



A Challenge for the New Decade “The Year Of The Child”—*Who Cares?*¹

Ted Ward

Reactions of Christians to the International Year of the Child have been strange and wonderful. Whatever else we might have learned, it is now obvious to the world that Christians don't agree with each other on certain things. Have we further confused out secular observers about what we stand for—and against? I'm afraid so.

1979—The International Year of the Child—has put the worldwide media spotlight on the neglect and suffering that confronts vast numbers of children. But many North American Christians, barely conscious of the harsh realities of the human condition beyond their own backyards, have reacted with a knee-jerk response to this latest United Nations theme. Once again, the forces of evil have been given the credit for a movement that could have been—and should have been—an important worldwide testimony to the power of the Gospel.

The troubled times in which we live call for a positive and constructive voice from all people of goodwill. It isn't enough just to know what Christians are against. What matters more is what we are for. If ever there was a theme that we should claim as originating with the Gospel, it is the matter of children.

Our Lord had a special heart of concern for children. Compared even with the agenda of his first disciples, Jesus Christ had more time for children than anybody. He put them first. He said that the Kingdom of God is made up of children. He made of childhood something special and good; he even said that adults must take on the qualities of a child again if they wanted to enter the Kingdom.²

So here in our country and in other places where the influence of the Gospel has been felt, people of goodwill and moral principle have created all sorts of protections and helps for children. It is no coincidence that laws to protect children from exploitation are more common in countries that have been guided by Christian principles. Not far back in the history of the United States, Canada, and Great Britain, as the Industrial Age forced all sorts of changes in life-style and the marketplace, children were exploited unmercifully as factory and mine laborers. Did Christians turn their backs and ignore the problems? No, indeed. Christians were in the front lines of battle to enact protective legislation.

Note: Christians used government as a vehicle to alter the social order—to protect human rights against the organized forces of human greed.

¹ Ted Ward. The Year of the Child—Who Cares? *Christian Standard* (March 2, 1980), pp. 4-6.
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² Matthew 18:1-10; Matthew 19:13-15; Mark 10:15; Luke 9:46-48

Less Concern?

Now that this problem—and many worse problems—is being recognized on a worldwide scale, should Christians show any less concern? The problems of mistreatment, neglect, and abuse of children are very real. Instead of sniping at the theme itself, Christians should take time to look into the facts. For example, because the International Year of the Child has focused attention on the data, we now know that 52 million children less than 13-years-old are employed as laborers, typically working 8 to 10 hours per day. Does this concern Christians?

We now know that in certain parts of India, private companies import children from nearby regions and other nations to work as coal miners. The smaller children are especially valued because they can squeeze into the smaller veins of coal and extend an otherwise worked-out shaft. Does this concern Christians?

What do we care that squads of small boys are employed as cleaners of the mausoleum crypts in La Paz, Bolivia? Boys and girls, 12 years of age and younger, are street-circus performers in India, performing stunts that often leave them maimed for life. Does this concern Christians? Homeless, starving children die at night on the sidewalks of Bogota. Brick carriers, miners, fish cleaners, chemical plant sweepers, slaughter-house shovelers, male and female prostitutes are children who never see the inside of a school, never have enough to eat, have no access to medical attention. Does this concern Christians?

It seems so much like a bad dream. Surely somebody is exaggerating. In its Year of the Child booklet, *Children*, Amnesty International provides evidence on 35 cases of children from 21 countries who have been arrested, imprisoned, tortured, separated from parents, and even murdered by officials acting on behalf of governments. Have you heard of Tamara, 3-years-old, who was tortured in a prison in Chile to force her mother to tell the whereabouts of her father, a suspected Communist sympathizer? It is well-known that being of the wrong race, the wrong nationality, or the wrong political parentage is enough to get a child killed outright—or worse, starved to death.

Has anyone missed the televised evidence of mass starvation in Cambodia? No compassion has been shown to children; those who brought about this massacre were acting on political convictions and beliefs. Make no mistake about it; this wasn't crop failure, lack of rainfall, locust plagues, or anything of the sort. It was political massacre. We live in evil times.

Surely it's a bad dream. If we close our eyes maybe it will all go away. Better yet, maybe we can divert the issue. Yes, indeed, not long ago the Swedish government made it illegal to spank your own children. Latch onto that; it's the evidence we need that the whole Year of the Child thing is a subversive plot to remove the influence of parents so that the state can take over the children.

