

Why should the kids at my church care about pursuing God?

## **I don't have all the answers, but I have a few ideas.**

by [Debie Thomas](#) in the [April 24, 2019](#) issue



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The fun part of my job in children's ministry is the kid stuff. The Lego towers and Magna-Tile castles; the art projects that leave our children's chapel looking like a tornado blew through it. Telling the children my favorite Bible stories, helping them make Advent wreaths, and hiding hundreds of candy-filled eggs for them on Easter morning.

The much harder part of the job is stepping back and wrestling with some big-picture questions. Why do parents struggle to get their children to church? What case can I make for Christianity at a time when kids have so many appealing alternatives? Why should young people commit themselves to spiritual things when their wider community views such commitments as quaint, obsolete, and even regressive?

When I was growing up, I never heard anyone ask these questions. The culture that raised me was so tightly religious, so uniform in its beliefs, and so self-reinforcing that there was no need to ask why we did what we did. We went to church on Sunday mornings because that's what Sunday mornings were for. We professed faith in God because God was self-evidently real. We pursued spiritual things because the very health of our souls was at stake in the pursuit. Religion was no joke—we had eternal destinies to secure.

But what happens when the terms change? What does spiritual urgency look like in the context of a more progressive Christianity, amid a broader culture in which what used to be obvious to so many people is no longer even tolerable? Without the fearmongering and the hellfire, the guilt and manipulation, how do we make a compelling case for following Jesus?

Charles Taylor argues in *A Secular Age* that Western culture no longer offers the bulwarks that once made faith easier. We no longer view the natural world as testimony; we view it through the lens of science. We no longer live in societies where religious ritual is deeply implicated in civic life. We no longer live in an enchanted world: we indulge children's belief in spirits and demons and moral forces active in the world, but we fully expect them to shed such fantasies before adulthood. And we no longer live in a world in which religion can make an exclusive claim on "fullness"—that numinous sense of wonder, of awe, of more.

Of course, none of these cultural shifts has been intentional or self-conscious. Kids don't come up to me on Sunday mornings to discuss disenchantment or the loss of the numinous. They ask things like: *None of my friends have to go to church, why do I? If your parents hadn't raised you to be Christian, would you still be one? Why should I pray to God when I have no proof? If Jesus is so important, why doesn't anyone talk about him outside of church?*

My own daughter once asked me what God is for, after a fervent prayer of hers went unanswered. Likewise my son, coming straight from a US history lecture on World War II, asked me why the God of history is nonexistent in his high school curriculum.

I don't have answers to all these questions, but I want to keep wrestling with them and weighing the answers that matter to me. If I could offer a child some reasons to stick around—reasons to pursue God in the context of a confusing world and an imperfect church—here are three possibilities.

**Christ invites us into a compelling story.** Kids love stories. They love *living* in stories. And they need stories to teach them that life is complicated, that easy answers rarely satisfy, and that even the best “happily ever after” endings exact a price. Good stories show all of us that our lives aren’t random and meaningless. They promise us meaning and coherence; they hold out the hope that our lives matter as essential parts of a larger whole. Most importantly, good stories point beyond themselves. They begin and end with an author. Maybe Christianity is worth it because it’s a deep and comprehensive story we can fall in love with. It’s a story that will hold us.

**Faith allows us to glimpse eternity**—in creation, in the church, in the fellowship of the saints and the breaking of the bread. In every action we take and every thought we think, Christianity insists that tiny seeds of eternity are growing. Nothing is superfluous; nothing is in vain. What we do, how we live, what we give ourselves over to, what we profess, what we worship—all of it matters. It’s so easy to forget this, and the church, if nothing else, helps us remember.

**The ground of Christianity is love.** When our children need it (and they will), there is a love available here that nothing else on earth will ever explain, diminish, or destroy. It’s a love that overcomes every barrier of suspicion and hatred we humans construct. It cleanses, blesses, challenges, and fortifies us. It’s an eternal love, the love of the broken, resurrected Christ. It’s a love worth living and dying for.

I wish I could know that these reasons will suffice for the kids I care about, both at home and at work. I can’t; their journeys aren’t mine to control. All I can do is hold these reasons out to them, small treasures in my hands, and invite them to take a good, long look—and then another, and another. All I can do is say, “Come and see.”

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