

DIGGING DEEPER

Children & The Early Church



Photo: Compassion

Introduction

A big part of Tearfund's work is in child development with our partner Compassion International and local churches around the world. In our *Introduction to Child Development* resource, we gave a brief overview of why and how we work in this space. We also looked briefly at what the Bible says about this topic. This resource takes a deeper dive into the history of children and the church.

This resource covers some sensitive topics around children and babies so please read ahead with caution or stop reading now if you may be triggered by this content.

In case you've jumped in here and have not read the *Introduction to Child Development*. Here is a brief recap:

We believe that every child in the world has basic human rights and that they deserve to be known, loved and protected. Despite the injustice we witness, we refuse to accept that poverty is an inevitable part of our broken and hurting world. Rather than seeing it as something that's too complex, or insurmountable, we focus on tackling it one child at a time. Our model of linking one child with one sponsor is a reflection of this approach and is how we seek to release children from poverty in Jesus' name.

Loving and caring for children was central to Jesus' teaching. Jesus welcomed children and he blessed them. He also warned of severe judgement to anyone who would harm or mistreat children. This seems like a very sensible or even obvious attitude for Jesus to have but it was, like much of Jesus' teaching, revolutionary for the time.

A different world

Today, we have laws and community groups that exist to protect children. In the Graeco-Roman world, no law defended or protected



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children. Their circumstances depended entirely on the will of adults, either their parents or their masters if they were slaves. Generally, children maintained a very low social status, similar to that of a slave. Slaves were thought of as property to be used or abused at the whim of their owner. Children were viewed similarly.

Children were at the mercy of those in authority because they were deemed less valuable as they were not fully developed. Not all people in the Graeco-Roman world held to this view, but this view was prevalent and too often the norm for the culture of the ancient world into which Christianity arrived.

Being a child in the ancient world was a blessing. But it was only a blessing if your parents wanted you, and that was probably only if you were a healthy boy. If you were a girl, or weak or unhealthy in any way, then you were a burden that needed to be eliminated.

We are not going to delve into the details around what happened to unwanted children and we are not talking about this to glorify violence and grotesque practices. Rather, to appreciate the magnitude of the early Christian response to this dreadful evil, we have to understand the ancient world's attitudes towards children. Children were often viewed as disposable in the ancient world. So the question for us is how did the first Christians respond to this situation and why?

Jesus Makes a Difference

It was into this brutal world that Christianity was born. Jesus modelled a counter-cultural attitude to children. He welcomed them (Mk 9:35-37), he blessed them (Mk 10:13-16) and warned of severe judgement to anyone who would harm or mistreat children (Matt 18:1-7). The early Christians took this example seriously and began to treat children differently. This began with the revolution of understanding that children were gifts from God that were to be cherished and valued.

Children were viewed as valuable members of the Christian community. In New Testament teaching, we can see a desire for

children to flourish (Eph 6:3). Furthermore, specific instructions are given to parents and masters that have implications for children. Fathers are instructed, “do not provoke your children to anger but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Eph 6:4). There is a responsibility for parents to train their children in the teachings of Jesus.

The Early Christian Response

Acting on Jesus’ instruction, the early church responded to the contemporary plight of children and the factors behind the poor treatment of children.

Economic Factors

A major factor affecting what happened to children was economic. In Roman culture, there was no “middle class”. Most people lived at or below a subsistence level, unable to maintain financial security. Often the burden of another mouth to feed was too much. In such a culture, the early Christians responded by creating communities of commitment, care and concern for the well-being and benefit of each-other. They formed communities that looked after each other financially. (Further reading 1 John 3:16-18, Acts 2:44-45, 1 Tim 6:17-19). As such, they removed the economic pressure placed on families to dispose of children.

Wrong Gender

Another reason behind the poor treatment of some children was a child’s gender. As is still the case in some cultures today, male children are desired over female children. If a family wanted a boy but a girl arrived they would have no qualms in getting rid of the child. Girls were particularly treated badly by not having access to education and through various negative cultural stereotypes. The early church countered this through their attitude towards females. Among early Christians, women were honoured as “co-heirs of the gracious gift of life” (1 Pet 3:7). The church believed that women and men were both created equally. Women were honoured as exemplars

in the Christian faith and women were ministers or leaders in early Christian churches. Women played a vital and important role in life, the church and most importantly, in the eyes of God. Therefore, there was nothing wrong with having a girl. (Further reading Genesis 1:26-27, 2 Timothy 1:5, Romans 16:1-2 and 7).

Physical Deformity

A final reason for disposing of a child is that there was something wrong with the child. The “deformity” could be a child with some mental or physical disability or a sickly child. In contrast to this, the early Christians, along with the people of God in the Old Testament, believed that all children are gifts from God. In his discussion of people with abnormalities, Augustine writes: “Even in cases of greater variations, God knows what He is doing and no one may rightly blame His work” (*City of God* 16.8). Every child born of human parents, no matter what variations or differences they may have is considered valuable as a gift from God. (Further reading Psalm 127:3).

Lessons for Today

By taking these actions, the early Christians undermined and subverted the generally accepted but inhumane practices and attitudes against children.

They sought through their communities to embody and defend the view that children were valued members of the Christian community who were to flourish and be treated with justice and fairness. The early Christians sought to provide safe communities where children were honoured and cherished, even if they were weak or vulnerable for some physical or mental reason. They sought to create communities where the plight of children would be alleviated, where parents or caregivers would not need to treat them with contempt or dispose of them. They took care of each other financially, emotionally and physically. Because children were understood as a gift from God to be honoured, they pioneered a radical movement of commitment, care and concern for children that changed the ancient world.

This has significant implications for Christians today and how we treat children. Around the world, children face similar realities of impoverishment and neglect. They are also victims of human trafficking and exploitation. The Christian practice of treating children as valued members of the community should stand as an example and also a challenge to those who follow Jesus today. We must defend the rights of children and do everything we can to welcome and include them, so that they may flourish as they are meant to.



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