

Church Oppression and Liberation Theology For Children

“I cannot describe in words what we went through growing up. Sometimes I still have nightmares of things that have happened,” Joshua Turpin, 27, stated in his testimony against his parents David and Louisa Turpin, standing trial for multiple counts of child abuse (Andone and Yan). The world was horrified when, in January of 2018, thirteen malnourished and abused children were discovered imprisoned and shackled in their California home. The children had suffered so many years of abuse that their growth and cognitive abilities had been severely stunted. While the first question is how could this happen, the second is how could this happen in a family that identified themselves as Protestant Christians? However, the sad reality is that physical and sexual assault of children is widespread within the Christian church. Many aspects of the Christian theology, from the encouragement of violence, to the paternalistic god, to the putting of faith before the well-being of others, have been translated into modern day contempt and maltreatment of children. However, the very same theology that is responsible for the abuse of children can also be their liberation in the depiction of God as a child and Christ’s own attitude towards children.

The first step towards a theology of child liberation is to understand the theological roots of child oppression. The entire concept of violence towards children has roots in theology. Ted Grimsrud states, “God wants our nation, or our criminal justice systems, or those responsible for the raising of children, to act as God’s agent of justice, of discipline, using violence when necessary.” For centuries, Christians have justified violence and extreme punishment for anyone who does wrong - claiming violence as God’s will. It is the view that all humans are guilty of sin and must be punished by an all holy being, that is creating a modern need to punish sin with

physical violence (Grimsrud). It is the violence condoned and committed in the Bible that lays the foundation for theological grounds of child abuse.

The idea that children are deserving of violence at the hands of parents stems from the Bible's suggestion that childhood is an inferior state. Adrian Thatcher states, "Outside the teaching of Jesus, children are discouragingly depicted in the New Testament" (1). While Jesus encouraged his followers to become like children to enter the kingdom of God, Paul seemingly contradicts this attitude in 1 Corinthians 13:11 when he states, "When I was a child I spoke like a child, thought like a child, reasoned like a child; but when I grew up I finished with childish things." Similarly, in 1 Cor 14:20, Paul, again speaks disdainfully of the nature of children, demanding that the Corinthinians think like adults and not children. His comments suggest that childhood is an inferior state and that children aren't fully capable of understanding the gospel or the kingdom of heaven.

This inferiority of children is further solidified by instances in the Bible where parents are encouraged to put their faith before their child. A stark example of this phenomenon is the story of Isaac - one of the most controversial stories in the Bible. Genesis 22 outlines the story of young Isaac and his father Abraham. Abraham is directed by God to offer his son, Isaac, as a burnt sacrifice and Abraham complies and is willing to kill his son until the Lord puts a stop to him. The idea that God would ask a father to sacrifice a child is absurd in itself, but what is more absurd is that Abraham is often *praised* by Christians for following through with the instructions. It displays to Christians the idea of a blind service to God - one that will put faith before the well-being of a child (Stoller, "Binding of Isaac"). Christians today model themselves after the

story and ideals of Abraham, persecuting their children in the name of faith and obedience to God.

The Bible also explicitly condones violence against children, suggesting that children should be condemned for sin, even sins that they themselves did not commit. It goes back to the theology of God's will and retribution - all beings are born with sin and deserving of punishment (Grimsrud). In the Bible, the punishment to those who disobey God is often targeted at the *children* of the disobedient. When adults in the Bible are guilty of disobedience or wickedness, God's threats often center on the children. For example, God's people are threatened in Leviticus, "If you remain hostile toward me and refuse to listen to me, I will multiply your afflictions seven times over, as your sins deserve/ I will send wild animals against you, and they will rob you of your children" (26:21-22). Similarly, in Psalms, violence against the children in Bethel is condoned for the city's evilness and enslavement of God's people, "Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks" (137:9). Violence against children is directly encouraged by God if it means atonement for sins, even if it is sins the children themselves did not commit.

