

EXPOSING CHILDREN TO THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS FOR BETTER MORAL UPLIFTMENT

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Abstract

Children are important in their own right as members of every community. They have their own ways of learning. They need to develop appropriately in matters of faith just as older members of the community. Children need to understand theological concepts early in life. Parents, caregivers and Christian Educators need to understand theological concepts well enough to help children understand them. This paper considered the rationale for purposely exposing children to theological concepts and some of the factors that influence children's theological concept. Substantiating literature with descriptive statistics from results emanating from two different researcher-designed questionnaires administered to 250 and 147 respondents respectively; the researcher established that those who teach children need to be thoroughly versed in theological concepts. Females especially tend to impact in children the more and so, they should be consciously taught theological concepts well though males should not be left out. Parents, theological institutions, ministers and caregivers of children all have specific roles to play to ensure that children form correct theological concepts and moral ethical standard.

Introduction

Children, being humans from birth to age twelve, are important members of any community. They have had more than their fair share of various treatments in life. At some points in history in certain societies, children were seen as liabilities who just consumed what others produced that is, till the age they became old enough to be running errands and making adults enjoy their entitlement. Some cultures even had wise sayings that children were born so parents would have errand runners! In pre-western civilized societies of Nigeria, parents boasted of the number of children they had because that meant more farm hands and definitely more mouths to feed. The one who had his quiver full of the arrows called children must have some substance to sustain them!

Thankfully, the narrative has changed from seeing children as liabilities or as ego-boosters for adults. Bunge observed in 2006,

“Children” and “childhood” are now hot topics in a wide range of academic disciplines, and the burgeoning area of childhood studies is challenging many assumptions about children and opening new lines of intellectual inquiry. Important studies on children and childhood are now emerging (Bunge, 2006).

As Bunge rightly advocates, children are important to the society. One must note though that children are not just important because they serve as cheap labour or are property to boast of. They are human beings made in God's image with real feelings, abilities and potentials. They need to be catered for not only in terms of food and drink but also in terms of emotions, salvation, spiritual development, intellectual ability and even theological understanding. The assumption that children do not know anything and cannot handle theological concepts is erroneous. As they view others around them and handle their own personal matters of concern; they need a clear understanding of God that will help them weather the storms of life. Various factors affect children's theological concepts. This paper looked at the rationale for exposing children to theological concepts, teaching sound theological concepts to children, the factors that affect children's theological concepts and how the factors can be influenced for positive theological concept formation and standard moral upliftment in the children.

Rationale for Exposing Children to Sound Theological Concepts

Theology consists of human beings thinking about God and expressing those thoughts as well as putting them into practice. A concept is "an image or representation whereby objects, events or experiences may be classified and distinguished." (Wakefield and Clark, 1986). Theological concepts are therefore those images, representations, classifications, distinguishing factors anything and everything that is used to articulate or express feelings, beliefs and experiences relating to God.

Children need to be taught sound theological concepts. Doherty (2004) is correct to have said that 'the greatest need of the world's children is ... for a solid, biblical, doctrinal, teaching evangelism.' There are numerous reasons why this statement is very true. Some of them are mentioned here. They include the Judeo-Christian/biblical background, survival skills, omission of the past, the 'new generation' to which children belong, and so on.

Children are very important in the Bible. The *Shema* (Deuteronomy 6: 4 – 9) was the starting point for most Hebrew family instruction. 'God ... expected each parent to take an active role in the spiritual development of their children (Anthony and Benson, 2003).

'... God instructed and expected adults to give careful attention to the care and training of children. From an early age, adults were to include children in the rituals of the faith ... parents were to focus more on their responsibility for children more than their rights to them' (Brewster 2011).

From their God-given instructions and commands, the Jews developed principles and philosophies of educating their children.

'The Jews felt that education of children was imperative; that it was the responsibility of parents; that it should permeate all aspects of life; that it should begin early and that it should be accomplished through a variety of methods in different places and at various times (Hall, 1978, 27).

