

## Leaders2Go 2019

### Connecting Children, The Bible, Real Life: Mission Impossible?

#### Notes

*How do we help kids grow UP with the Bible not to grow OUT of it?*

*Imagine kids (or adults) who confidently expect that God will speak to them through the Bible – not just now but in a future we can't imagine. Share ideas and wrestle with our ideals as we explore Scripture through the lens of a child.*

#### Four people

1. Bob Hawke died a few weeks ago. His parents were committed Christians and he was brought up in a family and a church that read the Bible.... But his engagement with faith began to falter when he went to India as a delegate to World Christian Youth Conference there and “there were all these poverty stricken kids at the gate of this palatial place where we were feeding our face and I just struck by this enormous sense of the irrelevance of religion to the needs of people and it started to unwind from that point .....
2. It was a similar story for Yoweri Museveni the President of Uganda. He was the President of the Christian Union in high school – but when he went to Tanzania and faced the realities of injustice, he said that the Bible was not answering the questions he was asking..... He was not opposed to Christianity – just found the Bible irrelevant to the massive issues facing a country.
3. About a decade ago, I struck up a random conversation with an American in an airport. He asked me what I did and said that he was baptised as an 14 year old. He then told me he was an atheist. I asked what had caused the shift and his reply was: *I grew out of it*. Now he didn't say: *I grew away from it* which implies a slide, a pull away, or perhaps a definite decision. He grew OUT of it – it didn't mature as he matured....
4. My friend Karen who when she lost the 2<sup>nd</sup> of her 3 babies before birth said: *I feel as if I have lost my baby and my faith on the same day.....* Later she talked of how – as a child in a Christian family and in church – she believed that if you followed Jesus, then life would be good. God would protect.

#### And a book:

Recently a godly women who is a children's ministry professor and practitioner, recommended a book to me, but it has nothing to do with children's ministry: *Everything Happens for a Reason and Other Lies I've Loved* (author Kate Bowler)). And I began wondering.....

#### Discussion 1:

What are the 'lies we've let children love?'

- The ones that kids grow out of because they are not true....
- They either have to unlearn what they have been taught. Or worse still they don't unlearn them, they simply dismiss them.

Things like:

1. you can be anything you want to be (mis-using Philippians 4:19)
2. a one-dimensional God – e.g. our ‘friend’ - but one without expectations
3. God has a perfect plan for your life (with the implication that it’s up to you to work that out)
4. God as a vending machine/Santa Claus whose role is to give us what we ask
5. Life to the full = life without pain/disappointment/suffering  
Life to the full = happiness  
Life to the full = blessing (in a material or ‘success’ sense)

### Input

The ‘lies (or platitudes or half-truths) children learn to love’ are far from the real world in which children live.

The question is: as we open the Bible with kids, are we helping them to see that its context is a very messy broken world – just like the one we live in. Just as there is no ideal world in which kids live, there is no way of looking at the Bible as a manual to live in an ideal world.

How do we help kids read the Bible as they live in a world where

- there’s very little black and white and compasses are hard to find
- the faith of those in their family may be non-existent or immature
- abuse directly impacts their lives
- chaos is around the corner
- anxiety and depression are common among children

The truths that need to replace the lies include...

1. The blessing that God offers us is that he is a God who will accompany us through life in this broken world.
2. He will never abandon us though he will not necessarily rescue us.
3. He is a God of huge love – but He shapes us to His will, not the other way around

As leaders, we need to have confidence that

1. through the Bible God will speak to children - sometimes with our help; often without
2. God’s plan for children – as for us – is that they follow him. And what does he require of his people? Micah 6:8 (note that these are **verbs**)
  - a. To do justice
  - b. To love mercy
  - c. To walk humbly with God

In Jesus, we see these 3 elements expressed as he lived fully in a broken world

- Walking humbly with the Father - even though this was the way of suffering
- Doing justice for those who were marginalised – giving them dignity and hope where no one else did. (Note: he did not seek justice for himself – no sense of entitlement)
- Loving mercy for the sheep without a shepherd etc
- Knowing the joy and the pain of friendship
- And in all this, living life to the full as he is seen in all the wrong places, with all the wrong people (and having a good time)

### Reading the Bible through the lens of Micah 6:8

Doing justice..... loving mercy....walking humbly with God seem to be embedded throughout the acts of the Bible and the stories highlight how this is played out in real life (though the Bible is set in a different cultural context from ours, it is set in a broken world like ours and makes no attempt to idealise the people or their choices they make)

If we are encourage children to be Followers and not Pharisees, is this a grid through which we help them to read Scripture and to develop from this a 'theology' of

- Who is the God who invites us to follow him
- What does He want/'require' of us?
- What does He NOT want/'require' of us?
- What does He want us to know?

