

## CEJ Book Symposium



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Book Review Editor

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*Helping our children grow in faith: how the church can nurture the spiritual development of kids.* By Robert Keeley. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books. 2008. 160 pp. \$14.99. paper.

The Fall issues of CEJ traditionally host an annual symposium with multiple reviews of a significant book addressing an important issue. One important topic that must be explored deals with how the church can best impact the spiritual lives of children. In this issue we have asked three persons to look carefully at Robert Keeley's recent book *Helping our children grow in faith: How the church can nurture the spiritual development of kids*. Sue Payne, a children's ministry practitioner for several years, provides a summary of the book and her perspective on the author's views. Greg Carlson, whose concentration is in leadership development and theological applications to ministry, interacts with Keeley's key points, providing critique and clarification. Holly Allen, a practitioner, professor, and writer in this area, provides additional insight into the strengths of this book. All have deep involvement in children's ministry and the church, and they engage the ideas of the book with candor and insight. The editor is grateful for the time these reviewers gave to this project.



Review by Susan E. Payne  
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Most books about children and faith development fall into three broad categories. Some are foundational: studying the theology, developmental psychology, philosophical, or cultural foundations of children's spiritual growth. Many are strictly practical and programmatic, filled with methodologies, ideas, and resources for parents, churches, or schools. The third major category is books written for parents seeking to teach their own children about faith. Robert Keeley has written a book that is intended to span all three of

these categories and answer the question, “How do we explain our faith to children in ways that are simple enough for children to understand, but, at the same time, how do we help them develop a deep faith that is able to stand up to the questions that they will ask?” (13).

Dr. Robert J. Keeley is Professor of Education and Chair of the Education Department at Calvin College where he teaches educational psychology and religious education in the elementary classroom. He and his wife, Laura, have “lived” children’s ministry as they serve as Directors of Children’s Ministries at 14th St. Christian Reformed Church in Holland, MI, and have raised four children of their own.

Dr. Keeley presents a model for helping children develop a three-dimensional faith, a faith that affects their heads, their hearts, and their spirits. Chapter 1 introduces his model. The “head” dimension is knowledge of the stories of the Bible that reveal who God is and how He works in people’s lives. The “heart” dimension emphasizes that children must learn to love God and to love each other with “an emotion that runs deep and shows a commitment to others that does not fade” (14). The “spirit” dimension is the desire for children’s faith to be a part of the “very fabric of their lives . . . part of their DNA” (14). Faith must be rooted deep inside so that “even when our head doubts or our heart falters, our faith remains strong” (14). This three-dimensional faith is a long-term task, strongly relational, and is best developed when leaders know God’s Word and understand the special needs and abilities of children.

Keeley organizes the book around six principles for helping to develop three-dimensional faith in children:

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 developmentally appropriate worship. (18)

Each chapter, 2 through 7, takes one of the principles and both expands on the biblical and theological basis for the principle as well as provides ministry leaders practical suggestions for the development of a holistic ministry to children.

The first principle, discussed in chapter 2, emphasizes the need of each church community to nurture the faith of the children in their community. Keeley argues that the meaning for family in the first-century Jewish culture (*mishpahah*) is much broader than the contemporary western culture notion of a nuclear family. This biblical idea of family is better aligned today with the contemporary idea of community. The entire community takes the shared responsibility for raising the children. The church must take the responsibility for creating a “house of learning” (27) where educating and raising up children to know who God is becomes a primary emphasis. He acknowledges that this takes extra thought and effort on the part of all members of the community, and he includes suggestions from his ministry experience of working to create such a community.

Chapter 3 addresses the second principle for creating three-dimensional faith, directly building on the first principle. “Children need to be part of the whole life of the church.” (37). He argues that Jesus showed the great value he placed on children by specifically doing things with them, healing children, and using the humility of children as an example to the disciples. Jesus was countercultural in both the Hebrew and Roman cultures of his time when he placed such value on children. Keeley feels that welcoming children involves “making them feel as though they are important and that they have a place in our fellowship” (43). Separating children in “wonderful high-powered programs” (46) is not the intergenerational approach that the author sees in the New Testament. Programs that bring the community together are to be preferred.

