with God (Oden and Just 2003:53; Trites 2006:63).

Luke used *paidion* to describe Jesus as a little child under seven years (Luke 2:40) and *pais* as a 12-year-old child attending the Passover with his parents in Jerusalem (Schenker 2006:np). This shows that Jesus was part of the group that attended the festival (Luke 2:41). Jesus, in both periods, as *paidion and pais*, was revealed in the temple (Luke 2:41-51).

Luke's inclusion of the summaries in Luke 2:40 and 2:52 shows that Jesus's uncommon wisdom may display his divine qualities, which marked him as the fulfilment of Israel's hopes and the saviour of the world (Franklin 2001:145). This is the only incident from Jesus's boyhood that is described in the Bible.

Luke's emphasis in chapters 1 and 2 seems to be on Jesus's and John the Baptist's birth and their mission that shows children are a valuable part of the community. Moreover, they were present in the temple and among the adults who were observing the feast. Jesus's wisdom and his awareness are also mentioned to show that children were present in the public and religious sphere. Therefore, Jesus's reception by Anna and Simeon as an infant, and by the teachers and elders at the temple at age of twelve, invokes an expectation of general acceptance.

Luke 8:40-56

Luke 8 is divided into two major parts: teachings and miracles (Walvoord and Zuck 2000:np). It can be divided as follows:

- Jesus's teachings about various responses to his ministry – 8:1-21
- Jesus's ministry through a series of miracles – 8:22-56

Luke 8:40-56 narrates the stories of Jairus requesting healing for his daughter and a woman who has suffered from chronic bleeding and sought healing from Jesus. Jesus was urgently called to heal the dying 12-year-old daughter (*pais*) of Jairus, a synagogue leader (Danker 2009:263). On his way to Jairus's home, Luke tells another story about a woman who had been suffering from bleeding for 12 years (Luke 8:43-49). Luke mentioned the age of the girl at the beginning to show the audience the connection between the girl and the woman (Garland 2011:371; Carroll 2012:198). The girl has been alive for as long as the woman has been ill (8:43). The 12-year-old daughter and the woman whose haemorrhage had proven incurable for 12 years were both desperate. The two connected through their common experience of sickness and social isolation (Kernaghan 2007:108). Jesus addresses the woman as 'daughter' (v 37) and the girl as 'my child' (v 53).

The desperate woman touched Jesus (8:45-46). Jesus was not annoyed about the woman's touch although she had made him unclean in the eyes of the law (Leviticus 15:25-30). As she touched the edge of his cloak, she was instantly healed. Reaching out to Jesus and touching his cloak was an act of faith (Ulrich 2001:40). Maybe she heard about all the miraculous healings Jesus did. She came with some expectation to Jesus. She trusted Jesus to heal her. And Jesus did. Luke inserted the story during Jesus's journey to Jairus's house to show Jesus's compassion for the lowly, the poor, the sick, and the marginalised people in the society (Garland 2011:371).

Then, while Jesus was still on his way to Jairus's house a person came from the house of Jairus and informed them that the child had died. Thus, there is no need for Jairus to bother the teacher anymore. However, Jesus, ignoring what they said, assured Jairus that it was not the end and continued his journey to Jairus's house. The 12-year-old Jewish girl was a young lady of marriageable

age. However, she was apparently going to die just as she was about to begin another life. Although from a human viewpoint, there was no hope of healing the child, Jesus valued the child and went to heal her.

Seeking to save the desperate girl who was not able to approach him, calling her 'my child' and informing her family to give her something to eat shows Jesus's love and heart of compassion for her. Jesus has as much concern for the children as He has for the adults and He was also compelled to act out of compassion for her desperate father because she was his only daughter. With this miracle, Luke indicated that children have a place equal to that of adults in the kingdom.

