

## **Prepared to Believe: The Evangelism of Preschoolers and Infant Baptism in African Anglican Churches**

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This article discusses the cognitive status of preschool children based on the insights of the child psychologist Jean Piaget. Building on this, a strategy is offered for the evangelism of preschoolers and the expected outcome of this evangelism is the formation of their worldview into a Christian one. This prepares them to believe the gospel when they reach a developmental stage in which faith and unbelief become part of their mental posture. Given their commitment to infant baptism, African Anglican churches must prioritise theological studies focused on children in order to carry out such evangelism.

### **1. Introduction**

Demographics show that Africa's population, as is widely known round the world, is youthful. This fact can obscure an important aspect of Africa's population in regard to children, viz., Africa's population pyramid continues to expand at the base, making children the most populous age group. In Uganda, for example, 50% of the population is below the age of 18 years, whilst 25% of the population is below the age of 5. In consequence, the shortage of Anglican theological literature on children puts Anglican churches in Africa at a distinct disadvantage for theological education and pastoral practice. This article will propose ways for African Anglican churches and families to evangelise their preschool-age children and the outcomes they should anticipate from such evangelism.<sup>1</sup> These methods of evangelism are grounded in preschoolers' cognitive status, based upon the insights of Jean Piaget and linked to worldview formation. The methods are also especially appropriate for the evangelism of preschoolers in Anglican churches on account of their practice of infant baptism.

Evangelism is understood as the proclamation of the gospel.<sup>2</sup> This is the case when the term is understood from the standpoint of its use in the New Testament, or from the standpoint of the content of apostolic preaching, or even from the standpoint of those labelled as evangelists in

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<sup>1</sup> In childhood studies, "preschoolers" are children aged 3–6/7 years old.

<sup>2</sup> This use of the term therefore does not rely on the state of the hearers, whether believers or unbelievers, baptised or not. The issue in this article is ultimately how to communicate the gospel to children, or "pass on the gospel to them" and we will use the term evangelism as the best way to capture this.

the NT. This understanding of evangelism is seen, for example, in a 1944 report commissioned by William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury, *Towards the Conversion of England*. The report was clear that evangelism concerned the “eternal gospel” and its intelligible presentation.<sup>3</sup> C. Robert Harrison has argued that this understanding is “nearly ubiquitous in the Church’s conversation about evangelism.”<sup>4</sup> This ubiquitous view of evangelism in Anglican churches is also seen in a second Anglican plan of evangelism, the “Decade of Evangelism” (Lambeth 1988, resolution 43), which called on Anglican churches to close the decade “with a renewed and united effort at making Christ known to the people of the world.”<sup>5</sup> This is also the view of evangelism in African Anglican churches where it is common knowledge that evangelism is taken to be preaching the gospel in church, market places, in the streets, in homes, etc.

Given that this paper is about the evangelism of preschoolers, I concern myself with how the gospel can be proclaimed to preschoolers in Anglican churches, thereby passing on the faith to them.

In what follows, I will first examine children’s cognitive status, drawing on studies of child psychology by Jean Piaget. I will then use this discussion to propose ways in which children should be evangelised before turning to consider the outcomes of such evangelism. I will then relate Anglican churches’ liturgy for infant baptism to the evangelism of preschoolers demonstrating thereby that these methods are highly appropriate for evangelism of preschoolers in Anglican churches. I will finally conclude with some thoughts on what needs to happen if African Anglican churches are to carry out this kind of evangelism.

Since relative to older persons children have distinct ways of thinking and therefore knowing, their evangelism in Anglican churches as well as elsewhere would be ill-informed if it were conducted in ignorance of, amongst other things, their cognitive status. I elect to use Jean Piaget’s insights in discussing children’s cognitive status because his work on child psychology gave the world penetrating insights into children’s cognitive status and thus continues to have considerable influence. In the remarks of one, “assessing the impact of Piaget on developmental psychology is like assessing the impact of Shakespeare on English literature, or Aristotle

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<sup>3</sup> Commission on Evangelism, *Towards the Conversion of England* (Toronto: Dent and Sons, 1945).

<sup>4</sup> C. Robert Harrison, Jr., “Competing Views of Evangelism in the Episcopal Church,” *AThR* 75.2 (1993): 218–36.

<sup>5</sup> Anglican Consultative Council, *The Truth Shall Make you Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988, The Reports, Resolutions, and Pastoral Letters from the Bishops* (London: Church House, 1988), 231. A report to the same conference defined evangelism as “the communication of the good news of Christ’s Kingdom” (p. 43).

in Philosophy—impossible.”<sup>6</sup> For these reasons a paper dealing with the evangelism of preschoolers in Anglican churches in the light of Piaget’s work has considerable merit.

This merit is amplified by virtue of the fact that there is virtually no critical literature available on the evangelism of children that is informed by understandings of children’s cognitive capacities.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, in discussing the moral training of children as an aspect of evangelism, Attfield mentions suggestively the possibility of using the work of child psychologists, Piaget and Kohlberg, when he writes, “school and church alike are keen to develop moral thinking, possibly along the lines of developmental theories such as those of Kohlberg and Piaget.”<sup>8</sup> Building on this, we will consider the cognitive status of preschoolers upon which my proposal for evangelism will be based.

