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Book Review: Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship by Ivey Beckwith

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Ivy Beckwith, *Formational Children's Ministry: Shaping Children Using Story, Ritual, and Relationship*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2010, 157 pp., \$15.99.

Reviewed by Brian Honett, Ph.D. candidate in Family Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Ivy Beckwith has a religious education degree from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and a Ph.D. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. She has served as a minister in a number of congregations throughout the United States. She has also worked as an editor and education consultant for Group Publishing and Gospel Light Publications.

Beckwith's book is an attempt to answer the following question: "With so many people in this country pouring their lives and hearts into the spiritual formation of children, why are we not seeing miraculous results, and why are we not capturing the imaginations of our children for the kingdom of God?" (12) She argues that the way children's church is done in North American churches is broken. Things must be changed, and she proposes a number of changes to the current system.

Beckwith starts out with a brief critique of the current model being used in

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most congregations today—a formal educational setting in which children are taught certain Bible facts with moral application while in a classroom setting—and finds this model lacking. While churches may or may not have done away with the name “Sunday school,” the overall model remains the same—with the “number one purpose to deliver information about God and Jesus to these kids in the hopes that this information will work its way into their souls and emotions and lead them to God’s abundant life” (18). Instead of making Bible teaching such a cognitive endeavor, Beckwith proposes that a more informal education process be used with a focus on practicing being a Christian. Along with the informal process there are non-formal educational components such as missions trips.

Beckwith spends the remaining part of the book examining the following three characteristics of spiritual formation of children in the local church: story, ritual, and relationships. She argues that people live by stories. Since the Bible is a book of stories, stories should play a prominent role in the spiritual formation of children. Not only are humans greatly influenced by stories, they are also ritualistic on an individual, familial, and cultural level. Whether it is the acceptable norms within culture or the regular celebration of the Lord’s Supper in a congregation, people are shaped by rituals. Additionally, people are relational. We live, work, and exist within community. We also worship and grow in our faith within community.

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With so much of the Bible being narrative, Beckwith argues that the role of story within the spiritual formation of children should be much larger and different than it is now. Instead of using the Bible story as a means to get to a set of moral principles, children’s ministries should seek to use those stories to introduce children to the character and essence of God (24). She sees story as the primary teaching form for the church up until the Enlightenment. Post-Enlightenment theologians and teachers sought to condense all of Scripture into didactic teaching of systematic theology and commands, removing the joy and glory of God’s story (25–26). Not only should the children learn the story of Scripture, but they should also learn the story of the church. Beckwith argues that while we do not drown children in lists of dates and names, they do need to learn the foundational characters of the historical church. Not just those characters from the post-Reformation era, but also important people from the early church through the present day should be discussed. Learning this information provides children a better foundation.

While the concept of children and story consumes a large part of Beckwith’s book, she also includes two other aspects. One is the concept of introducing children to ritual (the Lord’s Supper, holiday rituals surrounding Christmas and

Honett: Book Review: Formational Children’s Ministry: Shaping Children Us Easter, etc.) in order to make them feel a part of the community and to practice what it means to be Christian. The other aspect is including children in worship services so that they learn to be a part of the faith community.

I agree with Beckwith on many points. I believe she is asking the right question. Too many in children’s ministry plod along doing things the same way because they have “always” been done that way, rather than asking why there is not a more dramatic impact on the lives of children. Consistent ministry evaluation is valuable and necessary. Whether in a children’s lesson or sermon, Scripture is not just a vehicle to get to a set of moral principles. Beckwith states that “churches need to be careful that their activities are not contributing to pulling the family apart” (122). I agree that children are tactile learners and should be engaged, that a pre-packaged curriculum is often not very effective, and that children should be made more a part of the faith community.

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Beckwith brings a wealth of experience in children’s ministry to this book. Each chapter is replete with examples and suggestions built not only on her experience but also on the experiences of others. While these practical examples are helpful, at times they serve as the foundation for her suggestions rather than Scripture. It seems to be a glaring omission that a book on formational children’s ministry contains no Scripture. No matter how many years of experience or how pragmatic and seemingly effective it is, experience can never be the foundation of what is done in ministry. Beckwith needs to lay the biblical foundation for the involvement of parents in ministry.

In her section on spiritual disciplines (excellent habits we should definitely be teaching children from a young age), Beckwith includes meditation. She begins by discussing the fact that many Christians are scared of meditation because they associate it with eastern religions. This is refuted by the fact that it is a common discipline focused on reviewing Scripture in the mind—an excellent point. Yet immediately after doing this, she moves into discussing “centering down” through the repetition of a meditative prayer and controlled breathing, along with other techniques such as using a prayer rope, and how teaching children to do this helps them feel closer to God (105). Children need to be taught how to pray and how to hide Scripture in their hearts and dwell upon it, but she quickly falls into removing the mind and heart and reverts to an eastern concept.

Beckwith puts much focus on the person and his or her experience with God. This comes through most clearly in her understanding of the story of Scripture and its relationship to children. “Bible stories are all about other people recognizing God’s activity in what for them might have begun as a very ordinary week. . . . As we connect our children with these stories in all their colorful detail,

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as we look at the inbreaking of the work of God into the lives of these Bible characters, we invite our children to find the similar inbreaking of God into their own lives.” (29) The storyline of Scripture is not about us. It is not about God breaking into our lives or transforming an ordinary week—Scripture is about the unfolding redemption plan of God for His glory. It is about the Creation, the Fall, redemption, and consummation. Children desperately need to learn the story of Scripture; they need to learn it so that they can see that the Bible is about so much more than them and understand that God has been working out His plan since before time began. They need to see the gracious work of their heavenly Father through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and Christ. They need to long for what is yet to come, and Beckwith is right in that they will never do that by learning some moral principles from a story out of an old book. Their lives will not be transformed until they see the big picture; but the big picture is not just about falling in love with God. The big picture is about seeing what He has been doing all along to redeem His fallen creation and bring glory to Himself.

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Beckwith has asked the right question and made a number of insightful critiques. Her experience allows her to see problems in children’s ministry that are missed by many. Her challenge for thoughtful creativity and personalization of ministry to each context struck at the heart of my own tendency toward ease in ministry. However, she falls drastically short in understanding the whole picture of Gospel ministry. In the book, pragmatism and experience replace Scripture and its authority in effective ministry. Her resistance to a formulaic approach is commendable, but unfortunately, she adopts a host of practices that are foreign to Scripture and teach children to rely on emotional experience rather than God’s Word. A middle ground between a wholesale focus on personal experience and a wholesale focus on principles must be found. Ours is a passionate relationship with the Creator of all things who has given His unchanging Word to us to which we cling.

R. Scott Rodin, *The Steward Leader: Transforming People, Organizations and Communities*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010, 197 pp., \$22.00.

Reviewed by Dr. Allan Karr, Associate Professor of Missiology and Church Planting, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary

How refreshing to discover that *The Steward Leader* articulates a holistic lifestyle, because as a first impression, I thought this book was going to be simply another addition to the lengthy body of information in the trendy topic of