Lastly, the theological idea of children being deserving of violence or death, often stems from the patriarchal view of God. God is often likened as father - the *father* of the people of Israel, the *father* of Jesus. Thus, when God decimates entire cities, threatens his people with terrible violence, and sacrifices the life of his son - it is done in the image of a parent punishing his children. Many Christians use the image of God as father as an, "indication of divine masculinity and as a justification for an authoritarian and oppressive exercise of power over those who are weaker, including children" (Pais, 15). In the Old Testament, God was the father,

who condoned the destruction and violent deaths of millions for disobedience. In the New Testament, God sacrificed his only son - allowing him to die the most torturous and excruciating death, so that his will might be done. In the depiction of God as a paternal figure, the Christian theology has managed to justify extreme punishment and violence upon children at the hands of parents.

These theological roots of oppression are manifesting themselves in many ways in the modern Christian Church. Today, two pressing problems in the Christian church are 1) the abuse of children under the guise of homeschooling and 2) the defense of predators. There is a disturbing link between homeschooling and abuse. In 2014, a study found that 47% of all child torture victims had been withdrawn from school, while 29% had never been enrolled at all (Coleman and Brightbill). The reason for this is that homeschooling is used as a shield to mask abuse taking place at home. When a child goes to school, it becomes more difficult for a parent to hide signs of abuse such as significant weight loss, physical marks, poor hygiene, or emotional distress. In addition to this, because children have access to food in school, cases of death by starvation are almost solely limited to homeschooling families.

Meanwhile, there is also an undeniably link between Christianity and homeschooling. Under the guise of raising their children in religious instruction, many Christian homeschoolers are, instead, abusing, neglecting, starving, and denying education to their children, in the name of God. Many of the most disturbing cases of child abuse in recent years have occurred in Christian homeschooling families. The Turpins, as mentioned before, are one of the most glaring examples of this trend. David Turpin purportedly ran his own 'homeschool,' but due to lax laws on homeschooling, he was actually running a religious cult in which he forced his wife and

children to worship him (Webb). His children were wrongfully imprisoned - shackled, tortured, starved, mocked with food, and were not educated. Ironically, while some of the adult Turpins did not know what 'medication' was and could not tell their street address, many of them had memorized extensive passages from the Bible and some even intended to memorize the entire Book (Webb). Their parents were, essentially, playing the role of the divine and wrathful father who believe God's will requires absolute control over one's child to discourage any perceived sin.

The same is true of Tara Westover, who recently published the novel *Educated*. She grew up in a Fundamentalist family that denied her and her siblings an education. Her parents were reckless and often endangered their children's lives by their rejection of modern medicine. Meanwhile, they turned a blind eye to Westover's abuse at the hands of her older brother. Both Westover's refusal to remain silent on her brother's abuse and her pursuit of an education alienated her from her parents (O'Kelly). She stated that the greatest crime in cult-like homeschooling families such as her own is, "telling the truth" (O'Kelly). Again, it is the idea that children must be subordinate and show no signs of disobedience or questioning that fueled the abuse in the Westover family. The Turpins and Westovers are just two of many examples of Christian families using homeschooling to adhere to the oppressive theology of childhood as an inferior state and the role of parents as all powerful beings that need to carry out God's intended wrath and punishment upon their sinful children.

Meanwhile, this same Christian theology is being used to silence child sexual assault victims and excuse child predators. Many individuals today believe that sexual assault in the Protestant Church is even worse than the Catholic Church (Pease). The reasons for this is that the

Christian church has a disturbing trend of marginalizing victims while defending instigators of the crime. One example is Rachel Denhollander. Long before she was known as an Olympic gymnast who mustered the courage to speak against the sexual abuse of Larry Naster, she was abused as a child by a member of her church (Pease). The most disturbing part of the story is that her parents were warned by a fellow church-goer that a college-aged man appeared to be grooming their daughter for assault. Her parents were concerned by the accusation, but when they turned to the church for guidance they were overwhelmingly shut down, as the most common response was “you’re overreacting.” Rachel herself faced punishment when members of the church restricted their children from playing with her because they didn’t want to be the next ones ‘accused.’ Thus, the parents were forced into silence, truly believing that they had to sit and wait for “an aggressive sexual act” to be committed upon their eight year old daughter by a grown man before they had a right to bring it up to the church.

