



Read your Bible ... if you want to grow



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When she was eight my niece asked her mother (my sister), 'You know, in the story of Noah, what happened to all the people who were not in the boat?'

'They drowned,' answered my sister.

'If we had lived in Noah's time would we have been in the boat or not?'

Of course, we do not know what would have happened but the question demands a response. My sister and I had to laugh, both at the relevance of the question and at our own discomfort. Can you tell an eight-year-old, 'No, we would probably have drowned as well?'

In the end, my sister said, 'Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord' (this is a line from a song about Noah my niece knew). In Jesus we have also found grace in the eyes of the Lord. In this sense we are like Noah. Although I agreed with my sister, I still wonder (my niece is now 28) whether this answer was for the benefit of the child or for the benefit of the adults.

Problems in using biblical narrative

Is it not surprising that in the churches we love to tell this story to little children? Is it because of the lovely animals two by two (or was it seven, oh dear)? Why is that? Does it nourish their spiritual life? Does it give them deeper understanding of their relationship with God? We banish the idea of drowning humanity to the extent that people even when grown into adulthood will not associate

Noah with destruction. When I ask in a seminar why we think this grisly story is appropriate for little children some people will say, 'I never thought of that.' All complexities are ironed out, not only of an ancient edited text but also of an angry God. These complexities are never really allowed to surface again. The result is that for many people the ancient, beautiful, complex and mysterious story of Noah is just a children's story about where the rainbow comes from without any connection to their own spiritual lives.

The example of Noah holds in a nutshell a lot of the problems we face when we want to use the biblical narrative for the spiritual nourishment of children. The Bible is very old: to begin to understand it you will need some specialist knowledge about ancient culture and literature. The Bible is beautiful literature: to be able to appreciate this you will need to have considerable experience in reading. The Bible is in major parts 15- if not 18-rated. I am not only thinking of the Old Testament with its texts of terror (like Noah, Jericho and Jephthah) but also of the New Testament centring as it does on a gruesome death on a cross. And that is not to mention all the sexual innuendo and irregularities which are to be enjoyed in many of the stories. These are mainly in the Old Testament, although Matthew, with his reference to people like Tamar, Rahab and Ruth in the genealogy in his Gospel, clearly wants to remind us of these narratives. Maybe the biggest problem of all is that the Bible presents us with material that is rooted in deep spiritual maturity – even for the older, more learned and more prayerful amongst the adults

it can be hard to respond appropriately to the spiritual call the Bible places on our lives. In 1965 Ronald Goldman claimed, 'the Bible is the major source book of Christianity for adults. It is written by adults for adults and is plainly not a children's book. To help children become familiar with it too early is to invite boredom and confusion.'¹ Even though Goldman has had lots of critics since he wrote this, many of whom have proven him wrong, I cannot deny that I see both in children and in adults a lot of 'boredom and confusion' where the Bible is concerned.

In this article I want to think about how as Christians we use Bible stories to grow children's relationship with God. After a very quick look at the example of the story of Noah it seems as if this endeavor is more difficult than anticipated. A lot of locked doors seem to have appeared. The key to unlocking some of the problems we face when bringing the Bible and children together is in reflection both on how we view the Bible and on how we view children. Those views will impact powerfully on what we think is appropriate, helpful and effective in biblical teaching for spiritual growth in children. As Christians we will not find it easy to agree in detail on our views of the Bible and children but there might be some broad principles on which we can build work with youngsters.

An inspired text

I believe that the Bible is Scripture. This means that I see it as different from any other literature. These are texts about the God of Israel, the life of Jesus Christ and the influence of the Spirit that the Church has chosen as spiritual nourishment. I believe that the Holy Spirit can use every reading of Scripture as such. This is an enormous claim because it might seem that Scripture is often read in less than faithful or fruitful ways. I wonder whether that is mainly because my own view of God and the Bible is too narrow to encompass all that the Holy Spirit is doing through this text. In his evaluation of the Sunday school movement Philip Cliff claims that 'religion cannot be learned from a book, even if that book is the Bible.'² I would say that my relationship with God grows even in reading the most unlikely parts of the Bible – or maybe especially when reading the stranger corners of Scripture.

