

Re-subjectifying the child in mission: how Karl Barth's theological anthropology helps overcome the objectification of children in contemporary mission praxis

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Abstract

The operative theologies in much of the recent mission energy toward children have produced objectifying tendencies: children have been objects of mission efforts and strategies, either as ends in themselves, or as the means to 'greater' ends: reaching parents and communities; even 'global transformation'. Some commendable attempts to regard them as subjects have themselves continued to objectify them.

This critique is not new; however, the re-subjectification of the child has remained a challenge. To this end, the theological anthropology of Karl Barth offers substantial resources. In particular, his discussion of the I-Thou relation (over against Martin Buber's I-Thou / I-It postulations) provides a robust foundation for moving beyond regarding a child as something alien and different (or missionally alluring) and seeing the child both as a Thou to God's I (and an I to God's Thou) and a Thou to our own I (and vice versa). Though some of his categories of 'true humanity' are problematic when considered with the child in mind, Barth's discussion of the true humanity which emerges only in mutually subjective relationships nevertheless underlines the intensity of person-to-person engagement necessary for regarding children seriously – and as subjects – in ecclesial and missional praxis. Barth's material supporting his argument 'there is no humanity without fellow-humanity' also provides firmer ground for distinctively Christian approaches to child advocacy, development, and integral mission than secular human-rights frameworks.

This paper outlines how Barth's theological anthropology can help re-subjectify the child, and provide a basis for mission grounded in mutual subjectivity more generally.