## 2. Concrete Thinking and Capacities for Concrete Thinking: Children’s Cognitive Status

One way to view the cognitive status of children according to the studies of Jean Piaget is by considering human thinking from two perspectives. The first perspective is to the two ways human beings think, namely, concretely and abstractly. Thinking concretely is with reference to people, places, objects, and experiences; thinking abstractly is with reference to ideas and immaterial concepts, to non-representational symbols (or symbols not representing in appearance anything in human environment or life), and with reference to propositions or principles. The second perspective is to understand human thinking in terms of forms (or distinct areas) of thinking, which are distinct mental activities, including: judging, interpreting, comparing and contrasting, classifying, planning, remembering, analysing, synthesising, problem solving, trouble shooting, making decisions, and strategising.

<sup>6</sup> From an anonymous reviewer in O. Lourenco, “In Defense of Piaget’s Theory: A Reply to 10 Common Criticisms,” *Psychological Review* 103.1 (1996), 143.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Franklin I. Sheeder, “Evangelism and Christian Education,” *Christian Education* 30.4 (1947): 349–58; Gideon G. Yoder, *The Nurture and Evangelism of Children* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1959); Kenneth L. Chafin, “Evangelism and the Child,” *RevExp* 60.2 (1963): 161–71; Robert A. Proctor, Jr., “Children and Evangelism,” *RevExp* 63.1 (1966): 55–63; Edward L. Hayes, “Evangelism of Children,” *BSac* 132.527 (1975): 250–64; Perry G. Downs, “Child Evangelization,” *CEJ* 3.2 (1983): 5–13; Karen Marie Yust, “Toddler Spiritual Formation and the Faith Community,” *International Journal of Children’s Spirituality* 8.2 (2003): 133–49; Dennis Horton, “Ministry Students Ages of Conversion with Implications for Childhood Evangelism and Baptism Practices,” *CEJ* 7.1 (2010): 30–51.

<sup>8</sup> D. G. Attfield, “Child-Evangelism and Religious Education,” *BJRE* 16.1 (1993): 39–46 (43).

In regard to the first perspective for understanding children's thinking, Piaget classified the capacity for concrete thinking in children in stages relative to their ages. The first stage of concrete thinking he named "sensori-motor," which is found in children aged 0–2 years (infants and toddlers). Sensori-motor thinking "deals only with real entities, and each of its actions thus involves only very short distances between subject and objects,"<sup>9</sup> and "only leads to practical satisfaction, i.e. to the success of the action and not to knowledge as such."<sup>10</sup> The second stage of concrete thinking in children he called "intuitive (or preoperational) thinking" which is found in children aged 3–6/7 years (preschoolers). As we shall later discuss, intuitive thinking is concrete thinking limited to the perspective of the subject, "always 'centred' on a particular state of the object and a point of view peculiar to the subject."<sup>11</sup> Piaget labelled the last stage of concrete thinking in children "concrete operational thinking" which is found in children age 7/8–12 years (school-age children). Concrete operational thinking is concrete thinking characterised by certain operations of thought. These operations of thought classify, serialise or number objects, order time and measure speed, and structure and measure space. In other words, they are "logico-arithmetical and spatio-temporal operations"<sup>12</sup> performed through thinking. We now consider in some detail, following Piaget's framework, the capacities for concrete thinking of preschoolers and thereby seek to understand their cognitive status.

When children acquire language at about 2 years old, they manifest two crucial forms of thinking which increase their concrete thinking capacity, both of which are crucial for concept development. These forms of thinking are "comparing and contrasting" and, its corollary, "classifying" of things. With these forms of thinking, preschoolers are able to form concrete concepts (the grouping of concrete things on the basis of similarities or commonalities of properties, relations, characteristics, appearances, functions etc.). Consequently, they experience a leap in their knowledge of people, objects, and activities. This leap in their knowledge is tied to the way human beings understand, and make sense of, their world, which is primarily through concepts. So, once a child has words and names for various objects, s/he begins to organise and group them in his/her mind, use the concepts as a basis for further exploration and knowledge of the world and extend his/her thinking of objects "beyond the limits of near space and time."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Psychology of Intelligence*, trans. Malcolm Piercy and D. E. Berlyne, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2001), 133.

<sup>10</sup> Piaget, *Psychology*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Piaget, *Psychology*, 156.

<sup>12</sup> Piaget, *Psychology*, 153.

<sup>13</sup> Piaget, *Psychology*, 134.

However, Piaget identified four limitations in the mental operations of preschoolers which affect their concrete thinking capacity in the areas of “classification” and “interpretation.” In regard to “classification,” the limitations on their mental operations make them incapable of grouping the same class or relationship of things together properly. So, for example, a dollar bill and a rough paper are classified as the same and both might be thrown in the bin. In regard to “interpretation,” the limitations of preschoolers’ mental operations limit their inferential abilities to one, transductive inference, where preschoolers do not infer “by deduction but by direct analogies”<sup>14</sup> from a particular observation or experience to a related particular one. So, for example, since doctors wear white coats, anyone who wears a white coat is a doctor.