In essence, education of children among the Jews was compulsory; it was the responsibility of parents and was related to all aspects of life. This 'education' was both religious

and functional. Everything the children was taught included the ‘God-angle.’ There was no indication of separation of religion from other aspects of life.

‘In all societies, children have to be taught to acquire the skills and knowledge for them to survive as adults (Strange, 1996).’

Among the Yoruba of Nigeria in West Africa, religion was a vital, inseparable, non-detachable part of the functional non-formal education (Taiwo, 1982 & Fafunwa, 1995) that children received. As in Jewish and Yoruba examples, sound theological concepts help children’s ability to cope in life and as well prepare them for survival as adults.

According to Buconyori, (1993), children are as much the church today as they are the church of tomorrow. As such, they need to have sound understanding of God from the beginning of their lives. The other side of the coin is that if children are not taught to have sound doctrine and to understand the theology they should live and die for, there will be a giant gap in the church of Christ. In addition, they may develop warped or outrightly wrong theological ideas which Spurgeon as cited by Doherty (2004) refers to as ‘chaff.’ This proves that if children are taught right theology, they are better off and there is less likelihood that they will ‘grow as weeds’ as Pratte puts it. He states,

In a garden, good plants must be cultivated, but weeds grow by themselves. So we must teach children the truth early, or Satan will fill their lives with spiritual weeds. So the fact is that the child will be indoctrinated regardless of what we do or don't do. *The only question is: What values will he be taught?* To fail to teach truth is to guarantee that Satan will teach him lies and cause him to be lost eternally. The only one who really gains if we don't teach our children early is Satan. (Pratte, 2004)

If weeds will not grow by themselves in children, there has to be a repentance and major shift from ‘the time of neglect,’ with regard to theological education of children.

Bunge (2006) notes that while there are many discussions ongoing about children, as at when she wrote in 2006; she observed that theologians and scholars still leave much to be desired in the area of child study. She called on theologians, religious leaders and others to have a more thorough look and involvement in the lives of children and what is provided for their all round, but especially their theological and moral growth. She called for the need to hear from children themselves and to ensure that sound theology is taught to them (Bunge, 2006).

Apart from the rationale for teaching children theological and moral concepts, children are not immuned to death. Children need to be taught theological and moral concepts from conception to the grave so that they may make a decision to receive Christ and the salvation He gives. They need to be taught ‘from conception’ because they have become living beings from that time; they can hear, they may be easily hijacked if not led aright and because despite the improvement in medical sciences, children still die for various reasons. Hence, a child’s grave may be during childhood years or beyond. Even though *in utero* they seem not to be aware of what happens to them; researchers have confirmed that the foetus responds to sounds, their mother’s moods, familiar voices, music (especially when played constantly) and so on.

Hence, though many writers start their explanations on child growth and learning from birth; this researcher, from a Christian psychological and experiential point of view makes bold to state that experiences from conception also count in a child's development of theological concepts. For instance, as the foetus and later, the neonate responds to music, it is conversant with in the womb; from birth, the baby tends to move their head in the direction of the music that has become so familiar. If such music is soft, it is consoling to the infant. Since the infant cannot understand words as much as moods at this point in time, the soft music provides an atmosphere of safety, love and comfort while loud music may send signals of insecurity and make a child hyperactive.

This point is in line with Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development that infants (up to eighteen months after birth) develop to either trust or mistrust those around them based on the atmosphere provided and the provision or otherwise of the infant's needs lovingly and punctually. For, as Erikson teaches, explained by Santrock (1999) 'A sense of trust requires a feeling of physical comfort and minimal amount of fear about the future. Infants' basic needs are met by *responsive sensitive* care givers (Santrock, 1999). Caregivers must therefore be sensitive and genuinely caring in order to encourage development of trust in the infants. This should help them to trust God and His Word more easily. In teaching children theological concepts, parents and teachers must realize, recognize and take into cognizance the factors which affect children's theological concepts. Some of them are discussed below.