The other synoptic gospels similarly narrate this story. However, Matthew's account differs from Luke and Mark by omitting the instruction to her parents to give her something to eat. Mark has added the injunction 'not to tell anyone' (O'Grady 2007:71). Luke alone wrote that the girl was Jairus's only (Gr. *monogenes*) daughter (Luke 8:42). The use of 'only daughter' shows the daughter is the only hope of her father to maintain the family line (Phillips 2005:141; Spencer 2019:229). Her loss would be painful to Jairus because he would have no offspring and she was already nearing the age at which she can give life to others.

Luke used the Greek term '*pais*' to refer to the 12-year-old girl to show that she is dependent on her parents and not able to help herself. And although the culture around does not count children as part of the covenant community, Jesus has visited and healed her (Edwards 2015:258). The girl was accepted by the messiah and included as part of his covenant community.

Luke 9:1-62

Luke 9 covers stories that are part of the third and fourth parts of the structure of the Gospel according to Luke. Luke 9:1-50 forms part of the third part in Luke's structure, Jesus's ministry in Galilee, focusing on the teaching of His disciples. In Luke 9:51 the fourth part of Luke's structure, Jesus's journey to Jerusalem, starts. Luke 9:1-50 includes two separate stories about children: the healing of the demon-possessed boy (Luke 9:37-43) and the child mentioned as the least in the story of Jesus's teaching about greatness (Luke 9:46-48).

Luke 9:37-43

Luke 9:37 states that a crowd was following Jesus. According to verse 38, a man called on Jesus to heal his son. Verse 39 describes the son as possessed by a demon. The man was desperate because the disciples could not help his son. They failed to cast the demon out of him. Therefore, he calls on Jesus to help his son. He is the father's only hope. His son's condition was extremely critical. This is emphasised by Luke stating in verse 42 that the boy was thrown to the ground, suffering convulsions when approaching Jesus.

In addition, the boy's father might have experienced much distress and lost hope after the disciples failed to cast the demons out of him. However, Jesus who always brings help and deliverance to suffering people, responded with concern and healed the boy and restored him to his father (Luke 9:42). Jesus's answer, focusing on describing the boy's symptoms that emphasise the severity of his case (Luke 9:39), shows his concern for the child.

The term used to refer to the demon-possessed boy who was freed by Jesus (Luke 9:38, 42) is *paidia* (Betsworth 2015:np). Thus, the child is under seven years old. This little child was recognised by God and restored to health by Jesus as a valued member of the community. The boy has been stigmatised by society. This stigma could arise from the clean and unclean issues of the Jewish community and the honour and shame culture of Roman antiquity (Allen 2016:192). However, Luke wants to indicate the boy's inclusion in his community after Jesus had liberated him from this stigma.

Luke did not identify the boy's condition as epilepsy, as Matthew did (Mt 17:15) because he probably wanted his readers to understand clearly that his convulsions resulted from demonic influence (Luke 9:42) and not mere sickness. Luke described the demon's action in the boy with the phrase "threw him to the ground" to show the severity of the case, which is not included in Matthew (17:15-16) and Mark (9:18). The conversation between Christ and the father of the boy about the boy's disorder mentioned by Matthew (Mt 17:14-20) is not mentioned in Luke (Gooding 2013:175). The necessity and possibility of faith stated by Mark (Mk 9:21-24) are also not mentioned by Luke. This suggests that Luke's concern was more on the severity of the case and Jesus's concern and action to heal the demon-possessed boy than on their

conversation. Jesus was compassionate to the desperate boy and his hopeless father because the boy was his only son.