A Closer Look

Wait a minute! Let's look more carefully. The Swedes have a reputation for using governmental strategies to solve social problems. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't. (It seems to me that same observation could be made of us.) For example, Sweden had a highway traffic fatality record almost as bad as ours and they decided to do something about it. Now in Sweden, driving after drinking is not only illegal, but the laws and courts are so tough that a drinker will walk home rather than risk losing his or her license—for life. It is this same tough-minded Swedish outlook that lies behind their commitment to stamp out child abuse. In Sweden (and in America), child abuse often hides behind the “right” of parents to beat and injure their children.

Very likely, the Swedish lawmakers will discover that they have over-reacted and have created a new problem that will confuse families and frustrate proper parenting. But they aren't stupid; laws can be changed and modified for the better. The very idea that American Christians would raise this illustration to attack the Year of the Child disturbs me deeply. Not that I agree with the new Swedish law (I don't), but the very idea of diverting attention from the nightmare of evil against children is repugnant.

What is the real motive behind the International Year of the Child? Twenty years after the signing of the United Nations General Assembly "Declaration of the Rights of the Child", only a handful of nations had taken steps toward assuring children's rights. Consequently, the General Assembly called for a year of worldwide emphasis on the plight of children in the world. Mobilizing public interest and public opinion is still a valid political strategy, thank God. In the United States, we still have a long way to go, but our problems of childhood center more on matters of moral and spiritual neglect than on the physical and social deprivation so common in many other countries. Can we be so selfish as to tell the rest of the world that the only problems we care about are our own?

Some have seriously suggested that to cooperate in any way with the International Year of the Child is to cooperate unwittingly in a Communist plot. I have observed that those who make the most noise about "Communist plots" unwittingly provide worldwide Communism their best cases to illustrate a key deception: that only Communists care about human needs of people. As it turns out, the sharpest warnings against the International Year of the Child are being made by those Americans who most fear the possibility of new U.S. legislation expanding the federal role in child care and control of child welfare. There are Christians on both sides of this issue: I, for one, have opposed the 1979 Child Care bill in its present form, but it doesn't seem wise to slosh all these matters together and throw out the children with the bath water.

A Proposal

As a Christian, I can agree with a sign now posted on a bulletin board in a prominent evangelical theological seminary: "For a Christian, every year is the Year of the Child." Indeed, and so long as we don't use this slogan to mask an attitude of indifference, I suggest that Christians declare the 1980s as the "Decade of Family and Children." We have a lot to say to a sick society on these matters; thus if we were to get off the defensive and self-defeating messages of suspicion and hatred and get into the theme of Christ's love, we could make our influence felt.

The "Decade of Family and Children" is more than a casual suggestion. Before long, we will be hearing that the next "Year" sponsored by the United Nations will be the "Year of the Family". Christians lost the initiative on the Year of the Child. Indecision, caution, bickering, and political exploitation by ultraconservative movements have taken a heavy toll on what could have been a glorious forward movement in the name of the greatest champion of children's rights of all history, Jesus Christ. How will we respond to the "Year of the Family"?

The sinful drift of secular society has attracted the Christian community of North America into a steady erosion of moral and spiritual values. In the past several years, crucial values have gone "over the dam," especially in matters of marital fidelity, personal accountability, and family responsibility. If the Christians of North America follow this drift any further, our role as a moral force in our own society and as a base for world evangelization may likely come to an end.

It seems unlikely that God would permit that to happen. More likely, the decade of the 1980s may be a time of great division and of a sharpening of contrasts. Once again, it may mean something quite distinct to stand for Christ. For example, it is already unpopular to stand for marriage as a two-person lifetime love contract. A family's accepting responsibility for its own children may become "odd". Indeed, we may be on the very threshold of being seen as "old-fashioned" (and unpopular) because of our valuing *having* a family, wanting to bear and rear children, accepting responsibility for their education, and their development as moral, God-fearing, human beings. The hour of decision is upon us and the issues this time are basic. Christians, as rarely before, will need to concern themselves more with what they are *for* rather than what they are against.

The Year of the Child has left many marks. Though evangelical Christianity, as a movement, has taken few bold steps, thousands of Christian families are doing what they can do best—becoming the places of nurture and growth that provide children what they need most: human warmth, physical care, and spiritual support. Even in our churches, where for many years the tendency has been to assume that the Christian education program must provide what the families will not adequately provide for their children, the emphasis is shifting toward the support of families—to work with parents in their responsibilities for children.

Maybe we will be better able to take some initiative on the "Year of the Family"; or better yet, declare the 1980s to be the "Decade of Family and Children". Unless the basic moral and spiritual issues are clarified and offered as the basis of an acceptable appeal for forgiveness and redemption through the work of Jesus Christ, devout Christians may be very lonely by the end of the 1980s. And the plight of children everywhere may indeed be grim.