Children as leaders in the ways of the Kingdom of God

For my view on children I would like to refer to Anne Richards' excellent book, *Children in the Bible*. She explains that God does not only bless and heal and save children in the Bible; God also calls them and commissions them. Ultimately in the Gospels Jesus privileges children over adults (Matthew 18.1–7; Mark 9.35–37, 42; 10.13–16; Luke 9.46–48; 18.15–17), 'it is a profound affirmation of the child as a child.'³ If this biblical view of children is taken seriously the adults should not only see the children as equals

before God but respect them as the ministers who will teach the adults the business of the Kingdom of heaven. It seems that 'spiritual maturity' could be a contradiction in terms as maturity does not seem to go together with nearness to God.

God blesses, heals, saves, calls and commissions children

Taking together a faith in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit where the reading of Scripture is concerned and a view of children as leaders in the ways of the Kingdom of God changes a lot. Suddenly the reading of Scripture with children for spiritual growth is a very different proposal.

In his research, Ronald Goldman read Scripture with children and then asked them questions about it. For example, he would tell them the story of the burning bush and then ask, 'Why was Moses afraid to look at God?' One of the children (aged seven or eight) answered, 'God had a funny face.' Goldman concludes that this is irrelevant and the child does not understand the story.⁴ Howard Worsley also read this story with children. Instead of using an abridged version like Goldman, he used the biblical text in an adult translation (Exodus 3.1—4.5). Instead of asking questions he created a situation in which the child could respond. A five-year-old said about the story, 'I know that one. It's about Jesus becoming a bush and talking to Moses.' In another situation a ten-year-old asked, 'Why did God pick Moses out of all the other people? Did he do a lucky dip?'⁵ What I find interesting in this comparison is that it seems to me that the children in their engagement with the text open it up in an exciting way. Just reading about the research has nourished my spirit. I wonder about Jesus' involvement in the escape from Egypt and the ways in which God enjoys the diversity of creation ('lucky dip' indeed!). In contrast Goldman's questions close the story down. They make me wonder whether we really know the answers. Do we know why Moses was afraid? I also wonder where an interest in the 'fear of God' comes from.

Bringing the Bible and children together

It is a shame that a lot of work that is done with children and the Bible in churches (and families?) is more like Goldman rather than like Worsley. Often Bible stories are used to teach the children doctrine, to tell them what is right or wrong, to give them advice on how to live life or to help them imitate great heroes. The story of the feeding of the four thousand is a good example of this (Matthew 15.29–39; Mark 8.1–10). This story is often told to the young and very young with the message that Jesus wants you to share with others like the boy who shared his lunch. This interpretation has made the spine-tingling call to

NOTES

1. RJ Goldman, *Readiness for Religion: Basis for Developmental Religious Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), (pp. 70–71).
2. PB Cliff, *The Rise and Development of the Sunday School Movement in England, 1790–1980* (Redhill: National Christian Education Council, 1986), p. 322.
3. A Richards, *Children in the Bible: A Fresh Approach* (London: SPCK, 2013), p. 128.
4. See his contribution to LJ Francis & J Astley (eds), *Children, Churches and Christian Learning. A Practical Resource* (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 93.
5. H Worsley, *A Child Sees God: Children Talk About Bible Stories* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009), pp. 32–33.
6. I Beckwith, *Postmodern Children's Ministry: Ministry to Children in the 21st Century* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), p. 126.
7. Worsley, *A Child Sees God*, p. 79.
8. See www.godlyplay.uk
9. Sadly, Godly Play materials are very expensive and the idea of having a room where all these materials are laid out is not achievable for many.

feed people into the boring command to share. (As if grown-ups are good at sharing their cars.) The text is not even about sharing let alone that this message will inspire young people in their relationship with God.

