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## Receiving the Kingdom as a Child: A Review of Unfettered

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## Receiving the Kingdom as a Child: A Review of Unfettered

### Abstract

"In resting, [Smith] felt a call to a holistic tuning to the promptings of the Spirit: fully listening with body, mind, and soul, and allowing a childlike connection with God to grow."

Posting about the book *Unfettered* from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/receiving-the-kingdom-as-a-child-a-review-of-unfettered/>

### Keywords

In All Things, book review, Unfettered, imagining, child-like, faith, baggage, western, culture, Mandy Smith

### Disciplines

Christianity

### Comments

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt University](#).

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# Receiving the Kingdom as a Child: A Review of *Unfettered*

Marcus Buker

August 5, 2021

**Title:** *Unfettered: Imagining a Childlike Faith beyond the Baggage of Western Culture*

**Author:** Mandy Smith

**Publisher:** Brazos Press

**Publishing Date:** May 18, 2021

**Pages:** 224 (Paperback)

**ISBN:** 978-1587435058

Ah, yes. This is probably another one of those books on how we need to let go of our inner Pharisee, forget what we think we know, and let God show us Kingdom ways, as if teaching a child, right?

*Caveat emptor.* This book is not what you think.

Be prepared for an invitation to a tantalizing journey alongside Mandy Smith as she navigates the Spirit's promptings to let go of adultish, childish ways of relating (at best) to God. The way is initially punctuated with gut-punches to our canonical manner of approaching matters of faith:

"Western culture is in a tailspin, and Christian faith is entangled in it." <sup>1</sup>

"Given the choice between knowledge and life, we prefer knowledge." <sup>2</sup>

"The more we bring that toxic culture into our Christian practices, the more we strip our faith of every way God wants to redeem us as ordinary, limited humans." <sup>3</sup>

In *Unfettered*, Smith challenges the reader to heed Jesus' words in Matthew 18: "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." But what does this mean, exactly?

As a pastor, and also the author of *The Vulnerable Pastor: How Human Limitations Empower Our Ministry*, Smith casts the answer to this question in the span of two orthogonal axes: 'adultish-ness' (fearing limitations of powerlessness) vs. 'childlike-ness' (open to powerlessness), and 'adultlike-ness' (trusting in divine empowerment) vs. 'childish-ness' (passive fear of divine empowerment). While Western culture tells us to view our own limitations as a defect, Jesus' words imply that they are rather an invitation to something bigger

than ourselves, to daily join with God in something we did not initiate. God wants us to empty ourselves of the illusion of control so he can direct and fill us with His promptings and power. Echoing Reformed thought, she also emphasizes our role as co-creators in the Kingdom, as He makes all things new. Even in the study of the Scriptures and things of the Kingdom, we are to shy away from 'empire habits.' She asserts that our reliance on Western methods of attacking our deficiencies in understanding Kingdom ways with sterile academic activity results in restraining its power. In another gut-punch, Smith asks, "How can we be saved by something we've domesticated?"

How do we discern this something? Smith prescribes a framework of "Rest-Receive-Respond," as opposed to Western modes of "Respond-Control." She illustrates this by relaying the story of her experiences on an eight-week retreat, during which she felt prompted by God to rest from trying to run the world, not to shy from whimsy, and to focus on the small miracles of His creation. In resting, she felt a call to a holistic tuning to the promptings of the Spirit: fully listening with body, mind, and soul, and allowing a childlike connection with God to grow.

After receiving what God has for us, we are called to respond and trust that God will fill our emptied longing for power and control with His sufficiency. Smith delivers another shot by describing the ailment of swinging between adultish attempts at control ("It's all up to me") and childish retreat into passivity ("It's all up to God"). She reminds Christians of Moses' and Jeremiah's childish attempts to defer their God-given authority to speak and lead. Writing about her own experience, Smith feels God chastising her tendencies for passivity stemming from an 'overinflated trust in (her) own assessment of (herself) and an underestimation of God's power to change and use (her)': a *de facto* manifestation of pride.

The model of Rest-Receive-Respond is contrasted with the Western way of spiritually uninformed response to circumstances, for the purpose of corraling and controlling. This brings to mind the scene in the movie, *The Hunt for Red October*, where the Russian fleet is using a virtual wall of sonar to drive the rogue submarine forward, pushing ahead so quickly as to not bother to listen for sonar returns.

**Smith is realistic about the costs of obedient response to the small (and sometimes strange) promptings of the Spirit.**

She relates these social, relational, emotional, and self-preservation costs to a "slow kind of martyrdom." This concept is then related to the more severe, but analogous sufferings of Christ, as he remained obedient to the Father in the face of social and relational death, and from Gethsemane forward, death in an existential and very real sense. We are reminded by Paul that we share in his death (2 Corinthians 4:10-12), and we find solidarity with our Creator in the midst of suffering.

The notion of solidarity is also applied to the innate longing we have for God, which Smith argues is a small part of the same longing that God has for us. The final chapter of the book

reveals a “Theology of Childlikeness,” which Smith focuses on this longing and disconnection we have from God. She goes on to explore the differences between Eastern and Western perspectives on the Christian faith. Here, she presents a contrast between the Western guilt-based, individualistic framework of sin and redemption (with God as judge) with the Eastern shame-based, communal, and family perspectives in the context of a covenantal relationship (with God as parent). She points to studies showing that Western culture is becoming more shame based in recent years, correlating with multicultural, postmodern, and communal tendencies.

This has implications for how the Church engages culture. Society is evolving to not see the need for redemption, but shows an increasing need for inclusion, and, more poignantly, a desire to fill the void that Christians know to be the result of disconnection from God. Regarding the good news of the Gospel, Smith argues the emphasis needs to shift from salvation to the invitation and fulfillment that God offers.

She cautiously invokes the maternal metaphor of this disconnection with God as a severed umbilical cord, and that God himself enters the womb with us as a ‘twin rescuer’ in Jesus, whose life-providing cord is not severed.

The journey through the text is not linear and is strikingly self-aware. Smith is very honest in her own assessment of how the reader will view and interpret the text, just as she is open about her own and others’ questioning of her responses to the promptings of the Spirit. The call to childlikeness will be a significant challenge for those who are not naturally ‘whimsical.’ For those more open to the “still small voice,” Smith empathizes with questions regarding discernment: is what one hears really from God, or just coincidence, imagination, or even worse, heresy? There is little attempt to answer these questions in the book, but this may be intentional. As childlike followers of Christ, perhaps we need to embrace more mystery.

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1. p.1
  2. p. 18
  3. p. 4