A third principle of three-dimensional faith (chapter 4) is that children need to know that God is mysterious. “Hiding these mysterious aspects of God from children gives them an incomplete picture of who he is. It is not only *acceptable* for children see that God is mysterious but it is *essential*” (57). Giving a brief overview of Fowler’s faith development stages, Keeley argues that by teaching children that there is mystery to faith, they are prepared to face the natural developmental questioning and doubts that come in early adulthood (Stage 4: Individuative- Reflective) when faith is personally internalized. By teaching the complexity of faith and the mysteries of God (suffering, disappointment, and prayer), children will develop a “rich faith, a faith that acknowledges that there is much about God and the way he works that we do not know” (60).

How do children know this mysterious God? The key is the Bible stories that reveal God. In chapter 5, Keeley observes that the primary purpose for the biblical narratives is to teach knowledge of God and teach about humankind’s relationship to God. He cautions against simplifying the message of a Bible story to a moral point that gives children the impression that the story is only about a moral lesson. Instead, drawing on Stonehouse (*Joining*

*Children in the Spiritual Journey*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), Coles (*The Spiritual Life of Children*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), and Berryman (*Godly Play*, Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1991), the author argues that the power of a story is more than the sum of its parts, so stories should be allowed to speak. He includes a helpful section on the mechanics of good storytelling.

The fifth principle of developing a three-dimensional faith is to realize that faith and moral development are both important but are not the same thing. With an overview of Kohlberg's theory of moral development and a short survey of morality in Scripture, Keeley encourages, in chapter 6, finding the balance between helping children see how the Bible stories apply to their lives and avoiding moralizing each story. Keeley argues against much of mainstream children's ministry curriculum and literature that purports application as the primary purpose of children's lessons. "Taking a view that each story in the Bible must have a direct life application puts an unreasonable expectation on the stories" (87). Stories can have *faith* lessons ("a reflection on the story that helps us think about who God is, who we are, or what our relationship with God is like" [91]) without necessarily having a *moral* lesson ("a teaching that shows correct character or behavior" [90]).

The final principle is to include children in congregational worship as well as to have opportunities for developmentally appropriate worship for children. Chapter 7 gives practical suggestions for including children in inter-generational worship as well as creating worship experiences for children using the Stewart and Berryman model of *Young Children in Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1989). Keeley includes a short discussion of Piaget and multiple examples from his experience. There is also an appendix with a complete drama about Paul's missionary journey as an example of how to involve children in worship.

Dr. Keeley concludes his book with a final chapter on creating a child-friendly culture in any church. A church culture where children are valued would include involving all children in the life of the church, providing authentic tasks in which they can be involved, thinking about children in the planning of all church programs and events, helping children look for the sacred in the ordinary, offering developmentally appropriate activities, and encouraging adult-child relationships.

This book adds to the children's ministry literature in two significant ways. First, it fills a need for materials that bridge the gap between the more traditional, mainline, and smaller church communities and the mega-church ministry resources that have dominated the popular literature. Secondly, Keeley attempts to balance the developmentalist view of children's growth and abilities for faith development with the contemplative approach to children's spirituality. By reviewing the main theorists and then raising questions about

wholeheartedly buying into the age and stage theories, the author has found a middle ground that is helpful to his audience.

The practical examples and guidelines are both a strength and weakness of the book. The reader knows that the author has worked hard to implement his three-dimensional faith approach in his local setting. The examples are appropriate and tell the story of his model, yet they are strikingly homogeneous. For someone who is familiar with a small- to medium-size church that is Reformed in its worship tradition, they will find direct connections with their situation. However, a reader who has no experience in this type of worship community may struggle to understand or adapt the examples from only one type of cultural setting.

Keeley also challenges the reader to think about how the Bible is presented to children. The common practice of telling a Bible story and then presenting the “so what” moral or behavioral application to children is identified and thoughtfully challenged. Keeley is calling for a paradigm shift to allow the stories to speak for themselves. Where should the line be drawn between the teacher’s responsibility for interpretation and application and allowing the Word to speak and the mystery and metaphor of the story to teach the child? This book opens that discussion.

One omission in the book is how the church can help parents and families nurture a child’s faith development. Keeley begins by arguing that the entire congregation must be involved in the spiritual development of its children, yet he never directly addresses how that congregation can come beside families to assist parents in their training of their children. Even if a family is very active in a church community, many more hours are spent in the home than in the church. Perhaps a seventh principle that addresses the role of the faith community in partnering with parents would strengthen the message of the book.

