Why Church Kids *Must* Go Bad
By Andrew Root

I’m a book nerd. I never thought I would be such a person. As a matter of fact, most of the people that knew me in high school would never guess that I would become such a book person, or ever even finish reading a book for that matter. But I am. As a book nerd, one of the things I enjoy most is walking through bookstores or rooms filled with books. When I was restless in seminary, bored, or needed a break, I would walk through the used theological bookstore in the town where I lived.

So when I was at all three National Youth Workers Conventions last fall, I would walk the book tables, just looking at them (and of course, I must confess as all other authors should, I was also checking to see how quickly piles of my book were disappearing. I’m not only a book nerd, but also an ambitiously sinful one).

One book on my browsing stroll at the NYWC caught my eye—*When Church Kids Go Bad* by Les Christie. At first it was the catchiness of the title, the reality TV connection that caught my attention (Ok, I’m not only a book nerd, but also a reality TV junkie—now that my friends from high school would believe. I guess I’m part nerd and part junkie). FOX ran a number of shows about when things go bad, like animals, showing crazy clips of animals mauling people. As I read the acknowledgments of the book it was no surprise that the talented Jen Howver had thought of the title. Jen and I spent the better part of a few days outside London talking about almost nothing but bad reality TV (Jen may not be as much of a TV junkie now that she has her girls, but at the time we were two hard core, strung out junkies).

**Is this what youth ministry is about?**
But there was something about the title that intrigued me deeply theologically. Now, hear me clearly as I delve into this, I have no bones to pick with the contents of the book (I think it offers helpful, practical actions), and I think the title is marvelous for doing what titles are supposed to do—draw people to the book. But the title got me thinking: is that what we are really after in youth ministry, making and keeping kids (especially the ones we already have, like church kids) good? Helping them avoid all that is bad? Is that what Christianity is about—being good? Behaving? Being moral? Avoiding all that is bad? Is Christianity about behaving or avoiding what is wrong within us and within the world?

Now, I know most parents would respond “yes.” I understand that; we all fear for our children and hope that they will be good kids. I also understand that participation in religious activity (as sociologists tell us) mitigates risky behavior, meaning that kids who participate in religious communities tend to score higher on the good measures than other kids. I too want my kids to be safe and good, but is the job of the church’s youth ministry to keep kids from going bad?
For the happy and shiny only
And if it is, do we not risk making youth ministry (and the church, broadly) only for those who find it possible, or even easy, to be good—only for those who have not known or faced the deep disappointment, suffering, and yearning in themselves and in the world? Is youth ministry then only for happy, shiny kids? For the kids that have everything going well for them, kids with resources, kids that have by sheer luck avoided the tragedy and nearness of suffering that is so close to us all? Is youth ministry, and the church in general, only for those that have denied the bad that exists in themselves and in the world?

I think that this (often implicit) position of “good-ism” runs through the veins of most youth ministry. If we are honest we operate as though that it is our job, as youth workers, to help kids be good and avoid the bad, or that if they follow Jesus they will be good and avoid the bad.

We have to ask ourselves if this being “good” and avoiding the bad perspective has filled our youth ministries with kids that have had the resources to avoid the shadow sides of existence. Are our mission trips and Bible studies attended by those that can be positive? And have these positive, advantageous, good kids become the very model of significant adolescent faith?

If by making them the model, have we communicated that Christianity is ultimately about goodness, about positivity, and has little to do with the reality of the human condition—little to do with suffering, brokenness, and yearning? These good kids have become the role models for others; we have labeled them the good and positive leaders, while the doubting, the yearning, those up against all sorts of impossibility are told (again, maybe more implicitly) to get positive, to get good, to avoid the bad and the heavy if they want to be Christian. Kids that have tasted the shadow side, that have felt its cold darkness touch their broken souls, see little need for youth ministry—see little significance of the youth ministry in the church, for it is too positive, too concerned with goodness, to name, contemplate, and yearn for God to meet them in the shadows of their existence, to meet them up against their brokenness.

I wonder if one reason even good kids know little about the Christian faith (as the National Study on Youth and Religion pointed out), may be because they sense there is little to know, for Christianity from the perspective of the shiny and happy is about being good and avoiding bad. They don’t see Christianity as living into an altogether different reality, where from death comes life, where the God of glory is found in shadows, in brokenness and yearning, rendering brokenness and yearning impotent to determine our destiny. From the perspective of trying to keep kids away from the bad, Christianity is about avoidance.