Factors Affecting Theological Concepts of Children

Early Impressions and Awarenesses in Childhood: Each child's theological concepts do not show up clearly until later in their childhood. However, their impressions and awarenesses early in childhood form a foundation for theological concepts later on. Basing their position on Erik Erikson's trust versus mistrust theory; Wakefield and Clark explain that,

Children who from infancy have experienced an emotionally warm, dependable home environment are better able to develop healthy attitudes towards life. They gain positive impressions of interpersonal relations, a sense of orderliness towards life, and an awareness of a harmonious world. (Wakefield and Clark, 1986, 349)

Even though these impressions are not thought through in childhood, they are felt within and they serve as 'inner, unseen forces which shape future concepts toward God, the Bible, the universe, self and others (Wakefield & Clark, 1986). As such, Christian/Religious and Theological Educators as well as parents and individuals cannot afford to toy with the experiences and atmosphere provided for children lest they have the wrong or entirely negative theological impressions from the onset.

Parents and family members: a). Parents: Parents, as the leaders in the first institution of socialization and education in which the child grows have 'great power to influence the roots of theological concepts. Wakefield and Clark, (1986) citing Herb (1955), state that 'The goodness of God can be learned by analogy from the goodness of the father, the comfort of God from the comforting of a dear mother. Wakefield and Clark advance two reasons why parents' roles are crucial. First, they 'largely control the affective relationships in the early years which serve as

the basis for relationships in later years. Second, they are best able to stimulate their child intellectually and to interpret the world to their child.

A Yoruba adage states that *iya ni wura, baba ni digi. Ojo iya ku ni wura baje; ojo baba ku ni digi omo womi* - meaning that parents are of extreme importance. The mother is gold to the child and the father, the mirror. When the mother dies, gold is 'spoilt' and when the father dies, the mirror is immersed/drowned in water. Though gold does not spoil, the proverb indicates that the influence of parents on children cannot be overestimated. Children as great imitators imitate a lot from parents. American Psychologist Albert Bandura and Walter Mischel, the proponents of the cognitive social learning theory, believe that people learn by observing what others do. 'Through observational learning (also called "modeling" or "imitation") we cognitively represent behaviours of others and then possibly adopt this behaviour ourselves (Santrock, 1999). Chafin (1978) agrees with this so much that he explains that boys tend to look for someone like their mother when trying to choose a wife later in life and girls' desires are patterned after their view of their father's characteristics and example – especially where the parents are good role models. Grams (1963), Wakefield and Clark (1986) state that 'Though some parents would like to deny it, their children's concept of God is largely determined by what they are as parents.'

b). **Other family members:** In Africa, many families are not strictly nuclear in the western sense. Even in western educated families where the parents and children tend to stay away from extended family members; siblings of one or of both parents, one house help or more, domestic staff, one or more grandparents or others who serve as caregivers to the children are part of the family who stay together. As children imitate parents, they will also imitate older caregivers around them. In a situation where both parents work outside the home, there is even the tendency for the caregiver(s) to have greater influence on the child's exposure, thoughts, behaviour and even beliefs because they spend more time interacting with the child.

In many instances nowadays, media such as cable television/the television screen, YouTube, electronic games, cartoons on electronic devices (tablets, phones, and so on) and in fewer cases, DVDs, VCDs or other forms of electronic or print media are the 'caregivers' and 'babysitters'. Though writing more than a decade ago, both Bauer (1990) and Okoro (2001) from two different contexts affirmed this trend of media and electronics turned 'babysitters'¹ of children. In order to avoid warped or confused theological concepts, 'other (human) caregivers' in the home must be extra careful with what they feed the child with in terms of theological concepts while all adults must work together to ensure the 'electronic caregivers' do not feed children with unwelcome theological and moral concepts.