The book is a genuine account of the theory and the reality of working in children’s ministry. The author admits to the struggles in including children in all of church life and worship and the time that it takes to truly foster a child-friendly culture. Yet it is also true that children have specific developmental needs and abilities that must be considered in a holistic approach to their faith development. Those who minister to children need to be trained not only to tell an effective and powerful story, but also how to interpret Scripture to children of the 21st century. This paradox and creative tension must be balanced if a child’s mind, heart, and spirit are to grow in faith. The passion, intention, and priority that are necessary are evident in Keeley’s encouragement to think differently about our children and their faith development, and yet we must not abandon sound hermeneutical practices in our teaching of the message of God to children.

This accessible and readable book presents foundational aspects of chil-

dren's ministry and faith development. The three-dimensional model that Keeley presents can be a helpful structure on which to build discussions in the classroom or church. If every community of faith sought to find the balance between the head, the heart, and the spirit of the child in nurturing their spiritual development, they would be more effective partners with the Holy Spirit in helping all children grow in faith.



Review by Gregory C. Carlson  
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Robert J. Keeley blends his experience as Co-Director of Children's Ministries and his academic background (Calvin College, Professor of Education) to give us a book of insight and exhortation. The author addresses faith in the lives of children and how the church should play its role in the development of that faith. He proposes, "We want to help children build a faith that has three dimensions, a faith that affects their head, their heart, and their spirit" (13–14). This solid blend of practice and theory leans more toward practice, but is refreshing in application. The "six principles important in ministry to children" (18) form the outline of the chapters of the book:

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 developmentally appropriate worship. (18)

The first chapter asserts the main premise of the book: The church should be much more creative, involved, and intentional when it comes to fostering the spiritual development of children. Chapters 2 through 7 then tackle each of the six main principles with chapter 8 providing a summarizing encouragement to church leaders to implement the ministry to children that the book describes. Appendix A gives a sample of a worship presentation on "Traveling with Paul; Bringing the First Missionary Journey to Life." I did not find this drama, designed for middle-school students, that compelling,

perhaps because I questioned the dates of the Apostle Paul's biography and partially because any script loses something until brought to bear in one's own ministry. The second appendix was another matter! "Picture Books" is an annotated bibliography of books used by the Keeleys (Robert's wife, Laura, is Co-Director of Children's Ministries at Fourteenth Street Christian Reformed Church in Holland, Michigan) in their story ministry with children. The book concludes with a fine "Notes" section and a bibliography.

Keeley shares his evangelical perspective with ease and sincerity. He describes his view of Scripture: "Even though the Bible is set in a particular time and place, the stories and writings contained in it are true and remain relevant today" (67). He references Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003) in balancing "eternal relevance" and "historical particularity" (146). He puts a governing view on the use of the Scripture in children's ministry: "Editing Bible stories has its dangers of course. Since we believe that the Bible is the inspired Word of God, we don't want to change it or delete parts" (73). He writes, therefore, for the evangelical community, but I found some of his theological understandings not to support the wide spectrum of evangelical thought, especially those from a more baptistic viewpoint. While not expecting any conversionist support (Keeley comes from a Reformed tradition), I would have liked to see some samples and local church examples from a wider spectrum of churches. We all write from our own experience. In speaking about how his own faith developed, Keeley writes, "The way I came to know him was more of a tapestry, a weaving together of the things that I learned from many people in many places. Each person was important, because each of them had a role to play in helping me understand God and his place in my life" (12). The author's view of the nurture of children still has broad application, but the book would have been stronger if more had been shared about the place of confirmation teaching or at least acknowledging that some view the salvation of children in a point-in-time way, as well as in a process of spiritual development. This view was neglected.

In describing three-dimensional faith (chapter 1), there is much to affirm:

- The wonderful balance between God's initiative and our actions of ministry. "Faith comes from God. Any fancy curriculum or great words on our part . . . can't change the fact that the Holy Spirit has to work in the hearts of people to move them toward God. . . . But here's another thing that is also true: the things we do with children to build their faith are very important" (11).
- The importance of life model. "Our children's faith, and our own, should be part of the very fabric of their lives, so much a part of them

that it comes out in their language and their thoughts, even when they aren't talking about religion" (14).

