



## Teaching the Bible to Your Children: The Risks and the Rewards

JOHN L. THOMPSON and MARIANNE MEYE THOMPSON

Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California

I have often heard parents lamenting over how much of their weekends is usurped by their children's soccer games, and at times I have said to them, "You know, I hear they're working on a vaccine against soccer." Granting that soccer is rarely numbered among the major threats to children's health, every parent wishes now and then that some sort of inoculation might be had for the many dangers that do threaten the well-being of our children. And some might be tempted to think that the Bible has the potential to serve as a kind of broad-spectrum vaccine against all the spiritual menaces that stand ready to infect them. But I am also sobered by another possibility, namely, what if my teaching of the Bible to my own children has the reverse effect—what if I end up inoculating them not *with* the Bible, but *against* it?

page 296

By common consent, one would think, the real goal of teaching the Bible to one's children is not to fulfill some special Christian parental obligation or to provide yet one more building block in the edifice of their cultural literacy or even for them to earn a presentation Bible in third grade. In our home, we see the goal to be much less quantifiable and even far more elusive: it is to encourage our children to know the Bible as a primary means of learning to know God; to love God's word because it is *God's* word; to learn in their own hearts and minds and lives what it means for them to belong to God. Clearly, to love the Bible and to love God are not necessarily the same thing. But how can a mother or father make a child love anything, whether a book *or* a creator?

Thomas Aquinas might remind us here that one cannot love what one does not know. So while our attempts to cultivate a divinely-oriented faith, hope, and love in our children will be indirect at best, nothing will flourish if the climate in the home is not friendly to theological and biblical discussion. Life in the home must be lived not just implicitly but also explicitly with an eye to the presence of God. If children are to grapple with their lives before God, to wrestle in the battles of faith and temptation—and they will do both, whether well or badly—they need to know some things. They need to be equipped. They need to be vividly aware of God's promises and God's character. They need to know something of who they are as God's own children and, simultaneously, who they are as sinners like their parents. Or, to switch metaphors, if they are to participate in the business of the kingdom of God in their own lives, they must have the currency with which that business is done. Holy scripture, as God's word to us, is that currency. What we as parents must do, however, is to demonstrate that this currency is good for something—that it is of value (in a way, "spendable") for the transactions of trust, worship, temptation, confession, reconciliation, perseverance, and every other expense incurred in the life of faith.

Scripture, however, is vast. Often, the “great stories” of the Bible are offered as starting points for parents desiring to introduce their children to the word of God. At the very least, these great stories—whether Moses and the Red Sea, Jonah and the whale, or Daniel in the lion’s den—make stimulating bedtime stories. It’s undeniable that these are great places to start for the youngest children, precisely because they are great stories. We have read Moses and Daniel and John the Baptist and, of course, Jesus to our children from any number of Bible storybooks and picture books, over and over again. When our voices failed, our children (from as early as age three) loved listening to Bible recordings, especially the American Bible Society’s *A Few Who Dared to Trust God* (10 hours!). To be sure, parents may be tempted to use the Bible’s great stories for their sleep-inducing properties, as with any other bedtime story. Yet it remains the case that the great stories are indispensably part of the currency of the kingdom. As Martin Luther said, marveling at Abraham’s lonely and unprecedented journey, “it is difficult to believe God without an example.” But because scripture provides us with examples of faith such as Abraham’s, neither we nor our children need be as lonely as he was.

Of course, Luther was also especially sensitive to the ways in which the

---

page 297

greatest examples of faith in scripture were almost always also great examples of suffering, weakness, and human failings in general. When these failings are ignored, or (worse!) trivialized, the result is often but a mess of moralistic pottage. Indeed, the case could be made that here is where children are most at risk of becoming inoculated against the Bible, if scripture serves as no more than a Christian variation on Aesop or Grimm or Disney. It is especially grievous when “Christian” literature for children reduces the great stories to good morals, or the good news to little more than an admonition to “be nice.” Moreover, the Bible abounds with stories that fall short of virtually every moralist’s canon. The oft-despised allegories of Origen were driven by his worry over the “character” issue, whether that of Abraham or of God, and it remains to his credit that he saw clearly how scripture has also an offensive side. We, too, worry over scripture: there is nothing “nice” about the blood revenge depicted in 2 Samuel 21, and the encounter of Jesus with the Canaanite woman carries no easy lesson about God. Yet most Christian literature for children effectively censors and silences such tales, as if the “Christian” Bible must be sanitized, purged of violence and ambiguity—as if children couldn’t hear similar tales on the news or read them on the front page of the paper!

