

## Passing on the Faith

# Just Imagine: Considering the Theological Insights of Children

**Perhaps we should be thinking about how to do Children's Ministry in the way of Jesus, by taking our children's theological questions and observations seriously.**

By [Ivy Beckwith](#), July 31, 2013

*Note: This article is part of a special Patheos Symposium, [Passing on the Faith: Teaching the Next Generation](#). [Read more perspectives here](#).*

"What happened in the Bible while I was away?" asked the eight-year-old boy sitting in the pew next to me. He'd been absent a few Sundays and was asking me what he'd missed. I knew this was what he meant, but I was struck by the way he phrased his question and its theological implications. Without even knowing so, perhaps, he had characterized the Bible as a living, breathing book full of stories happening, moving, and morphing when we are not even looking. I sat there in the pew in the sanctuary of my church once again marveling at the spiritual and theological insight and imagination of children.

About a decade ago I stood on the floor of a national pastor's convention and declared the way North American churches go about their Children's Ministry to be broken. I cited things like the lack of meaningful intergenerational experiences and the preeminence of the idea that church, first and foremost, must be fun, wild and crazy even, for children to want to follow Jesus. In the intervening years I still believe what I said about the brokenness of church based Children's Ministry to be true. But I've added at least one more sign of this brokenness to my list—lack of imagination.

We, the adults who parent and pastor the children in our midst, must unleash our imaginations to first see children as able to contribute as equal partners to our discussions and understandings of God, the Bible, and the good news of Jesus. We must open up our hearts and eyes to see the insights children bring. We must allow them to have these insights, listen to them, and allow ourselves to learn from them. When that eight-year-old asked me that question about the Bible I could have just smiled at him and chalked it up to one of those cute things children say about the Bible because they have limited theological knowledge of the biblical literature. But I chose not to see it that way. Yes, it was a cute way to ask the question about what he had missed in Sunday School, but to me it had a deeper meaning of how this child understood this special book God gave us, and enhanced my view of the Bible as always speaking in new ways to us. But it is difficult to allow children to contribute to our discussions of God, Jesus, and the Bible when we are always telling them what the biblical stories mean and how they should apply these stories to their lives. This stunts their burgeoning theological imaginations and ours, too.

Second, we who pastor and parent children must redeem and re-energize our own imaginations to help our children envision and claim for themselves what life in the Kingdom of God looks like—to vision and eventually put feet to a different, better, and hopeful way to live where neighbors are loved, burdens are carried, cups of cold water are given, and where everyone is invited to the banquet. Walter Brueggemann has called this cultivating the "prophetic imagination." The task of the prophetic imagination is to evoke an alternative community that knows it is about different things in different ways from the culture at large. The prophetic imagination seeks to penetrate our despair so that new feelings can be named and embraced. And it

seeks to stun people out of business as usual and to believe a different way is possible. And ultimately to infect God's people with the joy of the kingdom of God—to turn our mourning into dancing and live out the words of the Psalmist that joy comes in the morning.

Over the last year I've read many articles, blogs, and studies about the millennial generation and its relationship or non-relationship with the institutional church. What I find interesting about this is that church-based millennials came of age in what might be called the "golden age" of church-based Children's Ministry. From the 1980s onward, churches hired children's pastors, spent time and money refurbishing their children's ministry areas, and curriculum publishers churned out programs and resources at record speed. Yet, all these blogs, articles, and studies chronicle how disillusioned the millennial generation is with the church. While the church's concern for its children is commendable, perhaps we have botched our sincere attempts at the spiritual formation of our children. Perhaps, instead, we should be thinking about how to do Children's Ministry in the way of Jesus, taking our children's theological questions and observations seriously and offering them the imaginative blueprint of the very real option of living hopefully in God's kingdom.

Ivy Beckwith has spent many years in church based Children's Ministry. She is the author of *Postmodern Children's Ministry* (Zondervan), *Formational Children's Ministry* (Baker) and the soon to be released, co-authored with Dave Csinos, [\*Children's Ministry in the Way of Jesus\*](#) (IVP).