The four limitations on preschoolers’ mental operations identified by Piaget were centration, conservation, irreversibility, and seriation. By *centration*, Piaget referred to preschoolers’ mental inability to decentre, or take on another’s perspective. In his words, “the adult thinks socially, even when he is alone, and ... the child under 7 thinks ego-centrally, even in the society of others.”<sup>15</sup> Ego-centric thought characterises the thinking of children, hence its labelling as intuitive thinking, “i.e. its reasoning is not made explicit.”<sup>16</sup> This kind of thinking is disinterested in questions of how and why: “children do not talk about causality among themselves before the age of 7 or 8. Such explanations as they give each other are rare and factual. The questions they ask one another contain very few ‘whys,’ and hardly any requests for a causal explanation.”<sup>17</sup> By *conservation*, Piaget referred to preschoolers’ mental inability to note what does not change in transformations so that they do not see that when ice melts to water or when water vaporises, the three are all the same substance; nor do they see that a liquid remains of the same volume when poured from an elongated glass into a broad one. By *irreversibility* Piaget referred to preschoolers’ mental difficulties to reverse sequences in their minds. For example, they have the ability to predict the original order three balls will re-emerge in a tube they have been pushed through but not the ability to predict in which order they will appear at its other end: “All children foresee the original order. The opposite order, on the other hand, is beyond them till about 4 or 5 years.”<sup>18</sup> By *seriation* Piaget referred to preschoolers’ difficulties in “arranging elements according to increasing or decreasing size.”<sup>19</sup> It is

<sup>14</sup> Piaget, *Psychology*, 141

<sup>15</sup> Jean Piaget, *The Language and Thought of the Child*, trans. Marjorie and Ruth Gabain, Routledge Classics (London: Routledge, 2002), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 125–26.

<sup>18</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 149

<sup>19</sup> Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, trans. Helen Weaver (New York: Basis Books, 2000), 101.

not until “the operational level that seriation is achieved straight away, by such a method as, for example, finding the smallest of all the terms and then the next smallest, etc.”<sup>20</sup>

A compromise in preschoolers’ ability to classify things properly into logical groups and to infer deductively is indicative of limitations in the depth of knowledge they are capable of attaining. In other words, since concepts are invariably related to the acquisition of knowledge of people, animals, objects, substances and materials, experiences, events, activities, etc.,<sup>21</sup> one’s inability to form concepts into proper logical groupings is reflective of gaps in one’s knowledge, resulting in what we might call “surface” knowledge. Consequently a preschooler’s knowledge of the world, on account of the four limitations Piaget pointed out, is of a superficial kind, whereby “the child’s conception of things is at one and the same time what they appear to be (phenomenalism)”<sup>22</sup> and not as they really are. This is to say that preschoolers are incapable of grasping deeper knowledge of the world regardless of having the prerequisite forms of thinking that can lead to such knowledge. This superficial knowledge of preschoolers, Piaget pointed out, is what accounts for their fantastical inner world in which there is no separation of, nor telling the difference between, fact and fiction, reality from the imagined. In his words younger children “find it far more difficult to distinguish between romancing and a faithful rendering.”<sup>23</sup> From the point of view of preschoolers’ limitation to transductive inference, the “child’s incapacity for true causal explanation and logical justification”<sup>24</sup> or his/her giving “incomplete reason or cause”<sup>25</sup> for actions and events means that individual fantasy holds sway. As it were, their magical world compensates for their inability to acquire deeper knowledge that would help them to make sense of the world as it really is and therefore have a more accurate picture of reality.

This typical inability in preschoolers to separate fact from fiction is corroborated in children’s cognitive studies by literature in childhood developmental psychology on *theory of the mind*.<sup>26</sup> Theory of the mind is “the ability to attribute mental states (beliefs, intentions, and desires)

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<sup>20</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 148.

<sup>21</sup> “The world” from here on.

<sup>22</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 276.

<sup>23</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 127.

<sup>24</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 241

<sup>25</sup> Piaget, *Language*, 116.

<sup>26</sup> See for example Henry M. Wellman, *The Child’s Theory of the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford Books, 1990); W. V. Fabricius, T. W. Boyer, A. A. Weimer, and K. Carroll, “True or False: Do Five-year-olds Understand Belief?” *Developmental Psychology* 46 (2010): 1402–16; V. Slaughter, “Theory of Mind in Infants and Young Children: A Review,” *Australian Psychologist* 50 (2015): 169–72.

to oneself and others,”<sup>27</sup> which invariably requires one to be conscious of beliefs, intentions and desires in oneself and in others. Of critical importance from the perspective of theory of the mind in understanding why preschoolers blur the distinction between fact and fiction is the ability to attribute beliefs as a mental state. This is because although “beliefs generally coincide with the state of the world,”<sup>28</sup> they are nonetheless internal and mental states that may, or may not, accord with reality. Preschoolers, as seen in myriad “false belief” task experiments, find it difficult to grasp that beliefs (or perceptions) are mental states and not reality; thus a person may have false beliefs, i.e., beliefs that do not accord with reality. In one common version of false belief tasks, for example, children are told a story where Maxi places a chocolate in a box *x* and goes away.<sup>29</sup> In his absence his mother removes the chocolate from box *x* and puts it in box *y*. The children are then asked to point out the box where Maxi will look for the chocolate when he returns. Preschoolers before the age of 5 will typically point to box *y* because they cannot distinguish Maxi’s false belief (chocolate is in box *x*) from their own belief (chocolate is in box *y*). Moreover, as alluded to above, this inability to point out Maxi’s false belief is an indicator that the preschoolers are not conscious of their own or others’ “beliefs.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed as a recent study has shown, it is not until the age of 70 months that children consistently demonstrate competence in distinguishing between factive (“know”) and non-factive verbs (“think” and “guess”), heralding the maturation of their mind.<sup>31</sup> Difficulty in grasping belief, and belief as a mental state, which results in the fusing of belief and reality in their experience is what makes preschoolers blur the distinction between reality and perceptions or imaginations. In consequence, what to an older person is fiction, imagination, or apparent (i.e., “belief”) is reality to a preschooler, hence their magical world. Thus theory of the mind insights

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<sup>27</sup> Anna R. Mcalister and T. Bettina Cornwell, “Preschool Children’s Persuasion Knowledge: The Contribution of Theory of the Mind,” *Journal of Public Policy and Marketing* 28.2 (2009): 175–85.