Only Luke records that the boy was his father's only son (Gk, *monogenēs*) and the father's appeal was based upon this fact (Luke 9:38). The "only son" here is a reality that reminds us of earlier accounts (Luke 7:12 and 8:42) of an only child. It emphasises that the son is the only hope of his father for offspring. If the son dies the family line will not be maintained (Green 1997:388; Edwards 2015:2). Only Luke states that when the boy was cured Christ gave the boy back to his father (Luke 9:42). This shows Jesus's concern and compassion towards the child as well as to the father and his needs. Only Luke recorded the impact of Jesus's miracle on the crowds: "they were all amazed at the majesty of God" (Luke 9:43). Yes, the majesty of God was revealed in Jesus's concern for a little boy, a demon-possessed boy, stigmatised and excluded by the community, but included in Jesus's ministry (Phillips 2005:233). In this, Jesus again showed that his kingdom values differ from the values of the Jewish people and of the surrounding Mediterranean culture (Balla 2003, 102; Allen 2016, 343). Although children were not important in their world, Jesus demonstrates here how important all the children, even the stigmatised, are in his kingdom. With the healing of this boy, Jesus in essence challenged the traditional views of children in the first century Mediterranean world in a radical way (Grobbelaar 2012:19).

Luke 9:46-48

Luke 9:46-48 describes the narrative about the argument about 'who is the greatest' which arose among the disciples during Jesus's journey to Jerusalem. Evans and Porter (2000:158) suggested that perhaps the competition between the disciples was created due to the failure of the nine to cast out the demon (Luke 9:40) and the three who went on the mountain with Jesus (Luke 9:28). It seems that the disciples failed to understand Jesus's announcement about his death (Luke 9:44). Perhaps, they were captive to the societal norms of their day, in which one only gains status and power at the expense of another (Green 1997:388). Thus, they became more concerned with greatness in the sense of position and prestige for themselves (Luke 9:46).

This pericope must be interpreted in the light of the socio-cultural context of the first-century Mediterranean world where children and their concerns were marginalised in favour of the adult agenda (Balla 2003, 102; Rhodin 2011:16)). Garland (2011:404) and Allen (2016:100) affirm that in the first-century Mediterranean world children were treated as equal to slaves, subject to abuse, with very little status and protection under Jewish law. However, the text should be read based on what Jesus tried to communicate to his disciples, so that it may be clearly understood. The attitude of the disciples likely comes from the Jewish tradition. Carroll (2001:122-123) stated it as follows:

Childhood in itself was regarded as a stage of immaturity, ignorance and deficient reason; therefore, education played a critical role in molding persons for adulthood. Evidently educational practices routinely employed severe discipline, both verbal and physical. Voices of moderation and restraint can also be heard. Plutarch advocated a balance between sharp rebuke and praise, and Quintilian goes even further, commending praise for good work and opposing harsh physical treatment as an educational practice. The place of children within early Judaism, as in the broader Hellenistic and Roman social worlds, is marked by ambiguity and ambivalence. As we would expect, the Christian scriptures also reflect these cultural patterns.

Jesus, knowing their inner thoughts, took a little child (*paidion*), had him stand by his side, and exhorts his disciples to welcome little children (*ta paidia*) (Spencer 2019:251). The word 'receive' (Luke 9:48) can be interpreted as welcoming and respecting the person and showing respect for the person (Green 1997:392). The phrase 'in my name' (Luke 9:48) means following my example. To receive 'in my name' may also mean to recognise the child's relationship with and identification through Jesus as a follower of Jesus (Parsons 2015:159).

Jesus identifies himself with children. The implication is that when children come to a person, it is Jesus and God that come into the life of that person (Spencer 2019:259). To ignore, not welcoming the child, is to ignore Jesus, to ignore God because accepting children is accepting Jesus and God the Father. In other words, the attitude they show towards children is the same as their

attitude towards Jesus and the Father. France (2013: 172) affirms this view saying that “to welcome does not only mean to be nice to children but taking seriously and indeed giving priority to those whom one may be tempted to despise or ignore.”

In the story, Jesus said: “whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me.” And “for whoever is least among you all is the greatest” (Luke 9:48). These sayings are unique to Luke. Luke’s message focuses on the attitude and action of Jesus in accepting, including children among the adults and respecting them (Parsons 2015:159). That is why Luke has omitted what Matthew and Mark have stated about becoming like the child in behaviour. Hendriksen (2002:519) affirms that Luke’s focus is on the attitude of Jesus towards children, which is different from Matthew and Mark who mentioned children as models to the adults.