Denhollander’s story is one of many of children and parents in the Church silenced when attempting to confront a predator. A similar situation took place within the deeply religious Duggar family - the stars of the popular reality show *19 Kids and Counting* - when it was discovered the family had covered up their eldest son’s sexual assault of several of his sisters when they were minors. It was discovered that father Jim Bob waited a year before bringing his son, Joshua, to the police, believing that prayer and meditation was enough to protect their daughters from their son (Marcus). When Joshua and his parents issued apologies, they largely focused on Joshua as the victim whose life was ruined, ignoring the destruction he caused in the lives of his innocent sisters (Marcus) When Church members sneer at child victims of sexual assault, believing they should be punished for bringing accusations against an adult, it reverberates

Paul's disdain for the mere act of being a child. It's this Christian theology that condemns "thinking like a child" and supports children suffering for the sins of adults that has seeped into the mindset of modern churches that silently allow innocent children to be sexually assaulted within their doors.

However, while Christian theology, without a doubt, supports child abuse, it likewise supports their liberation. The biggest argument *for* children within the Bible, is the image of God the child. It is the antithesis to God the powerful, all-knowing father and is the image of God as the helpless and weak child. Readers of the Bible often dismiss the fact that God chose to appear to his people in the form of a child. He chose the seemingly lowest of all beings - a naked infant, born without rights, in the child-oppressive Roman Greek world (Stoller, "Child Liberation"). In fact, God didn't just choose to be born a child, but to remain a child for the majority of his short life on earth. Being a child did not inhibit him from being God or from understanding God's will. In fact, he understood God's will for him better than his parents, when he preached as a child in the temple (Stoller, "Child Liberation"). The image of God as a child does what the rest of the Bible fails to do - it brings children to the center of Christian theology (Pais, 8). It forces Christians to see the ability and value of a child as a bearer of the image of God himself. It brings a whole new meaning to the verse that states, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for *me*" (Mat 25:40).

Aside from choosing to manifest himself in the form a child, Jesus's teachings on children are liberative. When the disciples treat the children coming to Jesus as nuisances, Jesus is the one who reprimands them. "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these" (Mat 19:14). Individuals often try to interpret

what Jesus meant when he told his people they must change into a child to enter the kingdom of heaven. They struggle with the theology that childhood is a disdainful state and the idea that childhood is the path to heaven. However, Janet Pais states, “We say that ‘childish’ is not the same as ‘childlike,’ the one undesirable, the other desirable... We say, ‘Don’t be a child!’ Jesus tells us the opposite: Be a child! Be the child you were and still are, the child-self who is still alive in you” (10). There is no nit-picking about what behaviors of a child Jesus meant in his theology. What he was doing was praising the childish innocence and purity of children - the mere act of being a child elevates one in closeness to God. Thus, childishness is not something to be disdained, but to be desired and revered.

However, child liberation is not complete without, as Jesus, stated ‘becoming like children.’ Perhaps the biggest reason that liberation theology is so difficult is that children cannot liberate themselves (Pais, 5). Children are the only oppressed people who cannot create a liberative theology for themselves because they do not have the power or capacity to do so. This leads to children being the most oppressed in society, because they have few ways to help themselves. Thus, a true liberation theology for children must include adults acting on behalf of the children. It must involve adults finding their child-self and reconnecting with the child-like spirit within themselves (Pais, 11). Just as the Bible states that they cannot enter the kingdom of God without being a child, they cannot liberate children if they themselves do not become children. It is only when adults reconnect with the inner child, weakness, and vulnerability of themselves that they can let go of the contempt they have for children and set a course for liberating them. If child abuse is the source of an inflated sense of divine power as a parent, then

an adult's deflation of self image and reckoning of one's own weaknesses is the true source of child liberation.

Overall, the Bible and Christian theology will always be contradictory. As long as Christians can interpret the Bible to their own means, it will always serve as both a tool to oppress and to liberate children. On the one hand, it encourages violence as the will of God, the father as a wrathful being, and disdain for children. However, on the other hand it suggests seeing the image of God in children and upholding them as the most innocent and pure of beings. It suggests that adults should strive to become like them, rather than to destroy their innocence. However, the Church is still a long way off from this liberation and they must first do away with the theology that tells them the punishment for disobedience is death, that an adult's sin is a child's sin, and that the act of being a child makes one subordinate, before they can ever begin to see God in their children.

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