These themes (Doing justice..... loving mercy....walking humbly with God) are often found in the less spectacular parts of the stories of the Bible – the ones that we overlook in favour of the stories such as David killing Goliath, the animals being herded into the ark. These stories that often populate our 'children's bibles' are ones that are often less likely to connect to the context in which kids live – unless we help them think more about the context that surround them: they are episodes in a much bigger story,....

### **Activity**

In small groups, take one of these passages and think about

1. At what points it connects with the broken world in which our kids live?
2. How they might understand through this story what it means:
  - d. To do justice
  - e. To love mercy
  - f. To walk humbly with God

1 Samuel 16: 14f

*David has had an amazing experience with God – what happens next?*

Esther 1-2

*Vashti, Esther and the beauty pageant: how do we walk humbly with God in a situation where we have no control over the unjust (even immoral) situation in which we find ourselves?*

Jonah 4

*Feeling that God has let us down – the difference between our sense of unfairness and His limitless compassion*

Judges 11:29-40

*Jephthah's daughter – where is the justice? How do we handle difficult parts of Scripture when there is no clue in the story as to 'what the moral is'?*

Psalms 102:1-5; 69: 14-18; 13: 5-6

*Helping children to lament the pain of the world and the way it touches their lives and those of others – and still keep their eyes on God.*

**What follows is a paper written several years ago and provides background to the elective**

## CHILDREN, MISSION AND THE BIBLE: A GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Wendy Strachan

I wonder what would be the response if you showed a Bible to a group of children in your community and asked them for their opinions of this book.

Try it. You might discover that there is quite a diversity in what children are saying. Comments like, 'a book about God', 'a story book' reveal some understanding. From many children though, the responses are discouraging: 'a book for adults', 'a church book', 'a book of magic', 'hard to understand', 'rules', 'boring'. And very often in my own community in a secular country, 'I don't know'.

Compare this with the description on the back of a children's Bible on my shelf: *So! You picked up the BIG Rescue Bible. You are in for the adventure of your life. The BIG Rescue is the best story ever told, and it's all in this book. If you thought God hung out in the sky doing nothing...think again. Read the BIG Rescue Bible and find out how God saves people and a planet that can't save themselves!*<sup>1</sup>

Now that sounds like a story that any child could become absorbed in. So how have children become so confused, uninterested or negative about a book that invites them to link their lives with the God of the universe?

The stakes are high. As Christians, we believe that the Bible unfolds a story that gives meaning to all our lives. Yet as Stonehouse and May point out, children live in cultures that are permeated by very different stories which they are learning whether we want them to or not. The question these authors pose: 'Which story – the biblical story or the culture's story – will be the primary one our children use to make sense of their lives?'<sup>2</sup> is one that challenges the way that we are engaging the Bible with children.

### **Information, entertainment – or...**

It's not that we haven't been trying. In some parts of the world, children win competitions that display biblical knowledge or an aptitude for Bible memorisation that adults find impressive. In other parts of the world, multi-media programs keep children engrossed as stories from the Bible flash before their eyes. But the reality is that neither *information* nor *entertainment* should be the main outcome of a child's experience of the Bible. Information unrelated to life has little impact in a world of information overload. Entertainment can reduce Bible stories to caricatures – and will always be superseded by something more exciting, more stimulating. If these are our aims as we open the Bible with the younger generation, we should not be surprised that, around the world, the church is faced with an exodus of children in alarming numbers. God - as understood through their experiences of the Bible and the community of faith that reads it - does not seem to be relevant to their own lives. The story of the surrounding culture is more powerful.