Other Significant Persons: While Wakefield and Clark (1986) put significant persons as a subsection under parents, this researcher sees the need to separate them on the grounds that they do not always live in the same place with the child as do parents, siblings and any other nuclear or extended family members who stay together in the same accommodation – be it a house or a general compound. While the Bible (in Exodus 20: 12, Deuteronomy 5: 16) 'shows that parents have the primary responsibility to care for and nurture children, the role of the community is also crucial. In the Old Testament, part of the covenant of the community of God's people involved the cohesion of the relationship between children and parents' (Brewster, 2011).

These other significant persons ‘today’ are those who have direct or indirect influence on the child outside the home such as teachers or leaders in the ‘community of faith’ in Church-based organizations and programmes such as Sunday school, Worship, Children’s Choir, Girls Auxiliary, Royal Ambassadors, Girls’ Guide, Boys’ Brigade, or any other organization outside the home to which the child is exposed. At the time when children are closer to teen years (ages 10 – 12) and easily influenced by peers; peers of the child would also fall into this group.

By extension, mass media and the whole of society as increasingly powerful agents of socialization also affect the child’s theological and moral concepts. The methods, materials and content, the songs, choruses, discussions, learning activities and learning experiences the child undergoes through these media influence the child’s theological concepts. For instance, the idea of having enemies which is not natural with children (Ayo-Obiremi, 2012) is now gaining more grounds as adults speak of enemies, teach about enemies, pray imprecatory prayers and sing vindictive songs against their enemies. As Wakefield and Clark rightly stated, ‘Each event in the child’s life is an occasion for learning whereby the child’s world of reality is enlarged and verified’. As children experience these actions among adults; they include the events and theology informing such actions in their understanding of reality.

The Child’s Intellectual Development: Children develop at different levels intellectually. Cully (1995) writes how Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist ‘carefully watching children from birth on, ... evolved his developmental stage theory. Both the psychosocial and developmental theories have served as spring boards for psychologists’ and educationists’ understanding and explanation of children’s developmental stages (Ayo-Obiremi, 2008). They are also very helpful in relation to a child’s development of theological and moral concepts.

Piaget has categorized children’s cognitive development into the foundational, pre-conceptual, concrete, and abstract stages (Wakefield & Clark, 1986; Cully, 1979). The stages are also called sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational and formal operational stages for birth to two years of age; 2 – 7 years, 7 – 11 years and 11 – 18 years respectively (Santrock, 1999). The foundational or sensorimotor period is from birth to two years of age and a period when the new born progressively learns to differentiate and ‘integrate, utilizing the reflex mechanisms in his experience. Incoming external data is assimilated with existing internal data through an enlarging mental capacity. By eighteen to twenty four months of age, ‘infants are gaining very influential awareness about the world they have entered. Piaget grouped ages two to seven together as the next stage and tagged them as the preconceptual or preoperational period; ages seven to eleven as the period of concrete concepts or the concrete operational period and ages eleven to fifteen as the formal operational stage or the period of abstract concepts. ‘Learning takes place at each stage because the child accommodates the self to the new learning and assimilates it, incorporating it and using it. This is the process of adaptation (Cully, 1979).

Those teaching theological concepts to children should take advantage of the process of adaptation and teach theological concepts that each child can handle at the right stage. As Garrison states, cited by Wakefield and Clark (1986); ‘It should be emphasized that if the church is to be effective in character training, the teaching must follow the fundamental principles of learning set forth in educational psychology’(Garrison et al, 1964)’. It is noteworthy, however that the identified periods of intellectual growth, as is the case with physical, emotional,

psychological and other aspects of growth are ‘not rigid divisions but helpful approximations’ (Wakefield & Clark, 1986).

