

Editorial: Did God really make that mess?

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Ezra is growing up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

His mama (my older daughter, Lindsay) and his daddy (Aaron) teach and model Christ-centered living. They're terrific parents. Joanna and I feel abundant joy when we watch them train and love our first grandchild.

Part of their parental program involves teaching Ezra, who will turn 3 in January, the catechism.



Editor Marv KnoxThey ask him the first question: "Ezra, who made you?"

He correctly replies: "God made me."

For his part, Ezra also has been teaching his mother and father. They've learned almost-3-year-old little boys and girls think critically about God. Children may not use theological words, but do they ever consider the glory, sovereignty and grace of God—even when their mamas and daddies aren't asking catechetical questions.

Like the other evening, when Lindsay asked Ezra, "Who made that mess?"

To a theologically astute—and straightforwardly logical—little mind, the

answer seemed obvious.

“God made that mess,” Ezra replied.

Amen, Ezra.

Out of the mouths of babes

Truth, if not precise accuracy, proceeds out of the mouth of babes. Although I wasn’t there at the time, I’d be willing to guess that if Ezra answered technically and accurately, he would have said, “I made that mess.” Messes and almost-3-year-old little boys go together like peanut butter and chubby cheeks, like fresh fruit and sticky fingers.

Of course, it’s not totally inconceivable that God, who made the world out of nothing, made a mess *ex nihilo* in their house. But you could bet next Sunday’s tithe Ezra probably had something to do with it.

Still, Ezra told the truth, didn’t he? At some level, the God who made Ezra had a divine hand in the mess discovered by Ezra’s mama. The nature of small children is to make messes. To begin with, they aren’t born fastidious and tidy. And even if they were, their fine motor skills aren’t fully formed, so neatness is practically impossible. On top of that, making messes engages creative regions of their little brains, and creative activity helps develop their young minds.

So, you could build a case that God, working through a child’s natural intellectual/physical/emotional growth process, made that mess.

Childlike affirmation of a creative-if-messy God

We also know Ezra made that mess. What his mama tried to teach him—if she didn’t fall on the floor laughing at his clever-cuteness and/or childlike affirmation of a creative-if-messy God—is Ezra is responsible for his own actions. Knowing Lindsay as I do, I’d guess she told Ezra, and not God, to

help clean up that mess.

Ezra's "God made that mess" catechism makes me laugh every time I think of it. It's like the best joke of the week, which I foist upon friends, who either snort in appreciation or chuckle to humor the grandpa in me.

But when I back away, I realize Ezra's response is a distinctly, universally human reaction to messes. It's true whether the messes are physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, relational or a combination of all of them.

We find ourselves entangled in something awful, and we ask: "Why did this happen? Why did it happen to me? ... Why did God make this mess?"

God holds us responsible for the messes we make

Across the millennia, humans have made messes and blamed God. We know this to be true, because it's a common theme in literature and scriptures that span time, geography, race and culture. Recoil in horror at a mess, then blame God.

Of course, we could join young Ezra in a philosophical and theological debate over whether the God who made us makes all our messes. Ultimately, however, the Bible tells us we're responsible. Beginning in Genesis 3 and proceeding through both the Old and New Testaments, we see God holds people responsible for the messes we make.

Messes are a price of ultimate freedom, of human free will. In order to reciprocate God's love, we must be free to accept or reject that love. And with the freedom to love or hate God comes the freedom to act in this world. We can make masterpieces or messes. Our choice.