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<sup>1</sup> *Big Rescue Bible*: CEV (Australia: Bible Society, 1995)

<sup>2</sup> Holly Catterton Allen (ed), *Nurturing Children's Spirituality*, (Eugene Oregon: Cascade Books, 2008) 367

Information is important – it can help children make responsible choices. Entertainment is engaging – it helps the story to come alive. But we cannot be satisfied with these outcomes when the Bible is so clearly about *transformation*. This Bible is ‘...*God’s story and the story of our ancestors in the faith, which we want our children to enter into as their story, on God’s side*<sup>3</sup>. It is the place where children encounter God, and are invited by him to join their lives to his life and to partner with him in changing their world. The keys to engaging this story are imagination and emotion, relevance, response and action.

### **Towards transformation**

#### ***Imagination and emotion***

The Bible is primarily narrative in character and story is the natural playground of children. That is our starting point. If we encourage children to ‘imagine’ themselves in the story, they will make their own connections. And as they do so, we must allow the Bible to speak for itself, resisting the temptation to make it conform to our pre-determined idea of how a child will meet God in a particular biblical passage.

Imagine yourself in this Australian classroom: it’s almost the end of the session with a group of 11 year olds. They’ve been listening to the story of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife. The earlier parts of the narrative – Jacob’s favouritism and the brothers’ treachery – have captured the imagination of at least some of the children. The story of the attempted seduction is a little trickier. But the teacher sticks carefully to the text, and is relieved to reach the climax where she triumphantly announces that despite this powerful woman’s advances, Joseph says ‘No!’. Silence.

Until one boy blurts out, ‘Miss, I think he’s an idiot!’

How would you respond? Would you ignore the boy and hope that the others didn’t hear? Would you reprimand him because he seems to have treated the story without reverence? Or would you grasp an opportunity? This boy has actually entered the story in his imagination – and in so doing has made a connection between the Bible narrative and real life. The story he’s just heard is familiar material in the TV programs he watches, the families he’s close to and the conversations he has with his friends. He is genuinely puzzled about why a young man would refuse to give in to the demands of a woman who has the power to protect or ruin his life.

The story connects. This boy is close to learning something about God, himself and his world. Close to encountering God.

Story and imagination are comfortable arenas for children. In story, the non-reader can be as active as the reader. The child in a rural area who may have no opportunity to go further than primary school is not at any disadvantage compared with the technologically astute city child who never reads anything that does not come to him in 30 second ‘bytes’. In story, the child who has never before opened a Bible can respond to God in no less vital a way than the child who has experienced the Bible in his home since childhood.

#### ***Relevance***

By entering the story with their imagination and so making connections with their experiences, children have the opportunity to discover that the Bible is not a cryptic book

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<sup>3</sup> Terry Clutterham, *The Adventure Begins*, (UK: Scripture Union 1996) 138

unrelated to real life, but a book that reflects their own struggles and hopes. Children will ascribe meaning and value to a passage to the extent that it connects with their own present experience. 'Only if the Bible has meaning now will children look forward with expectation to the discovery of Bible meanings in the future'<sup>4</sup>

Think of the contemporary issues that just one story – the story of Joseph – addresses: it's about families: dysfunctional as well as happy. It's about favouritism, unfairness, bad things happening to good people. It's about trouble that comes when you make a wrong choice, and trouble that comes when you make a good choice. It's about not being noticed or valued. It's about peer pressure: it's about pressure to have sex when you don't want to. It's about power. It's about feeling on top of the world one day and at the bottom of the heap the next. It's about confusion, disaster and celebrations. It's about loose ends and the difference that one person can make.

Joseph lived in a different country in a different era, but his story connects with 21<sup>st</sup> century children. They meet an adolescent who experienced the same emotions, the same struggles, the same despair, the same joy as they experience. And they meet Joseph's God: sometimes silent, often puzzling, always inviting trust.

The Bible comes alive to children when we help them to realise that the people in its pages are people like them. Not heroes. Ordinary people. Authentic people whose bad behaviour is recorded alongside the good. These men and women and children aren't characters in a fairy tale; they lived at a point in history where they met God and made choices about trusting him or not. We adults (and many of the children in our churches) can easily miss the fact that Joseph had no idea how his life would unfold. God gave him no blueprint – yet Joseph chose to trust him.