The Child’s Level of Language Development and Enrichment: ‘The ability to use words provides the youngster with symbols by which he can ‘handle’ images and precepts (Wakefield and Clark, 1986). The child’s language development rests both on nature and nurture issues. If the child has challenges in language development, they may not be able to grasp theological concepts which others within the same age range can handle. Another dimension is the nurture – the environment in which the child is brought up. If family members are Christians and they converse concerning spiritual topics, there is every likelihood that such a child will be better able to ‘handle’ theological concepts than the child of the same age from a non-Christian home whose ‘environment is void of conversation concerning spiritual topics’ and as such, has ‘his development in this area stunted’ (Wakefield and Clark, 1986).

The Hebrew child was at a great advantage in relation to God where issues of his nurture were concerned. The community in which he was raised represented a rich heritage of curriculum development. ‘The child lived in an environment that was intentional in its educational focus’(Anthony and Benson, 2003)’. It is rather unfortunate that the same cannot be said for theological exposure of children in Nigeria today. Doherty (2004) rightly observed that, ‘there is very little available on the subject of teaching doctrine to children in many of the world’s languages.’

‘Children are not second class citizens; they need a full expression of Christian faith. But they need it in ways and words which they can understand” (Hendricks, 1980). Hendricks makes it clear that it is the responsibility of those who work with children in different ways to ‘make further specific translation of these insights into the particular circumstances of the children whom they love and know’. Beers (1986) notes that, ‘Most adults use inherited holy language when speaking about God. This language about God needs to be passed on to the child. In order to pass on theology to our children, adults must explain their holy talk. ... This translation gap is a serious problem in the Christian community’s religious education of children.’ What Beers calls ‘holy talk’ is referred to as the ‘language of Zion’ by Chamberlain (1973).

In essence, children are full humans who have the right to education and who should be educated at their level of understanding. They can and must be taught theological and moral concepts. ‘Of course, no special theology for children exists. However, special ways of talking to children about God do exist’ (Hendricks, 1980). These ways of talking to children should take into consideration their language, their cognitive development, their nature and nurture issues and influences of parents, family and ‘significant others’ in the community of faith, in school, society and mass media. It is necessary at this juncture to examine the researcher’s methodology and findings on the field before taking a look at some guidelines for teaching theological concepts to children.

Research Methodology and Findings on Involvement of Theologically Trained Adults and their Impact on Children

Research Methodology

The researcher employed descriptive statistics to present the picture of how things were on the field. She designed a questionnaire in 2021 and administered it among Christian Educators across Christian denominations under the canopy of a study on Christian Educators and their roles. This questionnaire was a second one as the first was to theologically trained individuals to assess the impact of theological training on children. The latter was carried out in 2013 and the former, in 2021. Both questionnaires were analysed descriptively using frequency counts, simple percentages, the mean as a measure of central tendencies and in some cases, the standard deviation.

A total of 250 respondents across denominations answered the questionnaire on the roles of Christian Educators. One was from Winners Chapel, two each from Catholic and Redeemed Christian Church of God churches; seven of Pentecostal denominational leaning, eight Anglicans, 11 from the Apostolic Church and 213, Baptists while six respondents did not indicate their denominational affiliation. At the time of responding to the questionnaire, the respondents covered twelve of the States in Nigeria, cutting across the Southwestern, North-Western, North-Central, South-southern, and South-eastern geo-political zones of Nigeria. They resided in Lagos, Oyo, Osun, Ogun, Ondo, Kwara Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba, Rivers, Benin, Delta States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT).

In response to a statement in the questionnaire that “‘Christian Educator’ refers to everyone involved in the Education ministry of the church and those who teach in schools who are Christians whether they are paid or volunteer workers”, 126 (50.4%) respondents strongly agreed, 90 (36%) agreed, 21 (8.4%) disagreed while 11 (4.4%) strongly disagreed. A mean of 3.335 shows that respondents generally agreed with the statement and a standard deviation of $0.813 > 0.7$ shows a significant difference or discrepancy in the opinions of respondents.

