

Review of Willemer and White, *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*

Noel Woodbridge¹

Willmer H and White KJ 2013. *Entry Point: Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*. Mill Grove: WTL Publications.

1. Introduction to the Author

WTL Publications (2013) provide the following information about the authors of the book, Haddon Willmer and Keith White:

Haddon Willmer (Emeritus Professor of Theology at Leeds University) grew up in Free Church evangelicalism and had a good liberal education in Brockenhurst and Cambridge, studying history and theology. He taught in the University of Leeds for 32 years and is Emeritus Professor of Theology. He is a jack of too many theological trades to be the master of any, working spasmodically on Barth and Bonhoeffer, politics and forgiveness, Bible and preaching, and mission in Leeds and wider afield. Since retiring, he has supervised thirteen doctoral students at the Oxford Centre for Mission Studies. He is an active trustee of Pace (Parents against Child Sexual Exploitation) and of the Child Theology Movement. He is married to Hilary, a Christian social activist, and together they have three children, seven grand-daughters and one grandson.

¹ The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the beliefs of the South African Theological Seminary.

Keith J White and his wife, Ruth, live at Mill Grove, a Christian residential community that has been caring for children and young people in the East End of London UK since 1899. He is an Associate Lecturer at Spurgeons College, and a member of the faculty of the Asian Graduate School of Theology. As the founder and chair of the Child Theology Movement he has contributed to conferences and symposia around the world. Among the books he has written or edited are *A Place for Us, Caring for Deprived Children, Re-Framing Children’s Services, Children and Social Exclusion, The Changing Face of Child Care, The Growth of Love, Reflections on Living with Children, Introducing Child Theology,* and *Childhoods in Cultural Contexts*.

2. Summary of the book

The book is ‘the outcome of a sustained conversation on the text of Matthew 18:1–14’ (p. 1). The passage ‘provides the overall framework’ (p. 15) for the exploration *Towards Child Theology with Matthew 18*. Besides the Introduction and Conclusion, the book is divided into seven chapters. The content of these chapters can be summarised as follows:

1. Child

“*Jesus called a little child and had him stand among them ...*” (Matthew 18:2).

‘The “child in the midst” of this book is simply the child placed by Jesus and standing beside Jesus’ (p. 208).

2. Kingdom

“*The disciples were discussing who was the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 18:1).

‘The disciples were talking about greatness in the KINGDOM of God. That kingdom was the great concern of Jesus, the perspective within which he lived all his life, the presence and promise he proclaimed’ (p. 15). ‘Jesus placed a child in the midst, as a substantial, revelatory clue to the kingdom of God ... The child is needed by the disciples as a clue to the way by which they might enter the kingdom of God’ (p. 71). The ‘child as seen and placed by Jesus signs the kingdom of God, which is a powerful, historically and biblically rooted, but dangerously ambiguous, concept’ (p. 208).

3. Temptation

“Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert to be tempted by the devil”
(Matthew 4:1).

‘Kingdom is always tempting because it stimulates ambitions and anxieties ... Temptation means that people can miss the good and choose evil. Any encounter with the human project of kingdom puts people to the test’ (p. 15). ‘As the disciples brought Jesus back into fundamental temptation, the child strengthened him as an unspeaking witness against the false kingdom ... What he found in the child was a way of signing the kingdom of God, of reaffirming his vision and commitment to its character, and of pressing the argument upon the disciples’ (p. 101).

4. Disciple

“... unless you turn and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven ...” (Matthew 18:3).

“He who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me”
(Matthew 10:38).

Jesus 'called people to be his DISCIPLES, to be with him in the service of the kingdom of God in the terms in which he signed and proclaimed it ... by placing a child in the midst of the disciples, Jesus was reiterating his demand that disciples deny themselves, take up their cross and follow him' (p. 15–16). 'He placed a child in the midst of the disciples, who were evading the cross by seeking greatness. By his or her mere presence, the child silently restates the call to discipleship ... the invitation to "come and die"' (p. 109).

5. Humility

"Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:4).

'Jesus placed a child in the midst to call his ambitious disciples to humility' (p. 122). 'That the child reiterates the call to discipleship can be seen in the meanings Jesus gives to the child placed in the midst. Denying self, radically symbolised by the cross, is a way of HUMILITY' (p. 16). 'The cross is inescapable in a faithful vision and following of Jesus. The significance of the child for disciples is that the call to humility and to become like the children is a restatement of the call to take up the cross and not an alternative way into the kingdom of God' (p. 212).