<sup>28</sup> Maria Rosaria Cadinu and Jeff Keisner, “Children’s Development of a Theory of the Mind,” *European Journal of Psychology of Education* 15.2 (2000): 93–111 (97).

<sup>29</sup> Heinz Wimmer and Josef Perner, “Beliefs about Beliefs: Representation and Constraining Function of Wrong Beliefs in Young Children’s Understanding of Deception,” *Cognition* 13 (1983): 103–28.

<sup>30</sup> Anika Fiebich, “Mindreading with ease? Fluency and Belief Reasoning in 4- to 5-year-olds,” *Synthese* 191.5 (2014), 929–44 (929–30).

<sup>31</sup> Susanne Kristen-Antonow, Irina Jarvers, and Beate Sodian, “Preschoolers’ Developing Understanding of Factivity in Mental Verb Comprehension and its Relation to First- and Second-order False Belief Understanding: A Longitudinal Study,” *Journal of Cognition and Development* 20.3 (2019): 354–69.

are in harmony with Piaget's insight on preschoolers' ego-centric thinking and also account for reasons why they struggle to mentally decentre and take another person's view.

When children get to school age, they transcend the limitations of the four mental operations they had as preschoolers, and consequently become concrete operational thinkers. The result of this is a marked increase in their concrete thinking capacity. More precisely, they are now able to classify people, objects and activities properly, and, thanks to their development in theory of the mind, they are also able to decentre mentally by observing and attributing beliefs, intentions and desires to mental states of their own and others. Moreover their inferential ability is no longer limited to the transductive kind alluded to above but is now transitive and deductive, bringing about a proper linkage of cause and effect. For these reasons they are capable of grasping deeper knowledge of the world and can differentiate reality from fiction, thus moving away from the fantastical world they had as preschoolers to a more accurate picture of reality.

Before we consider the implications for evangelism that the understanding of preschoolers' cognitive status has, we need to consider certain criticisms of Piaget's studies on children's cognitive abilities. Our concern here is not with criticism of all things Piaget said, but with criticism that is aimed at the stages he identified in children's cognitive abilities and their nature. This is because these are fundamental to his insights and, crucially, what this article draws upon in discussing preschoolers' cognitive abilities. These criticisms of Piaget's stages of cognitive development and their nature are that, first, apart from the first stage in the first two years of life, they are general, lacking in detail. Secondly, there is concern that they do not account for what precipitates movement or transition from one stage to another. Lastly, some argue that Piaget's stages fail to accommodate individual and cultural variations, instead rendering them as uncritically universal and rigid.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, Piaget's understanding that children's cognitive abilities undergo definite developments has hitherto not been discredited in child psychology scholarship, that is to say, they have not been shown to be out of touch with children's cognitive realities. This is also the case with his insights on, in principle, the cognitive characteristics of children in the various stages he identified, i.e., sensori-motor, intuitive and operational. It is for this

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<sup>32</sup> I have drawn my summary of these criticism from Peter Sutherland, *Cognitive Development Today: Piaget and his Critics* (London: Chapman, 1992); Lourenco, "In Defense of Piaget's Theory: A Reply to 10 Common Criticisms," *Psychological Review* 103.1 (1996): 143–64; David Henry Feldman, "Piaget's Stages: The Unfinished Symphony of Cognitive Development," *New Ideas in Psychology* 22.3 (2004): 175–231.



reason that they continue to be applied today in discourse on children as varied as children's map-making,<sup>33</sup> children's development of operational time,<sup>34</sup> genetic epistemology,<sup>35</sup> use of labels,<sup>36</sup> perspectives on children's learning,<sup>37</sup> and models of learning.<sup>38</sup> It is for the same reason that I have used Piaget to map out preschoolers' cognitive abilities. With these remarks, I am now in a position to offer my proposals on how the church and parents can evangelise children in the light of their cognitive status.

### 3. Evangelising Preschoolers

We have described the cognitive status of preschoolers as one of concrete thinking but whose capacities for concrete thinking are limited by their inability to perform certain mental operations. We said that this makes them incapable of a deeper knowledge of the world. Therefore, evangelism, that is, gospel proclamation, cannot be a fully blown, and thus integrated, explanation about Jesus. A full-blown gospel proclamation requires communicating the gospel reasonably, which would invariably entail explaining to preschoolers, for example, the nature of Jesus' divinity and the goal of Jesus' coming to the world, the nature of his kingship and its purpose, the meaning of his deeds, the reasons for his sacrificial death, the significance of his resurrection, and the ends to be accomplished by his return. Such reasonable explanations of the gospel require making connections between various aspects of the gospel, for example between Jesus's coming and humanity's situation, between his kingship and God's eternal home, between his sacrificial death and humanity's condition, between his kingship and his deeds, between his kingship and his divine sonship, and between his resurrection and his words. These requirements presume the cognitive ability for spotting causal linkages in the gospel and

<sup>33</sup> E.g., Eugene Geist, "Let's Make a Map: The Developmental Stages of Children's Mapmaking," *Young Children* 71.2 (2016): 50–55.

