



IDEAS IN

ChildhoodMinistry

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Formational Children's Ministry, By Ivy Beckwith

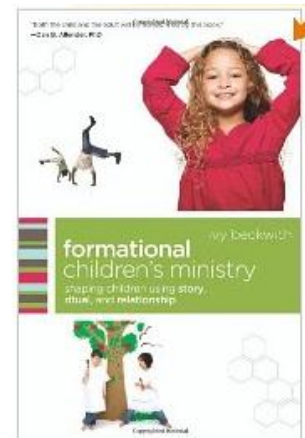
Review by Thomas Sanders, Director, Master of Arts in Christian Education: Childhood Ministry, Dallas Baptist University, Dallas, TX

Building on her previous work, *Postmodern Children's Ministry* (2004), Ivy Beckwith begins a dialogue by discussing what is missing from the previous and current models of instruction in spiritual formation. She roots her argument in the assessment that the formal education model or the model of secular education has strongly influenced the models of spiritual formation.

What I mean is that we believe that by teaching children Bible facts with moral application in a classroom setting, with a teacher/shepherd leading the group and directing the lesson, we will develop these children into Christians with intellectual knowledge of the Bible and theology, an emotional attachment to God and the faith community, and a desire to act and make personal choices that reflect an ethic of the values of the kingdom of God. (17)

Beckwith's concern is that the result may instead be a form of *Moral Therapeutic Deism*, the ultimate goal of which is a religious self-determined happiness. The author finally conditions her thesis by saying that current models do not need to be thrown out, just altered to become the beginning point of much more in spiritual formation.

In the chapter entitled "The Child and God's Story," Beckwith continues her previous concern about the use of scripture and biblical narrative as a vehicle to teach moral living. She argues that this strips the stories of their power and deeper meaning. In extending her thoughts on this subject she speaks of the dynamic nature of the stories to speak to the personal context of the writer, leaders, teacher, and child. Teachers and leaders in the local church must be mindful of curriculum that presumes or wrongly establishes the context for child, leader, or teacher. This form of preparation cannot be done in twenty minutes. Teachers and leaders who adopt Beckwith's characterization must feel the freedom to allow the child to enter the story and experience the moving of the Holy Spirit. Their preparation and teaching must include reflection for the child in and beyond the session as a critical weekly aspect. This means allowing the children to move beyond one preset outcome or teaching aim.



Beckwith moves from the child and God's story to the child and God's church. In this section of the book, the author focuses on the church's historical role in the spiritual formation of children. This may be the most negative critique of curriculum for today's children in that it does not in any large part seek to engage children in the stories of Christians across the centuries who have served, led, lived, and died for their belief in and relationship with Christ. In establishing the importance of the narrative in spiritual formation and in post modernity, Beckwith suggests that leaders with children should seek to help children engage with these stories, not for the ability to recognize and remember but as a motivation for living the Christian life and following God.

Beckwith guides the reader to evaluate how his or her church tells the story of its community of faith. In customizing curriculum to foster spiritual formation, leaders in this new aspect of teaching must involve leaders from across the church in telling the cumulative story of the faith community as a way of providing identity and continuing the story. In hearing the stories of the past and the present, Beckwith believes that children become more aware of the power of the biblical narrative, church narrative, and local community narrative, then begin to discover and develop their own narrative. In order to help children develop their own story, this chapter suggests that leaders help parents understand how to construct language with children even if parents are reluctant to take on the responsibility of guiding their child's spiritual formation. Beckwith challenges churches to put children and their parents together to talk about faith in order to develop "faith stories" of their own. The stories must be more than the story of an individual's conversion but of how he or she lives out faith in everyday life. In constructing these faith stories, adults must listen to children and value their knowledge. In this process the author suggests strongly that leaders must focus on the concrete rather than the abstract. The goal is that children hear the "faith stories" as part of their faith formation and in turn develop their own stories.

The second section of the book shifts to more practical matters of using ritual in faith formation and inclusion of children in the faith community. Beckwith returns to the home as the primary foundation for using three forms of rituals: celebrations, traditions, and routines. Rituals in this context provide a way to tie faith to the church, family, and God. One of the briefest sections in the book deals with worship and children. Beckwith gives support to both sides of the issue of including and excluding children in corporate worship. She postulates that spiritual formation can occur in both scenarios if conditions and practices are focused on children and their growth. Wrapping up this section of the book, the author addresses spiritual disciplines for children in faith formation. She focuses on mindful meditation, practicing prayer, focused fasting, simplicity, solitude, service, and witness. These disciplines are only introduced, and detailed activities for use with children are not provided. This list provides a framework for disciplines with children.

The final chapters of the book deal with the relational nature of spiritual formation, including soul care through the family, spiritual formation through the faith community, and peer-to-peer relationships. Beckwith argues that families today are solitary and need guidance from the church on how to become healthy places for children to grow and deal with the non-Christian and Christian cultures. The family emphasis is a recurring concept of spiritual formation in this book as well as the importance of the church in supporting families in guiding children toward God. In an emphasis on the family in the broader sense, the book paints the picture of a church and broader faith community that should fight against age stratified experience but should provide opportunities for children and people of all ages to experience

faith together. In closing the book, Beckwith provides a clear mandate to churches to help children develop relationships with peers. She acknowledges the inconsistent attendance patterns of children and the drive for large group settings in childhood ministry as challenges in helping boys and girls to develop relational connections with each other. She again encourages parents to provide opportunities for their children to connect.

Formational Children's Ministry (2010) as a text for childhood ministry is not a how-to book for novices who want to understand the basics of ministry to boys and girls. The book asks some valid questions related to the influence of decades of educational philosophy focused on programs and outcome-based curriculum. The questions that the author is asking fundamentally challenge all current models of education from the traditional Sunday School model to the recent large group/small group models. Her assessment is that most churches remove the power of the Biblical narrative by moralizing it to one single outcome or teaching aim. She encourages church leaders to see children as growing spiritual beings who are receptive to the working of the Holy Spirit for enlightenment and application. In this admonishment Beckwith supports a higher view of scripture and children. In addition to these encouragements, she joins the call for stronger emphasis on the role of parents in faith formation. One issue Beckwith overlooked is the large numbers of children who are living in single-parent homes. Addressing the way churches can help and assist these parents/guardians in their attempts to care for and teach their children alone could be beneficial to churches of all sizes and denominations. This issue aside, this book asks some compelling questions that challenge churches of all denominations and models to reflect on their ministry to boys and girls and their families.

Formational children's ministry. By Ivy Beckwith. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 2010. 157pp. \$15.99. paper.

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