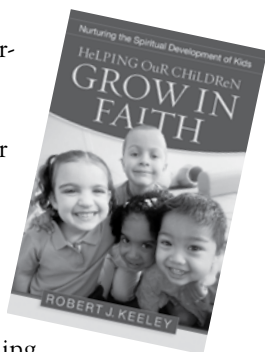


Books and resources

Helping Our Children Grow in Faith: How the Church Can Nurture the Spiritual Development of Kids by Robert J. Keeley

Baker Books (Grand Rapids, 2008). ISBN: 978-0-8010-6829-4. 156 pp.

When my 3-year-old, Sam, asked me, “Who is God?” one night after our prayer time, I realized I did not know how to answer the theological questions of children. For most people, explaining the mysterious, abstract concepts of our faith in God is difficult, but it is even more daunting when we’re trying to explain them to children. In his book, *Helping Our Children Grow in Faith*, Robert Keeley addresses this issue and many others in a thoughtful and accessible manner.



In the first chapter of the book, Keeley states there are six principles that are important in ministry to children, and he spends the rest of the book fleshing out these principles:

1. Children need to be nurtured in their faith by the whole community of faith, not just their parents.
2. Children need to be part of the whole life of the church.
3. Children need to know that God is mysterious.
4. Bible stories are the key to helping children know a God who is mysterious and who knows them for who they are.
5. Faith and moral development are both important but they are not the same thing.
6. Children should be part of congregational worship and they should also have opportunities to experience developmen-

tally appropriate worship. (p. 18)

For many people involved with children’s ministries at their churches, these principles are straight forward and may seem too simplistic to be useful. I found that the way Keeley addresses each of these principles challenged me to look at some concepts in a new light, reinforced some ideas I knew were important but had not put into practice in my church, and made me rethink some of the methods I’m currently using to teach children about God.

In his second chapter, titled “The Church as Community,” Keeley emphasizes the importance of children knowing they are full members of the body of Christ, not just potential members. He quotes some statistics from a report issued by the Commission for Children at Risk that suggest the cause for larger numbers of U.S. children suffering from mental illness, emotional distress and behavioral problems is “a lack of connectedness to people and to moral and spiritual meaning.” (p. 25) Churches are the perfect place to provide children the support they need, but only if we are deliberate and thoughtful about the way we do ministry for and with parents. Keeley discusses “authoritative communities” and how important it is to give children authentic tasks in the church.

In many churches, teachers are not comfortable when they cannot provide an answer to a child’s question. In the fourth chapter, “Dwelling in the Mysteries,” the author encourages us to “allow ourselves and our children the awareness that there is much about God we will never know. We must give children the permission to dwell in the mystery of God.” (p. 50) He then discusses theories of development in children and reviews Fowler’s faith development stages. Keeley encourages adults to help

children have a three-dimensional faith, one that affects their head, heart and spirit. To do this, he says we must teach children in ways that allow them to see how much bigger God is than we can understand, while reinforcing that God loves them and knows them.

Keeley then talks about the power of a story and how faith and moral development are not the same thing. He uses Kohlberg's stages of moral development to give readers a framework for what children can realistically understand regarding their morality. He states, "To help children grow in faith we need to help them know God, love God, and live the way God wants them to live. We won't accomplish any of these if we merely give them a list of dos and don'ts masquerading as stories of real people. It is

important that we do not reduce the Bible to a set of moral tales, while still helping our children grow up with a clear sense of right and wrong." (p. 83-84)

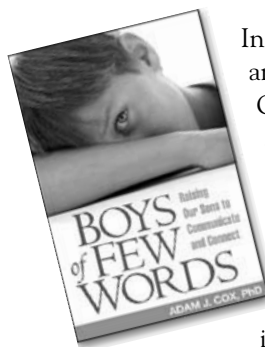
This book is a great resource for anyone interested in helping children grow in their faith. It is easy to read and challenges many of the tried-and-true methods we currently use in our churches to teach children about God.

Reviewed by Amy Castello, a graduate of George W. Truett Theological Seminary who currently serves as the Minister of Preschool and Families at Meadowbrook Baptist Church in Robinson, TX. She spends most of her time chasing her three children and trying to have a 5-minute conversation with husband, Charlie.



Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect by Adam J. Fox

The Guilford Press (New York, 2006). ISBN: 1-59385-208-8. 337 pp.



In this well-written and engaging book, Cox attends with sensitivity, wisdom and depth to a topic both timely and complex, namely, the psychology of boys. Drawing from a decade

of experience as a psychologist working with boys (ages 4 to late teens), parents and schools, he seeks to help parents understand their boys' experiences more clearly and profoundly, both their successes and challenges. Enhancing understanding about boys serves at least two additional goals that Cox wants to help parents meet: forming stronger and healthier relationships with their sons and assisting those sons with building healthier relationships of their own.