Clearly, the late twentieth century is by no means the first to discover the many hard and sad stories of the Bible. Indeed, there are few treasures from Luther’s own legacy as valuable as his emphasis on the theology of the cross and his insights about the hiddenness of God. Luther’s God is a God who often neither acts nor looks much like God. The Good Shepherd looks scarcely pastoral to the Canaanite woman, and we should not hide that fact from our children. Properly understood, the great stories of the Bible do not teach an easy faith or a cheap grace, even though the retellings of these stories (like so many children’s sermons) can easily devolve into clichés.

Is it possible to teach the Bible to children without dumbing it down or reducing it to an insipid moralism? We think so. In our own family, we have, in fact, begun mostly with the “great stories” of the Bible, but we have tried to en flesh these stories not only by retelling them with an eye to faith as well as behavior, but also by tying our use of the Bible to the rest of life. Here, at

least three kinds of context might be identified.

First, we must establish the sense that the Bible is an everyday book. It strikes me as somehow intuitive that if the only time children are read to is when they are being force-fed scripture, they will assuredly wonder what makes this book different (and, perhaps, oddly annoying) as compared with other books. As a corollary, one might ask whether it is even possible for someone to come to love God's word (as a book and as a story) who does not love words and books and stories in general. In our house, that has meant that the Bible is not always the one constant book from which we read to our children. Rather, we have tried to read the Bible in the context of all other reading—lots and lots of it. In practice, this has meant reading good stories wherever we can find them, including such standards as Grimm and Aesop, the *Little House* series, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, Beverly Cleary's

*Ramona* stories, Tolkien, and many more. But all this reading has always been eminently interruptible in order to probe such matters as the characters' hopes and fears, the implications and consequences of deeds, the development and care of conscience, and how providence and redemption are addressed (or neglected) by the author. Obviously, not all questions are treated exhaustively, and our children have never been too shy to ask, "Can we get back to the story now?" The point is simply that we have tried to underscore the continuity between Bible and life by keeping always in mind the theological dimension of all stories.

A second context flows out of the first, namely, to attempt to read the Bible in the context not only of all other literature, but also in the context of all other living. Children of school and preschool age will inevitably bring home questions and conflicts from classroom and playground to which a parent can bring scripture to bear—or not. Our oldest came home from first grade bearing the tale of woe that her "best friend" now "hated" her. What to do? We reminded her of Jesus' urging to love one's enemies and to pray for them, but we also shared times in our own lives when we felt betrayed by friends; and we prayed for comfort, both for our daughter and her friend. That episode dragged on for quite a while. So we also tried to model and teach the perseverance that we learn about from scripture.

The contexts in which a child's discipleship will be tested are many and diverse. Testing and trials—or just plain curiosity—may arise from family or sibling quarrels or from peer pressure or even from reading the headlines on the front page. Sometimes the exempla of the Old and New Testament offer a natural bridge to a child's questions or problems, but such questions are also natural occasions to introduce a child to the Bible's sapiential and epistolary literature. Why don't some people love God? Ultimately, the best answer may well be "I don't know," but along the way a child might be introduced to their brother (and the apostle) Paul, who struggled over the same question with admirable passion and compassion.

Bringing the Bible to bear on a child's life-situations will challenge any parent to honesty. Indeed, one must be forewarned of the thorny questions the Bible will raise! Our eldest, suffering from chicken pox some years ago, raised the issue before us with maximum acuteness, and not a few tears: "Why won't Jesus heal me of my chicken pox?" Again, to be schooled in the theology of the cross is better than a thousand pat answers. If your storybooks have painted a Jesus who waltzed through Palestine in a blaze of glory, what will you say? Now there are things in life far, far harder than chicken pox. We do not know what life will bring our children, but—

statistically, at least—we know that some children will die, sometimes without warning, just as they did in Jesus’ day. What sort of compassion is it, to avoid preparing one’s children to face the reality of death? Fortunately, there is no more hopeful resource than scripture for dealing with death, an issue which also loomed large for all the men and women of the Bible.