<sup>34</sup> E.g., Constance K. Kamii and Kelly A. Russell, "The Older of Two Trees: Young Children's Development of Operational Time," *Journal for Research in Mathematics Education* 41.1 (2010): 6–13.

<sup>35</sup> E.g., D. Abrahamson, S. Shayan, A. Bakker, M. van der Schaaf, "Eye-Tracking Piaget: Capturing the Emergence of Attentional Anchors in the Coordination of Proportional Motor Action," *Human Development* 58 (2015): 218–44.

<sup>36</sup> E.g., Stephanie E. Miller, Stuart Marcovitch, and Janet J. Boseovski, "Young Children's Ability to Use Ordinal Labels in a Spatial Search Task," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly* 61.3 (2015): 345–61.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., Kaya Yilmaz, "The Cognitive Perspectives on Learning: Its Theoretical Underpinnings and Implications for Classroom Practices," *Clearing House* 84.5 (2011): 204–12.

<sup>38</sup> E.g., Amy Perfors, "Piaget, Probability, Causality, and Contradiction," *Human Development* 59 (2016): 26–33.

integrating various pieces of information about the gospel, both of which are beyond preschoolers' capacities for concrete thinking.

I propose then that the evangelism of preschoolers through gospel proclamation is limited to proclaiming simple gospel content. By this I mean the proclamation of the gospel to preschoolers by way of singular concrete explanations of the gospel to them, with few words, through pertinent stories, illustrations, and memorable statements or sayings. Singular concrete explanations of the gospel entail explaining only one aspect of the gospel at a time without relating it to other gospel content (or even necessarily anticipating explaining at a later date its relationship to other gospel content). This singular gospel explanation to preschoolers precludes any integrated understanding of the gospel. It also focuses on the *what?* or *who?* or *when?*, or *where?* (events, places, descriptions, naming, identifications, etc.), and not *how?* or *why?*, of the gospel. This might include a key event in the life of Jesus, where Jesus was born, a miracle he performed, a relationship he had, a concrete identity of his such as Jesus the king, Jesus the healer, Jesus the miracle worker, etc. We will call this type of evangelism of preschoolers *simple explanatory gospel proclamation*. It has a counterpart in *simple non-explanatory gospel proclamation* (i.e., ways that do not involve simple gospel explanations as outlined above) which we consider below.

Evangelism of preschoolers through simple explanatory gospel proclamation enables them to acquire knowledge of the gospel of the declarative kind. By declarative knowledge I mean "knowledge that can be declared, usually in words, through lectures, books, writing, verbal exchange, braille, sign language, mathematical notation, and so on."<sup>39</sup> Correspondingly, declarative knowledge<sup>40</sup> is explicit, i.e., the knower is conscious that s/he has the knowledge and can articulate or communicate it. On the other hand, simple non-explanatory gospel proclamation enables preschoolers to acquire experiential knowledge of the gospel. Experiential knowledge is not taught by any systematic instruction and explanation but, rather, is acquired through exposure. Repeated exposure to something engenders knowledge through imitation, internalisation, imagination, and affection, and through intuition. For example, a preschooler will not know the route to a neighbour's house by studying a map or taking instructions from parents; s/he will know the route to the neighbour's house through repeated accompanied journeys to the house. This is akin to the ways in which preschoolers know and comprehend a language. Therefore, experiential knowledge may not be articulable.

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<sup>39</sup> S. Farnham-Diggory, "Paradigms of Knowledge and Instruction," *Review of Educational Research* 64.3 (1994): 463–77 (468).

<sup>40</sup> Also referred to as "propositional knowledge."

The first evangelism of preschoolers through simple non-explanatory gospel proclamation I propose, is through repeated exposure to the gospel through simple gospel stories. Simple gospel stories would have a singular focus with fewer words and characters as has been well done in some children's Bibles with usually Bible stories of about 25 words for 3 and 4 year preschoolers,<sup>41</sup> and between 25 and 75 words for 5 and 6 year preschoolers.<sup>42</sup> We need to note here that although gospel stories should be told intentionally to preschoolers for exposure purposes, preschoolers can also pick up these stories if they capture their attention and are repeatedly told in the context of adult conversation. In this sense, testimonies, or personal stories of faith in Christ, in the context of home conversations and in church can be avenues for exposure of preschoolers to gospel stories. Since stories are by nature concrete, when simple gospel stories are repeatedly heard by, told to, or dramatised for, preschoolers, they feed into their imagination and also become part of its content, enabling them to internalise the stories and acquire experiential gospel knowledge.

The second simple non-explanatory gospel proclamation in the evangelism of preschoolers I wish to propose is through repeated exposure to gospel symbols such as the cross, lamb, ship, fish, and Chi-Rho, and to gospel rituals, if we may term them so, of Holy Communion, and baptism. Repeated exposure to gospel symbols and rituals means that non-proclamatory evangelism of preschoolers requires the participation of preschoolers in Christian worship as a way of evangelism. Such repeated exposure feeds into preschoolers' imagination by which they internalise the symbols and rituals to which they are exposed. Parents, Sunday School teachers, and pastors, as noted by James Fowler cannot be in control of preschoolers' imagination and internalisation, but can engage with both.<sup>43</sup> Such an engagement is through appropriately answering, guiding, or correcting preschoolers in response to the questions they raise and the imaginations they express as a result of their internalisation of the gospel. Going back to our analogy of language in understanding experiential knowledge, this is the way that parents engage preschoolers when they are learning a language.