Cox pays close attention to how boys communicate and their failure to do so. He

attends to how difficulties with finding appropriate words to identify, understand and convey their thoughts and feelings place their social and emotional development under threat, especially as regards limiting their ability to empathize with others. Cox cites poor or compromised communication as the culprit in many struggles that boys face, including an array of social and relational problems, behavioral difficulties and learning disabilities. Calling boys who struggle to communicate "boys of few words," he sets out to educate parents on several matters: why boys communicate poorly; how to assess whether a boy struggles with communication; how boys may be helped to communicate better; and the significance for boys learning to speak more freely, authentically and purposefully in the contemporary "communication-driven" world.

Part one of the book, "The Communication Divide," provides parents with information about "boys of few words," including various ways that inadequate communication happens and reasons why boys find it challenging to express themselves or to understand how they think and

feel in the first place. Cox examines the roles that sociological factors, including family dynamics and influences, play in boys learning to communicate. This section also includes commentary on the significance of words and communication skills for living successfully in today's world, and contains a basic questionnaire that provides parents a tool for assessing how their sons communicate.

Part two, "Especially Challenging Boys," addresses a number of conditions that relate to poor communication and, in turn, damage the overall well-being of boys. These conditions include shyness and being withdrawn; anger, violence and antisocial behaviors; and learning and attention disorders. Cox suggests ways that boys may be helped with these types of struggles, first by becoming more aware of their thoughts and feelings, and second, by learning to communicate with greater confidence and effectiveness.

Part three, "How to Make Lasting Differences," lists thoughtful and feasible strategies for helping boys to enhance their capacities for communicating and thus for forming closer and longer-lasting connections with others.

This book has numerous strengths, and a few merit particular mention. First, Cox includes brief narratives that help the reader bond with actual boys and their struggles. These narratives inform the book's overall personal tone, which serves to keep the reader engaged with a subject matter that could easily become experientially distant if not academic in nature. Second, although Cox writes for parents, he encourages them to network with others in their communities – extended family members, teachers and school administrators, pediatricians and other health professionals – in collaborative efforts to support boys and to assist them with learning to communicate more easily and effectively. Third, Cox suggests several concrete ways to develop improved

communication, including measures that parents can take to encourage their sons to act on their own behalf, measures that parents may take themselves, and measures that family members and persons in the larger community may take together. These practical steps greatly enhance an already interesting and widely accessible book.

Cox cares deeply about boys and their parents. Without becoming preachy or self-righteous, he advocates with subtle passion for boys, their experiences and their needs.

He also advocates for parents and their indispensable role in helping their boys connect, with others and themselves, by virtue of learning to communicate what they think and feel. He calls for parents and others to take a stand for boyhood, a stand that prizes good communication and emotional connection. By doing so, Cox offers a gift not only to boys but also to the men they will become and thus to couples, families and broader segments of society.

Cox has little to say about the relationship between boys' communication practices and their faith or spirituality, except that "spiritual communities" may serve as valuable supports and guides for parents and boys. Although one might wish that he had reflected more on the relationship among faith, spirituality and communication, he stays within his expertise and principal focus – the psychology of boys. Nevertheless, what Cox argues for will benefit faith communities that seek to care for boys by nurturing their emotional and relational development.

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Reviewed by Allan Hugh Cole Jr., the Nancy Taylor Williamson Associate Professor of Pastoral Care at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, TX. He is author of Losers, Loners, and Rebels: The Spiritual Struggles of Boys (with Robert C. Dykstra and Donald Capps) (Westminster John Knox Press, 2007).



Longing for Enough in a Culture of More
by **Paul L. Escamilla**

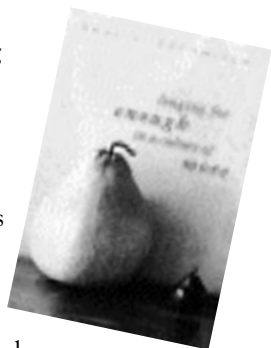
Abingdon Press (Nashville, 2007).
ISBN: 978-0-687-46651-1. 134 pp.

While planting a church in a north Dallas suburb, the pursuit of accumulating more of the biggest and best was an ever-present challenge in sharing the message of Christ – particularly our need to surrender to Him. I lived in the middle of a culture that never seemed to be happy without a newer car and a bigger home with an office, craft room, play room, pool and fully furnished media room complete with a movie-style popcorn popper! This lifestyle came with a hefty price – abundant debt, long commutes and stressful jobs that left no time to enjoy the “American Dream,” i.e., the one with the most toys wins.

Paul Escamilla’s collection of 25 short essays provides a timely framework to discuss the faith community’s role in this insatiable appetite for acquisition. Escamilla, a Methodist pastor in Dallas, weaves a tapestry of his pastoral experience and cultural assessment with sound biblical truth that is needed to help us live a life of moderation and balance.

It is intriguing that he begins his first essay examining the Genesis account of Adam and Eve. God had placed them in paradise not to consume and work on their tans, rather to work the garden and have communion with God. Escamilla shares that paradise itself was not enough, and the couple was tempted to reach for more. In reaching for more, they trampled the balance between work and leisure that God intended while beginning the perpetual race to accumulate more than what is necessary.