While the agreement as stated was unanimous across geographical location, denomination, and educational level, there was a difference statistically age wise, using chi square when the research question was stated as a hypothesis and tested. Most respondents (80%) who were between the age of 10 to 17 years strongly agreed that ‘Christian Educator’ refers to everyone involved in the Education ministry of the church and those who teach in schools who are Christians whether they are paid or volunteer workers while only approximately half who were the respondents in other age groups strongly agreed with the statement. Among older participants (above 64 years), only 30 percent agreed strongly with the statement. It may be that over time, the use of the word ‘Christian Educator’ has changed meaning.

Whether the Christian Educator included paid and non-paid educators in church and school settings or was limited to the church context, all respondents agreed that the roles of Christian Educators included preparation for teaching and training, ensuring children use skills they have acquired; evaluation, correction, disciplining children, leading children to Christ and disciplining them, advocacy, teaching, training and educating parents and care givers of children both within and outside the church, visitation, collaboration with other educators, learning, guiding the development of children alongside parents and living exemplary lives.

Since respondents agreed on these roles across denomination, age, gender, geographical location and all avenues explored, it is obvious that the role of Christian Educators is known and important. They are generally the ones who impart theological and moral concepts to children as 'significant others'. They therefore need to understand theological concepts well enough to articulate them in ways children will understand and to support parents in their divinely assigned role.

In an earlier study on the impact of theological education on children; using a researcher designed questionnaire in 2013, the researcher administered a total of 190 copies - both through printed hard copies and electronic means - to people who had experienced formal theological training. Out of the questionnaire copies, 147 respondents' responses were received: one was void and so, 146 responses were analyzed out of which 118 were males and twenty eight were females. The disparity in sex was representative because over the years, more males are known to have undergone theological training than females.

All the respondents had Baptist theological training at one point in time or the other. Fifteen theological institutions were represented by their graduates at different levels – at Vernacular, Certificate, Diploma, Degree, Master of Divinity, and post graduate studies levels. The fifteen theological institutions were The Nigerian Baptist Theological Seminary, Ogbomosho (ninety five people among the respondents had been trained here at one level or the other); Baptist College of Theology, Oyo (formerly known as Baptist Pastors' School, Oyo) (fifty four of the respondents had been trained here at one level or the other); Evangelical Church of West Africa (now Evangelical Church Winning all) (ECWA) Theological Seminary, Igbaja (twelve of the respondents had been trained here at one level or the other); Baptist College of Theology Jos, Baptist College of Theology, Lagos (six of the respondents had been trained here at one level or the other), Baptist College of Theology, Benin City, Baptist College of Theology (now Baptist Seminary) Eku and Christian Theological Seminary, Ibadan (each of the three institutions just listed had four respondents trained in them at some time or the other); Baptist College of Theology, Obinze - represented by three respondents; the Baptist Colleges of Theology in Jos and Kaduna (now Baptist Seminary), were represented by two respondents each while UMCATC, TCNN Jos and Ghana Baptist Theological Seminary had one representative each.

While this writer is of the opinion that everyone affects children's theological concepts – even if subconsciously only 2.7 per cent of the respondents indicated that they erre very well involved in impacting children's theological concepts through direct teaching, publications for children or personal involvement with children in terms of spiritual things. One point four percent saw themselves involved, thirty seven point four percent as fairly involved and the greater percentage of 57.8 per cent considered themselves as not involved at all. This is alarming for the group of people many in society look up to as the ones to pass on the theological concepts to children.

Considering gender issues, the study revealed that though females in theological education are generally less than males, they are more involved in impacting children's lives. A little over half (55.55 per cent) of the female respondents indicated involvement in impacting children's theological development while only 33.05 percent of the males indicated involvement. Likewise, 62.92 per cent of the females reported that their theological training has been helpful for them in relation to impacting children while only 38.98 percent of the males found

theological training they had received very helpful in relating with children theologically speaking.