Mark mentions the real child first and then moves directly to urge the disciples to welcome “one such child” (Mk 9:37). Similarly, Matthew focuses at first on the real child and then turns to use the child as a metaphoric example by exhorting the disciples to follow. But Luke makes the presence of the child as a real individual previously present among Jesus’s disciples (Carroll 2012:225). This shows that Luke’s emphasis is on Jesus’s solidarity with the child, and the disciples were supposed to do the same.

Both Matthew and Mark tell us that Jesus put a child among the disciples, while in Luke Jesus placed the child by his side. Luke’s mentioning ‘the child was by Jesus’s side’ is a demonstration of Jesus’s friendship with the little child much more than in Matthew and Mark (Bailey 1995:63; Nolland 1993:570; Berryman 2009:14). For Luke, the child is there as one person among the adult followers of Jesus and an example of the least to the disciples (Parsons 2015:159). This shows that Jesus identifies himself with children, who are to be treated as Jesus’s representative by the adults. In a broader sense Jesus meant that instead of seeking status for themselves, His disciples should give their attention to the needs of people who have no status, people like children. Because when the disciples minister to a child with no status, they visibly show that they welcome Jesus and God the Father into their lives (Carroll 2012:225).

In this section, Luke wants to show his readers that this child, and by extension all other children, are already understood to be a part of the Kingdom and that they are valued children of God. Contrary to the status of children in the first-century Mediterranean world, Jesus raised the status of children among his followers and showed equal respect and honour to them.

Luke 18:15-17

This section is presented as part of Jesus's journey to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51-19:44) and focuses on the story that emphasises receiving the kingdom as a child (Luke 18:17).

In Luke 19:1-43, Luke mentioned the widow who was looking for justice (:1-8), the tax collector (:10-14), the child (:15-17), and the poor (:22) as examples of the little ones (Carson and Moo 2009, 221). Jesus, who would be mocked, insulted, flogged and finally killed (:32-33), and the blind man (:43) are also examples of the little ones. All of them are part of those who are not accepted by the Jewish community (Craddock 1990:212; Constable 2005:212). The story of the child is placed in between two stories of the little ones: the tax collector (Luke 18:10-14) and the poor (Luke 18:18-25). Luke expands 'receiving the kingdom as a child' (Luke 18:17) to include other outcasts such as the widow, the tax collector, the poor and the blind to show that Jesus is concerned about the little ones (Craddock 1990:212). By doing this Luke wants to teach his audience to accept children and those who are socially rejected, just as Jesus did to these babies.

The terms used for children in this passage are *brephos*, which means infants (KJV) or babies (NIV), and *paidion* for children under age seven (Fortress 2005:1; Danker 2009:74). Thus, the children here were under age seven, most probably even babies, whose social position were marginal in the first-century Graeco-Roman world (Carroll 2001:127). Although *brephe* refers to infants or little children, the most dependent state of human existence that requires their mothers' care, Jesus accepted or welcomed even the most vulnerable ones by saying "Let the little children (*brephe*) come to me ..." (Luke 18:15-17). It seems that the *brephe* and *paidion* brought to Jesus shows that most probably infants and little children were among the crowd following Jesus (Jeffrey 2012:218). Moreover, Luke emphasised that even the infant (*brephe*)

is welcomed and accepted by God and the term *brephe* seems to recall Jesus's infancy narrative (Luke 2:12, 16) which identifies him with babies and children.