When preschoolers are exposed to the gospel through simple non-explanatory means, their subsequent imagination and internalisation of the gospel is most likely to connect with their declarative knowledge of the gospel acquired through simple explanatory gospel proclamation leading

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<sup>41</sup> E.g., Katin Juhl, *The Carry Along Bible*, illustrated by Jacob Kramer (Copenhagen: Copenhagen Publishing House, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> E.g., Carine Mackenzie, *Little Hands Story Bible: Stories from the Old Testament* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 132–33.

to a greater knowledge of the gospel. Thus preschoolers' evangelism has a greater impact when both ways are used.<sup>44</sup>

We conclude our discussion of the evangelism of preschoolers in the light of their cognitive status with a critical point on the outcomes of the evangelism of preschoolers from the perspective of worldview. The end goal of the evangelism of preschoolers is not merely belief, or a verbal profession of belief, in the gospel and therefore a conversion from a state of "darkness" to a "light", or from "blindness" to "seeing" or from the "old" to the "new", or from the kingdom of Satan to God's Kingdom. Rather, the expected outcome is one of Christian formation, forming the preschooler's worldview into a Christian one by virtue of it being heavily infused by the gospel. This is because a preschoolers' mental habitat is, as already discussed, fantastical, making no differentiation between the real or imagined, and so belief and unbelief are alien to their minds; indeed, belief and unbelief are not a part of their mental posture. A preschooler simply imbibes from, and reflects, the world s/he is exposed to and is consequently formed by it in at least three dimensions: (i) Their world perception, i.e., what they perceive of the world, how it is and why, how it ought to be, the underlying moral/metaphysical order, etc.; (ii) their self-perception and identity; and (iii) their values and attitudes. This is to say that preschoolers' exposure to the gospel is instrumental in forming their worldview since these dimensions are basic to a worldview.<sup>45</sup> Once a preschooler's worldview is formed, it remains an unrivalled force throughout their lives by virtue of both its transformation later into their root beliefs, and its enduring influence on their identity, attitudes, and values.

When preschoolers become school-age children, at about the age of seven, their increased thinking capacity, as discussed above, means that they invariably begin to sort out the magical from the real in their inner

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<sup>44</sup> This said, we should note that evangelism which is informed by various human elements such as cognitive capacities does not solely account for bringing people to the knowledge of, and belief in, God and the Lord Jesus. God works by his Spirit through evangelism to bring men, women, and children to himself. Evangelism, therefore, should always be carried out with reference to God through obedience, trust, anticipation, etc. When evangelism is viewed this way, then it should be precisely because of reference to God that Christians should strive to evangelise in ways informed by certain knowledge of human beings, in this case children, since it is God who has designed them so according to his plans and purposes divine.

<sup>45</sup> For more on this see Arthur F. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983); James H. Olthuis, "On Worldview," *CScR* 14.2 (1985), 1–12; Charles Taylor, *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 23–30; Robert Cummings Neville, "Worldviews," *AJTP* 30.3 (2009), 233–243; Katherine G. Schultz and James A. Swezey, "A Three-Dimensional Concept of Worldview," *JRCE* 22 (2013), 227–43.

world that hitherto has been undifferentiated. What then was part of their inner world that cannot be observed or proven by ordinary human means is either rejected as untrue, or embraced by faith as real. This sifting the real from the imagined applies to the gospel as well, which then has to be embraced by faith as true or otherwise rejected due to unbelief. However, school-age children whose worldview was formed by the gospel have, humanly speaking, a better chance to embrace it by faith and not reject it in disbelief. This is because their Christian worldview provides a hospitable environment for the preschooler to believe in the gospel once they attain the age of discernment. At that age their gospel-informed Christian worldview remains with them but is now reconstituted on the basis of faith as a root belief about reality and the world.<sup>46</sup>

This conclusion could explain the convictions articulated by Bushnell<sup>47</sup> over a century ago (that would herald a turn in focus towards Christian education as a form of evangelism)<sup>48</sup> that if children are from infancy exposed in a sustained way to the gospel, they have an increased likelihood to have a relationship with God than would otherwise be the case, and thereby precluding the need for a radical conversion later in life. Such a conviction is not merely academic but one that some adult believers, including myself, can identify with. During weekly testimony hours at an evangelical theological institution in Africa where I once taught, it was not uncommon to hear testimonies of conversions by some students that had no point of conversion to mention but rather a journey of faith in God and the Lord Jesus that began in childhood. Seen this way, apparent conversions in such preschoolers later in their school-age, teenage or adult lives need not be viewed as conversions per se but rather as spiritual “awakenings” or “renewals” of their faith. What occurs can be described as the “enthusiastic adoption of a belief system that had not been taken seriously previously or that had been abandoned out of scepticism, rebellion, or indifference,”<sup>49</sup> or, we may add, out of a lack of

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<sup>46</sup> Via a different route, for a more varied ecclesial context, and not using the language of evangelism and worldview, Yust gives proposals on nurturing children into the faith and their intended outcomes that are very close to mine. See Karen-Marie Yust, “Cultivating Christians: North American Family Cultures and Religious Identity Formation,” *International Journal for Children’s Spirituality* 22.3–4 (2017): 260–73.

<sup>47</sup> Horace Bushnell, *Christian Nurture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1915).

<sup>48</sup> For brief discussion on this, see Sheeder, “Evangelism and Christian Education,” 349–58; Randolph Crump Miller, “Horace Bushnell: Prophet to America’s Children,” *PerkJ* 32 (1979): 1–8; and Mark A. Maddix, “Christian Nurture and Conversion: A Conversation between Horace Bushnell and John Wesley,” *CEJ* 9.2 (2012): 309–25.