This kind of work with the Bible, where all complexity is flattened and made understandable for the grown-ups who have to teach it, has all the problems raised at the beginning of this article. If the Bible is used to teach the truth about God and life then it is very difficult to get that right. Historical and cultural monsters will be

we are in danger of depriving children of the valuable spiritual story of God

around every corner. Getting the interpretation right will be very hard. The chances are big that the questions that are asked of the children are completely beside the point. The highlight of the session will probably be when finally the teacher has to admit, 'I don't know.' Ivy Beckwith claims that by using the Bible in this way 'we stunt the spiritual formation of our children and deprive them of the valuable, spiritual story of God.'⁶

How can we bring children and the Bible together in such a way as to avoid all these problems raised by the ancient, complex and mysterious character of the biblical text? How can we share the biblical stories in such a way that the ancient, beautiful, complex and mysterious aspects become an advantage rather than a disadvantage? The first answer is openness. The text we are sharing with the children might mean something very different for them than for us. The Holy Spirit might want to inspire our reading of this text in a new way. A suitable prayer for opening the Scriptures might be, 'Please God, surprise us with your lovely word.'

Openness requires certain fearlessness. It is good that love drives out fear (1 John 4.18). In love towards the children and in love towards the Bible leaders let go of their fear. The fear of being inadequate, the fear of not knowing the answer, the fear of being wrong and even the fear of having to change our mind about what we believe all have to go. When we open the Scriptures and invite children to respond as they wish we will not know what might happen next and we will need to be prepared for a whole range of possibilities, including unbelief, scorn and disdain.

Openness also requires those who share the Bible stories to let go of their judgements. If children are to be enabled to respond to the Scriptures they will need a safe place to do this in. If a child thinks they might get it wrong they will not feel free to say what they think. It is important that any reaction is allowed. For example, a 14-year-old's reaction to the story of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts

5.1–11) was, 'Flipping eck! That's Nazi.' If Scripture is really inspired and inspiring than grown-ups do not have to defend either the Bible or God.

Godly Play is one method of sharing the Bible with children that shares some of these ideas.⁸ The values on which it is based are worth investigating. Godly Play wants to work with the innate spirituality of the child and is focused on teaching the child language to be able to speak about God.⁹ A key element in Godly Play is the 'wondering' period in response to the story or presentation. The storyteller initiates a period of reflection using some key 'wondering' questions:

1. I wonder what you like best about this story.
2. I wonder which is the most important part.
3. I wonder where you are in this story.
4. I wonder if there is any part we could leave out, and still have all of the story we need.

Such questions can be used in any context. I especially like the first and third questions. However, I prefer to amend Question 4. I want to ask why are these things in Scripture? What is God trying to say to us by including things I find uncomfortable/irrelevant/unimportant? So, for example, questions I would ask are:

- What is your reaction to this story?
- What questions would you like to ask about the story?
- I wonder what in the story makes you feel uncomfortable.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has not been to just offer a few tips on how to share the Bible with children so that it helps rather than hinders relationship with God. Its purpose is more radical. The view of children I have sketched, the outline of Goldman's and Worsley's research all point to one question: when we read the Bible with children who are we expecting to grow their relationship with God the children or the adult? Of course, if we believe that a reading of Scripture is inspired by the Holy Spirit the answer is always both. But it is important to acknowledge that reading Scripture with children might be for the teaching and benefit of the adults rather than the children. If this were the case reading the Bible with children might become a very different thing. A vision is opened up of a community in which adults and children read the Bible together and pay attention to each other and each other's responses. Intergenerational sharing of both faith and doubt, understanding and misunderstanding without immediately having to know all the 'right' answers (if there ever were those in reading the Scriptures), might not only strengthen the spirituality of those involved but might also become a magnet for others who will want to join this exciting experiment.