A theology of the cross
But there is another theological perspective that is worth considering, a theological perspective that confronts the avoidance of the bad that often gets caught in the practice of youth ministry. This theological perspective reminds us that discipleship is not about avoiding the bad in search of goodness (Jesus denies the very label for himself). Rather, discipleship is about following, and following Jesus where Jesus can be found. This theological perspective, which can be traced back to the early Reformation, argues that the fullness of God, that the fullest picture we have of who God is and how God acts, is seen in the cross. It is not goodness that makes one a Christian, but cleaving to the absurd assertion that God has revealed Godself fully for the sake of salvation in the crucified Jesus, in the bad—in the broken. When God, in Jesus, denied the goodness of the Pharisees and chose life with those in the shadows, God in Godself departed from the glory of the temple to mount the cross of Godforsaken hell outside the city gates. God is first and foremost found next to death, being swallowed by death, so that out of death life might split it through forevermore.

To follow this God one must follow God to the cross, into the bad, into the broken, into suffering, doubt, and loss. To follow the God who has been crucified is not to avoid the bad, but to search for God in it. It is not to be positive, but to call a thing what it is. It is not to be good, there is no goodness in the cross, it is hell, it is the death of God, it is complete destruction. We must follow God to the cross because from the place of what is, from the truth of brokenness, yearning and the suffering of our being and our world, God acts, God moves, God takes what is broken and impossible and brings it to life.

The model of adolescent faith is not the kid who can avoid the bad, but the kid who stares down the darkness in herself and in her world by seeking God in just such places. The model of adolescent faith is not shiny, happy kids, but honest kids, that in joy confess a God who works in backwards ways, in ways where the first are last, and the suffering are embraced, where all who taste death are promised God's very presence. They are not good kids that avoid all that is bad, but faithful kids that go into the world to seek God in the real, in the reality of existence, which is both beautiful and horrible.

**Youth ministry as accompaniment in darkness**

Then youth ministry is not about keeping kids good, but accompanying them in facing darkness, in facing what is broken inside them and in the world. Youth ministry doesn't seek to keep kids from going bad, but asks them to dwell in what is impossible, what is broken, what is hurting in them and in the world and seek God in its rawness. Then in a real way, youth ministry is not about concerning ourselves with kids going bad, but asserting that church kids must go bad. They must face what is bad, what is broken, what is raw in them; they must seek a God who is found in the death on the cross, splitting it through with life. It is only here that the very content of the Christian message (the desire to know only Christ and him crucified, as Paul says) matters to young people, for it is no longer a message that helps them be benignly good and positive, but rather it ushers them into a new way of seeing.
acting, and being in the world. The content of the Christian message gives them a new way to see their context and reality itself. They are reminded that Christianity is for those with deep doubt—those that palpably yearn—for they seek a crucified God, they seek God in the hiddenness of the cross, in the hiddenness of their own broken humanity. Those who are brave enough to seek for God here are the models of adolescent faith, for their Christianity is not the cultural religion of goodness in the avoidance of the bad, but the thirsty yearning for some hope and possibility next to all the death in the world.

Paul is pushed up against the wall with the community at Corinth. This community in Paul’s first letter has so much potential, so many gifts, but in his second letter has become an overachieving, spiritually oppressive place. They are convinced that they are gifted and good, that they have made growth and advancement in the spiritual realm, their obsession. They refuse to see weakness. Their gospel has been warped to fit their pursuit for the happy and shiny. Too often, youth ministry is done in just such ways, seeking to move kids into spiritual elitism. But Paul will have none of this; he is being looked down on for being less than elite, less than spiritually advanced, for not being much. Paul then takes the turn that he believes all of Christianity rests on, the way of suffering and weakness as the way of God in Christ. In 2 Corinthians Paul reveals his thorn in the flesh, his place of impossibility. He reminds this spiritually elite community that the God of the cross meets us first in our impossibility, an impossibility that Paul knows in his own being. It will be in the darkness of his thorn in the flesh that Paul will do ministry. It will be in searching for God in brokenness that we will find God, not in our arms race for spiritual growth. But too often our youth ministries have looked more like Corinth, than thorny places of shared suffering.

Therefore what we do in youth ministry is not modifying behavior, not seeking positivity and happiness as signs of strong faith. Rather, our job is to dwell with young people in the thorniness of their existence, in their deep questions. We invite them to contemplate a very new way of seeing reality, a reality where from death comes life, a reality where God is found in suffering and our very suffering is a sacrament of God’s love and presence in our lives. Youth ministry is about opening up what is real to young people, asking them to seek God in their deepest questions and yearnings, to seek God in what is not good in them and in the world. We invite them, in the content and context of discipleship, to go bad—to focus on the raw, to focus on their broken humanity as the location of God’s very presence and activity in their lives and the world.