A third context which we have tried to employ in teaching the Bible to our children has entailed attempting to read and teach the Bible in the context of Christian tradition and history. To be sure, it helps that one of us is a church

historian, but my lecture notes have not shaped the teaching of my children so much as the other way around. Sometimes we have had to explain about the disagreements among Christians over scripture and interpretation—as in the case of the dismal story of slavery in America and its racist concomitants, or in trying to explain to a daughter why the United States has never (yet) had a woman president. Church history, and in particular the history of the Bible’s interpretation, is a necessary correlate of “merely” explaining the Bible to one’s children. Indeed, the context of tradition and history is especially important for explaining why even those supposedly redeemed by Christ and enlightened by the Holy Spirit may need to be chastened by scripture and even to repent of the way they use scripture.

Tradition and history also offer children a salutary link with the communion of saints and that cloud of witnesses that surrounds us. My most memorable experience here occurred last year while reading Roland Bainton’s venerable church history for children, *The Church of Our Fathers*. Having begun by explaining Bainton’s title and excusing it in light of his later trilogy on the women of the reformation (!), we worked our way through to the controversy over the Trinity at Nicea. Grasping the subtleties of the connection between God and Jesus is a tough problem for most children, and I’ve heard many seminarians describe somewhat sheepishly the various sorts of heresy their children espouse. It has been no different at our house. I’m sure our children, like most, began to connect Jesus with God as either ditheists or (more likely) as Arians, though on a few days they seemed to lean toward modalism. So it was with apprehension that I read with my daughter the story of the Arian controversy—and it was with surprise that I heard her interrupt, “Now I understand about the shamrock!” The shamrock? It turns out that a month or so earlier, on St. Patrick’s Day, she’d heard a children’s sermon about how Patrick had explained the Trinity by using the shamrock: three leaves, but it’s all one plant. Having occasionally debunked such crude analogies when offered by my seminary students, I now had to admit my own foolishness, because this otherwise misleading analogy had apparently furnished just the insight my eight-year-old needed to see how the Father and Son are yet one God. The moral of the story, for me, is essentially the same as I would pass on to seminarians, namely, that it is possible to elucidate the doctrine of the Trinity from the Bible alone, but it is a tremendous help also to know the details of how those fourth-century Bible readers came to formulate the Nicene Creed as a way of teaching *their* children who the Jesus of the Bible is.

There are surely lots of other hints and tips that other parents might offer were we to pool all our wisdom and strategies in our attempt to raise Christian children—tips about how to pray with one’s children and how to encourage some sort of devotional life or ethical insight or simply Christian character. But the most exciting possibility awaiting those who undertake to teach the Bible to their children is, in our experience at least, the possibility of sharing a spiritual journey

with one's own offspring and enjoying their fellowship, their prayers, and their own heartfelt counsel. Were I merely preparing them for some bizarre memorization quiz, I couldn't do it. Only to the extent that I myself have found the Bible to open

windows into the heart of God and the mysteries of the life of faith can I muster any enthusiasm to communicate the richness of scripture to my children. Without a doubt, there are risks involved. Yet there are also, sometimes, rewards.

Not long ago, both our children were battling viruses and we stayed home from church on Sunday. As we have done before, we decided to have a simple service of worship at home. Our older daughter volunteered to produce the bulletin: off she went, and we smiled. Indeed, the service she outlined was endearing, as her five-year-old sister recited the story of Nehemiah and quizzed us on its meaning. But in the middle of the bulletin lay a startling entry under the heading "Call to Worship." There, our daughter led us in a responsive reading, taken from the opening lines of Psalm 32. "Happy are those whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered," she read. "Happy are those to whom the LORD imputes no iniquity and in whose spirit there is no deceit," we read back. Would that either of us could take credit for the instinct by which she looked to the Psalms and judged that these were lines well suited for worship! But, aside from Psalm 23, I can't remember pointing out the book at all, much less tutoring her in liturgics. Whatever drew her to lead her parents in worship in this way, the effect was too profound to be called cuteness or even precocity. It was, simply, a gift.

How to teach children Scripture. Teaching children about the Bible. Bible teaching aids for kids. Teaching the Bible at home (homeschooling). A wise man, through observation and the Holy Spirit's inspiration, came to understand this important truth: "Train a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it" Proverbs 22:6. Because it is so important to shape and guide children, God has given them the capacity to receive and understand spiritual truths from an early age. Children are trusting by nature and will believe whatever adults tell them—be it fairy tales, fascinating facts or Bible stories. They believe the miracles in the Bible without question and find it easy to talk to their unseen friend Jes