- A thorough knowledge of Scripture. "We meet God in his Word, so we need to hear and read it often until Scripture becomes a part of us" (15).

But also there are a few concerns:

- The possible usurping of the parent's role. "The need for people other than parents to have a role in nurturing the faith of young people has perhaps never been greater" (13). This is true, in my opinion. But there seems to be such an emphasis on church leadership here and an assumption of strength on the parent's part, that we miss a huge opportunity to equip *parents*. In light of how many of Keeley's illustrations come from his own family life, I could wish that more were said about the parent role in the spiritual development of kids.
- The diminished programming bias. "Helping children develop this kind of faith is a long-term task, one that isn't accomplished through flashy programs or high-powered special events" (15). However, Keeley outlines how church programming can produce a special impact. And, it seems to me, the Lord established some cool programs in the festivals of Israel. Why should Disney and MTV have all the fun?

Chapter 2 discusses the role of the church in community. Plusses and highlights include the following:

- Diagnostic of a children's ministry problem: "As a church, however, it seems that we sometimes don't really consider children full members of the body" (29).
- And solutions for that problem: "It's when we *individually* take the time to get to know the kids in our own church that we can have the most impact on them *collectively*" (32). "One important way to make children and teens feel like part of the community is to have authentic tasks for them to do" (33).

These issues need more clarification:

- "The Bible is not meant to be a parenting guidebook" (22). Perhaps we should look again at Solomon's prologue in Proverbs or Paul's encouragement to Timothy (II Timothy 1:5). Where are we to go for parenting principles if not to God's Word?



- The way community is described (24) needs to be tested against urban and metropolitan settings as well as rural and small city living.

Chapter 3 describes so many practical ways for raising the value of children! Keeley does a fine job toward this end: “The Lord calls us to be a community, a community that involves people of all ages worshipping and working together” (46).

Dwelling in the mysteries is a vital and delicate function of children’s ministries. “If I introduce children to a God who is so small I can explain everything about him, I am shortchanging the children. Part of the wonder of God is that we will never fully understand him” (50). Holding the tension of thinking about God and children so we can *understand* but also keeping the *mystery* in our Christian education deserves our best pondering and planning. The excellent description of Fowler’s stages of faith (53–56) postulates a question: Is it possible to impose upon children’s faith (stages 1–3) what should be evaluated only as adults? I have heard youth publishers and educators diminish the salvation experience of children (even calling it “dangerous” and needing to be “redone” during the young adult years) when in reality it seemed to me that they were imposing stage 4 faith principles. In spite of that, listen to Keeley’s sound balance: “We can let children in on the fact that God is mysterious without making his story complicated, and we need to simplify the story without letting it be simplistic” (61).

As someone who has studied and sought to promote storytelling in our ministries, I found chapter 5 a solid development of the principle and techniques of using this medium. Storytelling is indeed “a powerful and effective way to help children—and adults too—build a three-dimensional faith” (78).

Chapter 6 addresses “Obedience and Faith.” While I affirm the sound application of Kohlberg’s moral development and the increased understanding that the social literature can have in helping us minister to children, these points of clarification and question came to mind:

- I do not see the distinction between Keeley’s method of storytelling and his criticism of Miller and Staal (86). I believe Keeley works too hard to eliminate the conceptual element of storytelling. There is a danger of being moralistic, but eliminating the principle meaning of Scripture and placing it all on the integration of a child’s cognition seems to be out of balance.
- I am still thinking about Keeley’s question: “But is it necessary for adults to make an application for *every* story?” Is this question in regard to *immediate* application or to *eventual* application? It is possible to be deceived by stories which seemingly have no purpose—“cleverly invented stories” (II Peter 1:16)—and to also to give heed to fables

that lead away from godly living (I Timothy 1:4). How do we avoid these errors?