Escamilla continues throughout his text with thought-provoking chapters on reframing work, rest and play. He challenges the



prevalent American illusions that “more is better,” “it’s all about me,” and that people really are “self-made.” He redirects our attention to the fact that we cannot live as God intended in isolation. We are forever connected with one another. Responsibility in the context of community leaps from his pen as the reader is challenged to move from hoarding to giving, from consistent noise to times of silence, from law to grace, from a habitual yes to the courage to say no.

His chapter on “Purpose” was especially meaningful to me and will be to all whose vocation is to serve Christ by serving others. Escamilla reminds us that the product of our work is not the work itself, rather “...can I do what I do in such a way as to offer others and the world the gift that has been offered to me – life abundant?” (p. 67) The true call of Christ is living in such a way that no matter what our occupation may be, we point others to Christ.

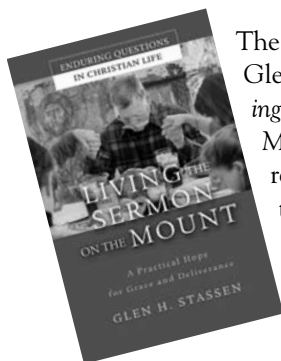
This book and the way it challenges our American lifestyle is a gift. It should be read slowly and within community to gain a full appreciation of its timeliness. A free discussion guide download is available at www.cokesbury.com, which would make a wonderful small group study for those tired of keeping up with the Joneses. Escamilla does not offer trivial answers or responses for how society and especially the church can solve the issue of grandiose excess at the expense of a person’s soul. He does, however, hold a mirror to our culture and initiate challenging conversations to get the community of faith to have the courage to live counterculturally in moderation and balance with enough rather than exhausting themselves on the empty pursuit of more.

Reviewed by David Cozart, Minister of Education/Administration at Meadowbrook Baptist Church in Waco, TX. David worked in the financial sector while pursuing an MDiv from George W. Truett Theological Seminary. He was the lead pastor in a church start and served as a corporate chaplain with Marketplace Chaplains USA. He and wife, Lori, live in Hewitt, TX, with their 2-year-old son, Matthew.



Living the Sermon on the Mount: A Practical Hope for Grace and Deliverance
by Glen H. Stassen

Jossey-Bass (San Francisco, 2006).
ISBN: 0-7879-7736-5, 222 pp.



The lovely subtitle of Glen Stassen's *Living the Sermon on the Mount* invites the reader straight into the promise of the gospel – Jesus gives us solid, “practical” hope. Hope that we may truly

be delivered from what

Stassen calls the “vicious cycles” that trap us – hope that is based not on our own efforts but on the free gift of divine grace.

Stassen is an ethicist, professor and Baptist theologian known for his work on theological ethics, politics and social justice. He is a professor of Christian Ethics at Fuller Theological Seminary.

In his book, Stassen rejects two dangerous errors into which Christians seeking to live the teaching of Jesus often fall. Contrary to much interpretation, the Sermon on the Mount is not about impossible ideals, he argues. Jesus is not talking about a holiness available only to an elite few. He expects us to be truly transformed by His teaching. At the same time, Stassen reminds us that we can never interpret the Sermon in a way that suggests we sinners can be transformed by our own strenuous effort. Transformation comes from grace. It is God's power and not our own that leads us into the new life preached by Jesus.

The book has great possibilities for use in many different congregational settings. It would be engaging for any group interested in a thoughtful and scriptural guide to following Jesus. Because the texts of the Sermon on the Mount are so familiar, they will provide a comfortable starting point for Christians in community to learn from Stassen's exegesis and to consider practicing the less comfortable teachings of Jesus.

With sections on the reign of God, the Beatitudes, loving enemies, justice, anger and forgiveness, church folks will find plenty of challenging material for discussion. Stassen does not ignore hard issues or teachings, and he uses personal stories and incidents from contemporary politics to shed light on scripture. By providing cultural context and the insights of a seasoned follower of Jesus, Stassen helps his reader to imagine how seemingly impossible teachings like that to “turn the other cheek” might work in practice. Such teachings are surprising and “subversive correction of the hostility, domination, exclusion, and injustice that characterize our world,” the author says.

Stassen shows how the Sermon breaks the vicious cycle of “easy love” and “in-group selfishness.” This is a personal challenge to me as a parent to turn love for my family outward into love of others and enemies. I commend the book to those looking for a serious resource for Christian life based in the transforming teaching of Christ.

Reviewed by Beth Felker Jones, assistant professor of theology at Wheaton College in Illinois. She is a United Methodist pastor's wife and the mother of three young children.



Don't Give Up

By John Dear

Jesus does not romanticize his way of life. He is homeless, so his followers, too, can expect to wander the earth as pilgrims on a mission to proclaim God's nonviolent reign.... Jesus insists that his mission has a life-and-death urgency. The end of the old world is at hand – and so is God's reign. Get with it, stay with it, and don't give up.

Source: Jesus the Rebel