Fifty five percent of all the respondents (81) had no courses taught them on ministry to children while they were undergoing theological education; 39.5 per cent had less than three courses on children's ministry and only 2.7 percent had four or more child-related courses during their theological training – these being religious educators but not even all of the religious educators who were respondents! It is noteworthy that even the religious educators who were of the highest percentage involved with impacting children theologically, and had taken courses to aid them in childhood ministry; only 7.1 per cent of them had impacted children! These findings confirmed the need to provide guidelines in exposing children to theological concepts so all theological, Christian Educators and all people who affect or influence children's theological concepts will be able to intentionally assist children in forming correct theological and moral concepts.

Guidelines for Teaching Children Theological and Moral Concepts

Sound theological and moral concepts must be taught to children from the beginning of their lives through spiritually sensitive, exemplary, God-fearing caregivers. 'Education must always be targeted (on point). We do not teach a child in primary school like we teach a university student or *vice versa*. Each school and, in fact, each lecture must be targeted toward the persons who are going to receive that education' (McCain). As such, parents, caregivers, pastors, theologians, (religious/Christian) educators and all older people owe it to children to give them sound theological exposure and the necessary backing to stand for sound theology. Children have the 'awesome task' of drawing 'from bits and pieces of information and experiences (to) construct a world of reality.' Adults need to help them by synthesising separate parts together as whole understandable and relevant theological concepts.

It is very necessary for religious and theological educators to understand how children form concepts from images and precepts. According to Wakefield and Clark (1986), they need to appreciate 'how crucial it is that the growing child gain clear, accurate concepts related to God, Christ, the Holy Spirit, sin, death' and so on. They also need to understand the 'process whereby concept formation occurs'; ... to 'ponder why theological concepts occur' and 'what Christian parents and teachers can do to aid *the accurate concept formation*'.

Children form their theological and moral concepts from what they see, hear, observe, experience and so on. For instance, a child's concept about God is formed from their observations of the reactions of their human father to issues (like the child's performance as seen on the report card); the quantity and quality of time the father finds for the child, whether or not and how the father prays with the child and the rest of the family, relationships of the father with the child and siblings, what friends/peer group state about God (such that when it thunders, God is angry), comments of parents about God around the home and what significant others in the child's life (like the Sunday school teacher, and in Africa, siblings and extended family members) say about God. (Wakefield & Clark, 1986).

‘Effective religious education includes the passing on of traditional Christian vocabulary. The passing on of the vocabulary must be done with an attitude that embodies Christian experience. Good religious education gives attention to the learner, as well as what is being learned. Above all, what is passed on must be elemental and true’(Hendricks, 1980). There is the need to ensure that the right thing is passed on because it is very difficult to relearn theology. That ‘right thing’ must also be passed across through the ‘right vehicle’ of language – the language that children understand. “Children are not second class citizens; they need a full expression of Christian faith. But they need it in ways and words which they can understand. (Hendricks, 1980).

Children are limited in their thinking but they should be taught theology at the level they can understand. ‘... The more the young are taught, the better. It will keep them from being misled.’ (Lloyd-Jones, 2007). In spite of the limitations in the young child’s thinking, parents and teachers must not neglect the opportunity to teach children the Bible (Wakefield and Clark, 1986). ‘Charles Haddon Spurgeon, ‘a Baptist Pastor in London during the latter half of the 19th century (who) had a special love for children, and a great desire to see them saved and serving Jesus Christ ... encouraged all his Sunday school teachers to teach the doctrines of the Gospel and of the Word of God to their children (and was himself)... at all times, a teacher of doctrine’(Doherty, 2004). He wrote in one of his sermons, as quoted by Doherty,

‘I do hold that there is no doctrine in the Word of God which a child if he be capable of salvation is not capable of receiving. I would have that children taught all the great doctrines of truth without a solitary exception that they may in their after days hold fast by them’ (Doherty, 2004, 17).