The background to the story appears to be the practice of bringing children to the elders or scribes for a prayer of blessing upon them on the evening of the Day of Atonement (Marshall 1987:682; Bunge 2001:37; Hendriksen 2002:829). Children were brought, probably by their parents or close relative, so that Jesus might touch them for healing and blessing with the hope to protect them from evil and preserve their lives (Garland 2011:728). The attitude of the disciples towards children seems to be affected by the ancient Near Eastern view of children (Green 1997:392). Although Jesus warned the disciples not to reject children (9:48), they made the same mistake here. By rebuking and sending the children away, the disciples did not understand what Jesus had taught them in the section discussed above. As a result, they did not want Jesus to be bothered by infants. However, Jesus ordered the disciples to allow the little ones to come to Him (Luke 18:16) and exhorts them not to hinder them for the kingdom of God belongs to the little ones (Morris 1992:291).

In the Graeco-Roman world, a man did not touch children, but Jesus did (Clark 2002: 239; Carroll 2008:182). Touch implies that Jesus would place his hands on the children and bless them, which is an action the apostles should imitate (Parsons 2015:267). Jesus taught his disciples to welcome children because welcoming children means welcoming God (Luke 9:46-48). God is coming into the disciples' life through children. If they do not receive, welcome, greet a child, they are not welcoming God in their life. In this passage Jesus models behaviour in the kingdom of God, which is to receive children who are the least in the society. The term "least" refers to the status of children in the eyes of the world: Children had no status in the surrounding culture (Garland 2011:404). However, Jesus urged the disciples to welcome children and to receive them as part of the community following Jesus, for they are the important ones in the kingdom of God.

The parallel passages in the other synoptic gospels are found in Matthew 19:13-15 and Mark 10:13-16. Luke seems to parallel the Marcan text more closely than Matthew. In relation to the story stated in Luke 18, all the synoptic gospels have similar ideas and much in common (Clark 2002:239):

- People wanted Jesus to touch children;
- The disciples tried to prevent them from coming to Jesus;
- Jesus exhorts the disciples to let children come to him;
- He compares receiving the kingdom to receiving a child;
- He allowed children in his presence or touched them. Jesus's touching of children is an act of welcoming or receiving, which the disciples were supposed to imitate because welcoming extended to children becomes a welcome extended to God.

The pronouncement about receiving the kingdom like a child in Luke 18:17 and Mark 10:15 is omitted by Matthew. Matthew mentioned the issue of causing the little ones to sin (Matthew 18:5) which is not mentioned in either Mark or Luke.

Luke used the word 'infants' (*brephe*) in 18:15 for the children, whereas both Matthew and Mark have a different word for children (*paidia*) which is used for older children (Guthrie 1990:65; Zodhiates 1991:1761; Barton 1992:103). Luke uses *brephe* to stress the dependent condition of these children who were not considered as fully human and valuable in the ancient world (Constable 2005:211). Luke may also have used the word *brephe* to emphasise the contrast between Jesus's attitude towards children and the disregard for children in the ancient world, including Judaism (Kodell 1987:425; Utley 2011:272).

Blenkinsopp (1997:66-67) said that in the ancient world children were socially equal to slaves, with very few rights, not protected under many Jewish laws and subject to abuse. That is why Luke used the term "touch", while Matthew and Mark explained it in greater detail by expanding it to the following: "laying his hands on" and "praying" by Matthew, and "laying his hands on" and "blessing them" by Mark. It seems that Luke focuses on 'touch', which is directly related to his message that shows blessings, welcoming and showing love to children (Jeffrey 2012:218).

Summary of the Theological Meaning of the Passages

Luke mentions “child” and “children” many times to show that children are important and equally valued as the adults in God’s kingdom. Luke’s account of the celebration of John and Jesus’s births, their infancies and circumcision, and Passover celebrations shows the welcoming and inclusion of children as part of the covenantal community (Luke 1 & 2). Jesus’s presence in the temple and his discussion with the teachers (Luke 2:36) also show that children are an important part of the kingdom of God and the community at large.

Luke’s message shows that the kingdom belongs to children, the little ones (Luke 18:16). Luke also described Jesus as the friend and defender of children who identified Himself with them by bringing them by his side, touching them, and healing them (Luke 9:42; 8:55), as a sign of welcoming them in his kingdom, regardless of their age (Luke 9:48; 18:15-17). Grassi (1992:904) confirms that the Gospel of Luke could well be called the “Gospel of ‘little children’” because it teaches us those infants are welcomed by Jesus and included as equals to adults in the kingdom of God.