6. Reception

"Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Matthew 18:5, ESV Anglicised Version).

'Fundamental to the story in Matthew 18 is the kingdom of God. What is it like and how is it to be entered? The child in the midst has given us the clue to answering these questions. There is no explicit mention of the kingdom of God in the words, "Whoever receives one such child in

my name, receives me. And whoever receives me, receives him who sent me” (Mark 9:37; Luke 9:48)’ (p. 160). ‘Father and Son are not named in this saying. Jesus is the one who is sent, and the receiving occurs in the actual practice of mission’ (p. 162). ‘Jesus chose disciples so that he could send them out to proclaim the kingdom of God (Matthew chapter 10). In this mission reception has a crucial function’ (p. 165).

7. Father

“*See that you do not look down on one of these little ones ...*” (Matthew 18:10).

‘Matthew 18:10: “See that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I tell you that in heaven their angels always behold the face of my Father who is in heaven.” Within the parameters set by these words we read the better-known, oft-quoted verse 6: “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to stumble, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea”’ (p. 178). ‘Jesus did not despise a child, a little one. To see a child as a sign of the way into the kingdom of God is the opposite of despising. The warning not to despise even one little one is implied by Jesus’ action of placing a child in the midst of the disciples’ (p. 179). ‘At the end of the story (Matthew 18:14) there is a repeat of verse 10, in different language: “It is not the will of my (your) Father that one of these little ones should perish.” The message of the gospel is that God seeks, recovers and receives even the lost and the enemy: God forgives rather than being bound to give people what they earn (*deserve*). So the kingdom of God is here, both as a little seed, and also as a vision of new creation’ (p. 214).

3. An Evaluation of the Book

3.1. Strengths of the book

First, this is a very practical book. The authors indicate that they have been led to write ‘a kind of practical theology. The chapter on reception is where this becomes plain in a down-to-earth everyday way. There is no mistaking the call to each of us to welcome or receive a child in the name of Jesus’ (p. 213).

Second, the book is in the form of an essay, which offers readers ‘a stimulus to discussion, not as a teaching or a definitive analysis’ (p. 213). The authors have *not* written ‘a confessional statement of what the Child Theology Movement stands for’. However, they have written ‘within the vision of what CTM is: a fellowship of thinking and active disciples exploring the gospel seed and sign of the child placed in the midst by Jesus’ (p. 214–215).

Third, the book focuses on ‘a mere ten verses of the Gospel of Matthew’ (p. 213). This narrow focus allows the authors to analyse the passage in more detail and to provide readers with a comprehensive application in everyday life, of the biblical principles relating to Child Theology in the passage, in particular, in the field of missions.

3.2. Weaknesses of the book

First, the book claims to be ‘an attempt to do Child Theology.’ However, the authors readily concede that ‘it is not definitive or intended to be so ... And we fear that there will be those who will be disappointed because they were expecting a new section in what is understood to be systematic theology’ (p. 212). Furthermore, they openly admit that they are ‘not systematic theologians in any

conventional sense’ and clearly state, ‘it is not our intention primarily to contribute another systematic essay’ (p. 212–213).

Second, the book lacks an in-depth exposition of Matthew 18:1-10, which includes a contextual analysis, verbal analysis, and literary analysis. Regarding its contextual analysis, the authors concede that ‘we did not attempt to expound it in this context’ (p. 213) and state that the book ‘can, and perhaps should, be read as an extension of the idea of receiving a child through going out to find and recover the sheep gone astray (Matthew 18:12–14)’ (p. 213).

4. Conclusion

Despite its shortcomings, Willmer and White’s book presents ‘a sustained conversation on the text of Matthew 18:1-14’ (p. 11). This book is a ground-breaking contribution to the field of Child Theology and I strongly recommend it as a valuable source on Child Theology. I am convinced that it will serve as an ‘entry point’ to stimulate fruitful discussion on the topic, both within the Child Theology Movement and elsewhere, which will no doubt lead to even further developments in this important field of study and ministry.

Reference List

Willmer H and White KJ 2013. *Entry point: towards child theology with Matthew 18*. Mill Grove: WTL.