<sup>49</sup> David A. Snow and Richard Machelek, “The Sociology of Conversion,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 10 (1984): 167–90 (169–70).

relevant teaching or engagement by churches and parents. Others, with John Barker, prefer to call these awakenings “secondary conversions,” where those who respond in faith to the proclamation of the gospel are not strangers to it but are familiar with it having earlier either been shaped by the gospel or accepted it, a situation that both brings about and conditions their current awakening.<sup>50</sup> Such an understanding also means that the Christian life of a person evangelised as a preschooler in this way is not viewed solely in its current state divorced from his/her Christian formation.

#### 4. Infant Baptism and Preschoolers' Evangelism in Anglican Churches

Evangelism of preschoolers in Anglican churches is implicit in the liturgy for infant baptism. Indeed, if we understand our liturgies past and present correctly, an undertaking is made to evangelise the baptised infant subsequent to their baptism. Anglican churches' prayer book liturgies for infant baptism without exception point in various ways to three things that are symbolised in baptism:<sup>51</sup> forgiveness of sins, rebirth, and becoming a member God's family, the church. The post-baptismal state is no less than the onset of Christian pilgrimage, the entry to Christian faith and practice. For the baptised infant, the sequence is that evangelism is carried out after his/her baptism in a process across their childhood which results in their Christian formation rather than conversion.<sup>52</sup> This is because the infant's post-baptismal state must be actualised in reality. If there is no actualisation, which would be the case if the baptised infant is not evangelised, then we would have a baptised person who does not know God, the Lord Jesus, or God's forgiveness—a baptised person who

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<sup>50</sup> John Barker, “Secondary Conversion and the Anthropology of Christianity in Melanesia,” *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* (2012): 67–87.

<sup>51</sup> See for example The Church of Nigeria (Anglican Communion), *The Book of Common Prayer*, rev. ed. (Dongshang Town: Nanjing Amity Printing, 2007), 158–67; Anglican Church of Kenya, *Our Modern Service* (Nairobi: Uzima, 2002), 34–41; Anglican Church of Southern Africa, *An Anglican Prayer Book* (London: Collins, 1989), 380–87.

<sup>52</sup> Since the liturgies for adult baptism are similar to the ones for infant baptism, the same three things are believed to happen to an adult who is baptised, only that unlike the infant an adult begins his/her Christian pilgrimage having believed in the gospel. The sequence of events for the baptised adult prior to the onset of Christian life is his/her evangelism, followed by repentance and conversion evidenced in his/her profession of faith in God and the Lord Jesus, and lastly his/her baptism.

does not believe in the gospel, and is not a member of the household of faith, the church.<sup>53</sup>

Anglican churches presume that the infant's post-baptismal state will be actualised by means of the infant's believing parents, godparents/sponsors, and the specific community of faith to which the child belongs. This presumption is visible in the role of Christian nurture that parents and godparents of the infant bind themselves to according to the liturgies for infant baptism. However Anglican churches' liturgies do not explicitly provide the content to facilitate this actualisation nor offer guidelines on how to go about it, leaving it incumbent on Anglican churches to work these out. I suggest that the content of actualisation is the gospel. Given that the gospel and belief in the same is integral to the forgiveness of sins, to rebirth, and to membership of God's family, the church, which are the very things believed to happen through infant baptism, actualisation must in principle be by way of gospel proclamation, i.e., through evangelism. To put it plainly, baptism cannot be divorced from the gospel and the positive outcomes of gospel proclamation. Anglican churches then by virtue of their practice of infant baptism are committed to the evangelism of their preschoolers by following-up their infant baptism with a ministry of evangelism throughout their childhood. In consequence, my proposals on how preschoolers' evangelism in Anglican churches should be conducted based on preschoolers' cognitive status in relationship to worldview formation are highly appropriate for preschoolers' evangelism in Anglican churches by virtue of potentially enabling the ends of their infant baptisms.

In the BCP and in the prayer books of some African Anglican churches such as the Anglican Church of Kenya a link is made between infant baptism and confirmation on the basis of infants coming of age ("age of reason").<sup>54</sup> However, the reason for this linkage and the relationship between childhood and the age of reason to confirmation are not given, once again leaving Anglican churches to work them out. My proposal above for preschoolers' evangelism in Anglican churches based on Piaget's childhood cognitive studies helps in making sense of this linkage and relationship. As discussed earlier, these studies show that when children get to school-age their cognitive status enters a new phase where, amongst other things, reality and fantasy are now distinguished and thus faith and

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<sup>53</sup> I suspect that this need for actualisation upon those baptised as infants is the reason some in Anglican Churches doubt the efficacy of infant baptism and do not subscribe earnestly to it. When I served as an associate priest in an urban Anglican parish there are those who preferred to bring their babies for dedication as a substitute for baptism.

<sup>54</sup> See Anglican Church of Kenya, *Our Modern Service*, 38; Church of the Province of Uganda, *Come and Worship* rev. ed. (Kampala: Centenary, 2009), 32.

unbelief become part of their mental posture. These children can therefore embrace the gospel which has been instrumental in the formation of their Christian worldview, but from a position of understanding and belief, and thus are able to profess it verbally. In other words, when an infant's Christian formation comes to completion in their school-age years, you have a baptised person who believes in the gospel and is able to profess the same publicly, thereby becoming a candidate for confirmation. This adds to the friendliness of my proposals to Anglican practice of infant baptism.