Moreover, children in Luke are present as the least in the community and humility is seen through associating with the least in the society (Luke 9:48). To enter into the kingdom of God one must receive the child (the least) rather than oppose or hinder them from coming to Jesus (Luke 18:16-17). Welcoming children is taken as an outcome of following Jesus (Luke 9:48); thus, those who do not welcome children cannot claim that they are following Jesus. Jensen (2005:130) and Clark (2002:238) confirm that Jesus’s teaching to his disciples affirms that welcoming children reflects one’s disposition towards God because receiving children means receiving Jesus and the Father (Luke 9:48).

Therefore, as presented in Luke’s interpretation, Jesus is a friend of children who assigns significance to children and cares for them as valuable beings, equal with adults. Berryman (2009:184) and Utley (2011:272) affirm that Jesus gives a prominent place to children, accepts them as valuable, and identifies them with the kingdom in his ministry and wants his followers to follow his attitude and actions regarding children.

In a broader sense, Luke's Gospel emphasises Jesus's love and care for those whom the Jewish leaders neglected and never even noticed such as children, women, widows and sinners. Thus, adults who accept the message of Jesus are instructed to be friends of children, to welcome them and care for them so they may honour Jesus. Darrell (1996:281) and Betsworth (2015:np) affirm that adults are directed to welcome children just as Jesus loved, protected, accepted, and respected them as equal to adults, despite their low status and powerlessness.

Luke's gospel presents the following patterns of the kingdom of God which followers of Jesus should follow so that they may honour God:

- To welcome children - Luke 1 and 2; 9:47-50; 18:15-17;
- To include children as part of Jesus's followers – Luke 9:48; 18:15-17;
- To show love and give care for children, even to the infants – Luke 9:42; 55; 18:15-17;
- To be humble and accept the least such as children, for the kingdom of God belongs to them – Luke 9:48; 18:16;
- To accept that children are fully human and valuable and should be respected as equal to adults – Luke 9:48; 18:17;
- To welcome and respect, in a broader sense, all the little ones, the outcasts and children in the society and the community of believers, as Jesus accepted them – Luke 9:48. Thus, failing to welcome children implies the rejection of Jesus and God.
- To have a high view of children, as illustrated by Jesus, as God's representatives amongst us.

Guidelines for Practical Implications

The purpose of this article is to examine what Luke stated in his Gospel about Jesus's attitude towards and teachings regarding children. The outcome shows

that Jesus has welcomed, loved and cured children just as He did to adults. He also taught his followers to do the same. Jesus said, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all—he is the greatest." (Luke 9:48) This shows that adults, as true followers of Jesus, are called to welcome children and include them in the kingdom of God. Bunge (2001:24) affirms that all parents, the church, and the state play a significant role in protecting, raising and educating children.

Therefore, adults should know their responsibilities and obligations towards children in welcoming them and respecting their emotions, as Luke has stated in his gospel about Jesus's attitude and teaching regarding children.

The following are guidelines for the church, parents, mentors and the believing community at large based on Jesus's attitude and teachings regarding children as identified in the Gospel according to Luke.

The Church

The Church has a responsibility to nurture and protect children. However, today the church has abdicated its role of caring for and protecting children (Greener and Oladipo 2013:70).

In Africa, the neglect and abuse of children are due to the harsh and negative attitude of adults towards children, as is confirmed in many African proverbs (Grobelaar 2016, 87). Thus, the church should work to bring change in the attitude of adults towards children and protect them from all forms of abuse and exploitation (ACPF 2016: 3, 7) in conformity with the biblical standard as seen in the teaching and ministry of Jesus.