- “Taking a view that each story in the Bible must have a direct life application puts an unreasonable expectation on the stories” (87). I do not know that any of Jesus’ parables were meant *not* to have an application. The story of the Good Samaritan seems to have a *very specific* application (Luke 10:36, 37). Should we tell stories without meaning?
- Can a story give direction if it does not have meaning? (88–89).
- The distinction between moral lesson and faith lesson brings these questions to mind: Are we not rather talking about teacher-directed lessons vs. student-directed lessons? By labeling it moralistic vs. faith lesson, can we diminish the clear authority of the text? Should we eliminate all reference to behavior—except that which is internally generated? How can children think the faith lesson through when they only think of their own self-interest? (80)

Worship is so vital, and Keeley does the church worker a great service in integrating practical, creative ideas with sound educational theory. I could only have wished that more emphasis would be placed upon Vygotsky’s cultural and social influences and less upon Piaget’s individualistic child development. The implementation ideas for children’s worship and the balance portrayed between creative worship and sound educational theory make this chapter worth the price, in my opinion.

Or maybe the summative chapter 8 is really the best part of the book. Seriously, one could take the chapter 8 essay as an excellent example of integration, implementation, and inspiring creativity in children’s ministry. This small text could be used as a profitable companion text for children’s ministry courses. It would prompt theological and praxis discussions. Keeley has given us a fine treatise on aspects of children’s ministry that do not see enough dialogue in our classrooms.



Review by Holly Catterton Allen

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Robert Keeley has written a very accessible text for parents and children’s ministers or others who are integrally involved with children’s faith journeys. He organizes the text around six central principles that he believes are especially relevant for Christian faith development: the importance of the whole faith community, the value of involving children authentically in the life of

the church, the key role of the biblical story for children, differentiation between faith and moral development, the significance of worship for children, and a singular focus on acknowledging God as mystery. Keeley develops these themes holistically, weaving incisive illustrations, substantive quotes, and well-considered commentary into a readable, simple, yet nuanced, compendium of “best practices.”

In general, the book offers Keeley’s insight and reflection on the best current trends in children’s ministry based on his familiarity with contemporary scholarly work in the field, his expertise as a professor of education, and his considerable experience working as a children’s minister. Keeley appropriately draws on the works of leading scholars and practitioners in the field of spiritual development and children’s ministry such as Catherine Stonehouse, Donald Ratcliff, Jerome Berryman, Marva Dawn, and Gretchen Wolff Pritchard. He references important theorists (e.g., Piaget, Kohlberg, Fowler) and cites current religious gurus such as Brian McLaren and Rick Warren as well as the ubiquitous numbers cruncher George Barna.

Something Keeley does especially well is incorporate significant ideas from developmental theory seamlessly into other discussions. He integrates both James Fowler’s and John Westerhoff’s faith development theories into his nuanced and moving chapter entitled “Dwelling in the Mysteries,” carefully cautioning parents and churches that spiritual development is a complex journey. Keeley folds Lawrence Kohlberg’s moral development theory into his chapter on faith and obedience, explicating its intricacies in a way that laypersons can painlessly absorb. And he embeds Jean Piaget’s cognitive theory in his chapter on worship to support both developmentally appropriate separate children’s worship and, alternatively, more child-friendly congregational worship.

Along the way, Keeley makes a strong case for the role of good children’s literature in helping children understand that God is a part of their whole life. He artfully illustrates this point using *The Lotus Seed* (Shelley Garland, San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1993) and *All the Places We Love* (Patricia MacLachlan, New York: HarperCollins, 1994). Also, Keeley presents an excellent annotated list of picture books that lend themselves to spiritual discussion (in an appendix).

Though Keeley avoids complex or divisive theological discussions, he nevertheless addresses central concerns of parents and church leaders who are attempting to nurture children’s faith development. With his irenic spirit, Keeley proffers balanced support for both congregational, intergenerational worship as well as a separate developmentally appropriate children’s worship. He exhibits suitable concern that children receive strong biblical teaching that is theologically sound and age appropriate, yet he also steps into Jerome Berryman’s more aesthetic world of Godly Play with some well-worded sup-

port for nurturing children's sense of wonder. And throughout the text Keeley encourages parents and churches to infuse into all they do the sense of God as ineffable.

Keeley offers excellent illustrations, including good stories from his own family as well as his ministry with children. Church-based illustrations are primarily from a liturgical perspective, but not in a way that would alienate those from non-liturgical fellowships.

Though Keeley does not break new ground or share fresh research, he re-configures what is known and articulates his six principles in winning and convincing ways. His text can serve as a primer for Christian education committees, elder boards, and children's ministry teams; if churches receive and incorporate Keeley's ideas, their children will grow in their understanding of God and his work in their lives and in the world.