Spurgeon’s belief that children be taught all matters of doctrine is the ‘spiritual version’ of Durojaiye’s (1976) belief that a child can be taught anything useful as long as it is brought to the child’s level. Hendricks (1980) states that one should speak to a child about God simply so the child can understand and kindly so the child will *want* to understand. Close to this idea is that of Beers (1986) that even though some truths of the Bible, which according to Hebrews 5: 14 are “meat” for ‘those who are more spiritually mature;’ ‘most of the great truths of the Bible which are organized into theology can be stated in such a way that a child can understand them’ (Beers, 1986) that is; they can be made ‘milk’ for the child and expanded on and made deeper as the child grows. It is necessary to examine the extent to which theologically trained individuals have an impact on children ‘today.’

One of the ways to teach is through written material. Thus, religious educators are encouraged to write material that has sound theological content that is simple yet profound, clear yet deep enough so children are built up in the faith. Hendricks gives some guidelines for writing children’s theology. They are very relevant for those who are or will be willing to write theology for children. They are as follows:

1. ‘Children’s theology can and ought to have a musical quality about it’(Hendricks, 1980, 19).
2. ‘An adequate theology for children will need to take account of the steps and stages of childhood. It will need to adjust its vocabulary, examples and teaching techniques to the stage of childhood it is addressing. An ideal theology for children would give specific

examples and teaching techniques for all doctrines to all steps and stages of childhood. Persons interested in a theology for children are advised to look also into the psychology and physiology of children, for they are all interpretations of a larger whole' (Hendricks, 1980, 19).

3. Major topics must be included. Hendricks relates these major topics in theology to the notes of a musical scale. Topics he refers to are: revelation, God, Jesus Christ, Holy Spirit, creation, providence, man, sin, Christian church and last things' (Hendricks, 1980, 20). In the list for preschoolers (ages birth to six years), 'sin' is covered in 'self and others and 'man' is also taken care of in these two topics. 'Last things' is not part of the preschoolers' curriculum but that is understood, going by their nature of being in the concrete stage. However, as they learn about God and Jesus, issues relating to heaven will come in.
4. Good theology must allow for variation and creativity within the guidelines of a theory which uses the essential notes. (i.e. the topics which are also the building blocks of theology). (words in parenthesis added) 'Those who work with children scarcely need to be told that each child has his melody line' (Hendricks, 1980, 20).
5. 'Theology must have all these musical elements – the notes (i.e. the topics which are also the building blocks of theology); the theory (i.e. the awareness of logic, classical Christian thinking and the composition of the individual's own tradition) and the melody line' (Hendricks, 1980, 20; words in parenthesis added).
6. 'A theology for children may start softly and at a very elemental level. If the notes and theory are there, the individual can use them to make great and beautiful music. Theology is speech about God. It can also be sung speech to the glory of God...' (Hendricks, 1980, 20).

Recommendations and Conclusion

Having considered the rationale for exposing children to theological and moral concepts, parents, Religious Educators, Theological Educators, others involved in the upbringing of children in the home and society (referred to here as 'significant others') should borrow a leaf from the principles shared in this paper to ensure that children's theological concepts are well formed and that they are not left to chance in their understanding of God and the things of God.

Theological institutions should be more intentional about preparing ministers who understand theological concepts and who are able to express them in language children can understand. Ministers should see themselves as having the responsibility to reach all ages and thus, intentionally expose children to theological concepts which they can grasp at their age and level of understanding. Females especially should consciously be taught theological concepts well because of their greater impact on and involvement in children's lives but males should not be left out either.

All Christian leaders and ministers should learn from music: going from soft, easy, and familiar to the hard, difficult and unfamiliar and help children grow in understanding of God through walking alongside them to understand theological concepts. Writers of children's curriculum, educational and spiritual formation materials should ensure that key proper theological concepts are introduced at the level and in the language children can understand. The proper teaching of theology to children will help them be influencers of their peers in older

childhood also known as preteen years (Ages 10 – 12) and enable them grow to teenagers and adults who can fulfil scripture and defend the faith they have in them (1 Peter 3:15).

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