Traditionally, children have been largely ignored in most of the church's ministries (Greener and Oladipo 2013:128). We may say children are welcome and free to participate in the church but this is far removed from the practice in most of the churches (McConnel et al. 2007:243). Therefore, the church should know her responsibility to train and equip parents on how to nurture and lead children following the examples of parents in the Gospel of Luke who brought their children to Jesus, for blessings and seeking healing (Luke 8:41, 9:38–39, 18:15). The church should also select mentors who are gifted, mature

and compassionate ministers who are willing to serve children and prepare them for effective ministry through training and developing good characteristics by following the model of Jesus. Moreover, the church should make an impact in the community including the government where children are not given proper care and protection because to welcome and love children may require to more directly challenge the violence affecting children and the social and political forces that marginalise them.

Parents

Parents are primarily responsible for nurturing and caring for their children, who are given to them by God for a reason (Brewster 2010:np). What parents teach or fail to teach their children in the privacy of their homes will someday have public consequences. As parents who were concerned about their children and brought them to Jesus for blessing and healing (Luke 8:54–56; 9:42; 18:15–16), today’s parents should also give care and protection to their children regularly. In this way, children can be welcomed, protected, saved and nurtured in their spiritual life at home.

Luke also emphasised the inclusion of children, as part of their family, in the kingdom of God by describing the celebrations of the birth of Jesus and John the Baptist (Luke 1 and 2). Therefore, parents should nurture, protect and guide their children. Parents may tend to use physical punishment as a means to teach, guide and nurture children. However, parents are supposed to discipline their children properly in a humble spirit without humiliating and hurting them, for that makes them feel unloved and weird (Kostenberger 2010:104).

Mentors

Mentors play a vital role, next to parents, in the process of nurturing children. Children need well-trained mentors because they need much care, for mostly they are restless and easily hurt. Thus, mentors should equip themselves so that they may follow Jesus’s attitude and teaching regarding children because teaching children includes patience, being sensitive, living an exemplary life in love and praying for them.

Moreover, mentors should also work creatively and cooperatively with parents and the church for the well-being of children.

The believing community

We are to love, help, and protect children who are the symbol of all who are weak, helpless and dependent. In doing so, we serve Him and His Father as well (Philips 2005:151). Every adult is directly or indirectly involved in a child's life whether parents, family, neighbourhoods, school or society (White 2008:11). The believing community's social life is where children should enjoy being members of God's family. Luke used the stories of children to remind his readers and all believing communities today of their responsibility to welcome the marginalised children into their midst through giving care and hospitality to them and identifying with them. In his interaction with children, Jesus taught his disciples a new way of viewing children in contrast to the surrounding Mediterranean cultures where adults had a very low view of children (Fortress 2005:18, 19; Allen 2016, 25).

Moreover, besides giving care and protection, adults must take care not to be stumbling blocks or obstacles for them. Jesus strictly rebuked those who let children stumble or hinder them from coming to Him (Luke 18:15-17). Thus, to be a friend and defender of children, adults should follow the teaching, attitudes and practice of Jesus towards children and act accordingly. If adults learn to be humble and accept children as Jesus did (Luke 9:48) they glorify God and can create a welcoming world for children.

Strategies

To implement the guidelines stated above and influence adults to change the common views about children to be more in accordance with Jesus's view of children as expressed in the Gospel of Luke, possible strategies are necessary.

The key possible strategies are stated as follows:

Creating awareness

Speaking clearly and freely on behalf of children and families is one of the best means to create awareness. The church is the primary body responsible to acknowledge the theological importance of children and their rightful place as members of the believing community and beyond (McConnel et al. 2007:243). The church should also create awareness in the government and the community at large about their part in enhancing children's well-being and

helping them to achieve a better life. This can be done, through training, discussions and workshops.

Teaching/Training

The church has the responsibility to equip parents, mentors and the believing community. This can be done through teachings on how to welcome, love, give care and protect children by following the example of Jesus, so that adults may change their attitude towards children. In teaching the believing community, ethical issues concerning children should be considered. The church should also teach children how to respect the authority of their parents and grow healthy as good citizens in their country and faithful ministers in the kingdom of God (Grobbelaar 2016:207).