## 5. Conclusion

Going by my wide experience of east and central African Anglican churches, evangelism has been done consciously, consistently, and robustly in African Anglican churches. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of evangelism of preschoolers. Indeed there are those who wait for preschoolers to be of age before they evangelise them. Saying "then they will have to decide for themselves whether to accept Jesus or not" is a common sentiment. The liturgy for infant baptism which, as we pointed out, presumes subsequent evangelism of those baptised is virtually ignored. Any inquiry of African Anglican churches' clergy and lay people reveals that their understanding of infant baptism as laid down in the liturgy is *de facto* replaced by understandings of infant baptism as a child naming ceremony, or a form of child dedication, or even the blessing and protection of a child. In some cases, some clergy and lay people have no understanding of what infant baptism means and simply justify the practice as a required church tradition. It is no wonder that it is not uncommon to hear the very priests who baptise infants in African Anglican churches disparaging baptism by telling their hearers that it is inconsequential in matters of salvation. African Anglican churches are therefore under-prepared to carry out the preschoolers' evangelism proposed above. If they are to evangelise the myriad preschoolers in their churches as I have proposed, and thereby be in harmony with their liturgies of infant baptism, they must prioritise and invest financial resources in theological childhood studies for training their clergy and children's ministers (Sunday School teachers).

Prioritising theological childhood education of clergy and children's ministers is a prerequisite for the kind of evangelism I propose because clergy and those who minister to children must be knowledgeable, from a theological perspective, on childhood matters, to appreciate the appropriateness of such evangelism and support it. Such critical knowledge is acquired via theological childhood studies. Childhood studies concern themselves with manifold subjects on children which range from their nature, development, spirituality, world and contexts, to their rights, education, health, needs and wants, concerns, and questions. Accordingly, theological childhood studies are theological studies focused



on children that draw critically from childhood studies for theological reflection and discourse on children. Some theological studies focused on children more directly address areas of children's ministry by drawing on childhood studies, and from the Bible and theology. Starting from the 1990s literature on theological childhood studies has been on the increase<sup>55</sup> with two journals exclusively devoted to the subject.<sup>56</sup> There is currently a considerable amount of material to support the theological education of clergy and children's ministers in Anglican churches in Africa. The Anglican Church of Uganda has taken a step in the right direction by having theological childhood studies in Bishop Tucker School of Divinity and Theology of Uganda Christian University's Child Development and Children's Ministry programme at both Bachelor's and Master's level. Church Army's Africa theological college, Carlile College, based in Nairobi which trains evangelists for the Anglican churches of east and central Africa has also done the same in offering a diploma course in Children and Family Ministries.

The other reason why theological childhood studies for clergy and children's ministers in African Anglican churches is a prerequisite for the proposed evangelism of preschoolers has to do with its delivery. For the proposed methods for the evangelism of preschoolers to be carried out, Anglican churches need personnel who are not only skilled in child pedagogy but who can also craft curricula and carefully choose the most appropriate literature for such evangelism. With the objectives of evangelising preschoolers through simple concrete explanations of the gospel as well as simple non-explanatory gospel proclamations in mind, I have to point out here that the content of such curricula would in principle be based mostly on simple gospel stories offered repeatedly to preschoolers over the course of their preschool. I venture here to suggest, for a concrete example, that a curriculum could be drawn up revolving around six groups of Jesus stories, namely, divinity, miracle

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<sup>55</sup> See Marcia J. Bunge, "The Child, Religion, and the Academy: Developing Robust Theological and Religious Understandings of Children and Childhood," *JR* 84.4 (2006): 549–79; Adrian Thatcher, "Theology and Children: Towards a Theology of Childhood," *Transformation* 23.4 (2006): 194–99; Diana Wood, ed., *The Church and Childhood*, Studies in Church History 31 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); Pamela D. Couture, *Seeing Children, Seeing God: A Practical Theology of Children and Poverty* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000); Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003); Kristine Henriksen Garroway, "Gendered or Ungendered? The Perception of Children in Ancient Israel," *JNES* 71.1 (2012): 95–114; Naomi Steinberg, *The World of the Child in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Namely the *International Journal of Children's Spirituality* and the *Journal of Childhood and Religion*.

stories, passion, resurrection, ascension, and second coming stories. All these groups of stories could be packaged in orderly sequence and offered to preschoolers as a complete unit for three months (12 Sundays), four times through the year. The curriculum would be offered to preschoolers when they are 3 year olds and re-run yearly in their 4th up to their 7th year but graded, i.e., adjusted per year to match the preschoolers' age-dependant memories, concentration spans, and life experiences. Such adjustments would be in the number of words per story, as well as in the various questions, puzzles, and songs. The adjustments would also be in the audio, dramatical, visual, and musical choices as well as in the verbal and kinaesthetic activities chosen to accompany the stories. Simple gospel explanations that are limited to matters that deal with the who? what? where? when? would accompany these stories and be graded as well.

I would like to give more concrete details on the kind of curriculum that would be useful for preschoolers' evangelism that I have proposed, for example, on how the curriculum can be designed to also be useful to parents and godparents at home, on how the curriculum can be linked to the church's major feasts, etc. However I have not designed my paper to articulate a curriculum that could serve the evangelism of preschoolers in African Anglican churches but to propose how such an evangelism can be done in an initial step towards writing curricula. I have argued here that African Anglican churches must invest in theological childhood studies to develop such competencies amongst their clergy and children's ministers.

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