Establishing and strengthening children's ministry

The church should accept that children are valuable, but also vulnerable. To help children feel welcome and included in the church's ministry, as part of the kingdom of God, the church has to establish a children's ministry. The local churches that have already started children's ministries should also be strengthened so that children may be welcomed, nurtured and protected. The children's ministry may include Sunday school and children counselling.

Evangelism

Families are primarily responsible to evangelise, instruct and guide their children in the ways of the Lord (Stinson and Paul 2011:126). The church is also responsible to reach children with the good news of salvation. By rebuking those who prevent children from coming to Him (Luke 18:16), Jesus made it clear that his disciples and the church today, must work hard to bring children to Christ, so that they may be nurtured. Historically evangelical churches emphasised adult and youth evangelism, but the children have very often been neglected (Robin and Naomi 2011, 20). Thus, adults should prepare and work hard to evangelise children.

Children's worship programs

Children's worship is an important tool for welcoming children and nurturing their spiritual lives. It helps them to worship the Lord freely, to hear His Word, pray and serve Him, for they are not too young to begin working for Him now. Thus, the church should establish children's worship programs and a

committee to run the program. There is also a need to minister to the adult members of the church through drama, music, testimony and sharing the Word of God. Thus, church leaders should encourage and help children to serve adults in providing them with such opportunities.

Developing teaching materials

The church should develop its own teaching material for children. Developing teaching materials should be one of the strategies to welcome children of all age groups and including them in ministry as part of the kingdom of God. Furthermore, the department should develop mentors' guides and training material. This can be done in cooperation with Bible schools or by forming a team that can develop teaching materials for children.

Including courses in the curriculum of Bible schools/ theological colleges

Bible schools must plan and work hard, to include child-related teachings, as one of the possible strategies to change the attitudes and practices of adults. This can be done by offering child-related courses in their curriculum so that they may equip pastors and lay-ministers at diploma, undergraduate and graduate levels. Moreover, the church can also provide seminars, workshops and panel discussions on child-related matters by inviting instructors from Bible schools so that the believing community can be well-equipped.

Prayer

The New Testament church frequently interceded on behalf of various individuals, and the purpose was for Christian growth (Philippians 1:9-11; Colossians 1:10-11), for effective pastors (2 Timothy 1:3-7) and effective mission work (Matthew 9:38; Ephesians 6:19-20). Similarly, church leaders need to establish a prayer group for children's ministry before they start anything. Even if the church already has a children's ministry, prayer is essential for the church to have God's guidance and provisions for the needed expenses for the ministry. Moreover, the church should encourage parents to pray for the well-being of their children

Conclusion

The status and place of children in the teaching and ministry of Jesus as expressed in the Gospel according to Luke were discussed thoroughly. Thus, in conclusion, some theological perspectives on children were formulated. From these formulated perspectives, it became clear that although children were considered as the least in the community, welcoming children, the ones of low status, is equated with welcoming Jesus and God. Moreover, children in Luke exemplify his emphasis on the gracious mercy of God toward the poor, the weak and the marginalised.

This article has identified, formulated and discussed recommendations for developing a new praxis with children. It was done with the belief that it would create an awareness of children and their needs in the church and beyond and would assist in starting to make changes in the community. Therefore, much attention was given to formulating guidelines and strategies to change both the thinking about and the praxis with children.

To sum up: The low view of children among adults may be addressed by accepting the high value of children expressed by Jesus. The study also provides clear biblical perspectives on children and children's ministry useful to parents, mentors and the believing community at large. Thus, the study clearly indicates that children's ministries can be enhanced, if the believing community welcomes children by creating a loving and caring environment for them.

Finally, I believe that where the findings of this study are implemented, beneficial changes in the attitudes and views of the believing community towards children and childhood will take place.

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