As children experience God's story in the Bible, they will begin to ask fundamental Big Questions: *What is God like? How can I expect him to act? How does he expect me to act?* They will begin to make connections with other parts of God's story and ponder: *Why does God act in this way? Why is it important for God that we know this story?* And then they will begin to make connections from the story in the Bible to the story of their own life. *Who am I like in this story? How would I have acted in the same circumstances? Does this story remind me of something that has happened to me? Would I like this story to be true for me?* And the story will come alive, just as it did for that boy in the Australian classroom.

As the Bible comes alive, children discover more about God who is the main character in the story of the Bible. They discover that in Jesus, God fought for good and against evil – and won! They discover that God is interested in the details of their lives. They discover that this surprising God wants to accompany them through life and help them win too – though in unexpected ways.

A group of some forty boys living in a street kids' centre in Lima were surprised by God. They were street-hardened. They had learned not to trust anyone. To them, God was distant. The stories of Jesus' miracles served only to increase the distance between them, the insignificant, and God the all-powerful. One night, as usual, the staff simply read a passage of

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<sup>4</sup> Dorothy Jean Furnish, *Experiencing the Bible with Children*, (Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1990), 70.

the Bible to the boys. As usual, they expected no response. But this night was different. As the boys listened to the Bible story, the adults realised that almost every boy was crying. 'This is our story,' they sobbed.

What had they heard? It was the story of Jesus' arrest and his silence in the face of the abusive questioning of powerful people: '... Jesus remained silent and gave no answer.'<sup>5</sup> The connection was made. The street boys understood this silence: whenever they were arrested, abused, pressured for information, they had a code of silence. When you own nothing except your thoughts and feelings you protect them with silence. 'Our silence is our truth. This Jesus is one of us,' they said.

The biblical narrative had captured their imagination and struck a deep chord in their own lives. They met the God who understands them, not because he is all-knowing, but because he became one of them: vulnerable, abused and marginalised.

### ***Time and space to respond***

Children respond out of their own experience – and that is something to be encouraged. Since each child is unique, it follows that there will be a range of responses. For example, the New Testament account of the man whose demons were cast into the herd of 2000 pigs, met with two very different responses in India. One girl was excited that Jesus would think that one person was worth more than 2000 pigs; but a boy was outraged that Jesus would destroy a person's livelihood. One story, one God, two children, two sets of needs, two responses.

To an adult who has pre-determined the outcome of telling a Bible story, these different reactions may be unwelcome – perhaps threatening. But if we remember that in the Bible children are meeting God, then how can we possibly dictate the response? Instead, our task is to create the kind of environment that will encourage and respect their response – whatever that may be. The honest '*Miss I think he's an idiot*' is surely a better response than a silence that hides scepticism or boredom. By encouraging enquiry and respecting a child's response, we are modelling the respect that Jesus showed to those who came to talk with him.

Howard Worsley recounts a conversation between a five year old girl and her mother after they read the story of Abraham taking Isaac to be sacrificed<sup>6</sup>:

*Daughter: Why did God ask Abraham to do this horrible thing?*

*Mother: God was testing Abraham to see if he would trust him.*

*D: But a friend of God would not kill his son.*

*M: Abraham was a man of great faith.*

*D: I think this could have been sorted out in a different way...*

Compare that with the reactions of teenage boys as they read the same passage with their youth leader:

*B (15 year old): It's right to put God before your family...*

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<sup>5</sup> Mark 14:61

<sup>6</sup> Howard Worsely, *A Child Sees God*, (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2009), 69

*C (15): I'm not sure about that. I think that Abraham would have felt really guilty if he'd killed Isaac (pause). We know our family better than we know God and I'd rather have my family than God.*

*A (13): No, your family doesn't matter. If you lost your family, God would look after you. He provides for your needs. God could raise your family from the dead if he wanted.*

*D (17): Yes it's right to trust God. I love God more than my family*

*B: So do I*

*C: I love my family more than God*

These accounts illustrate the variety of responses that will occur when young people know that it is safe to question and to struggle as they seek to understand and respond to the text. In each response, we can feel their emotion as they reflect on the 'morality' of God. Perhaps we recognise how their responses are shaped by their age, experiences and the understanding of God that they already have. Perhaps we recognise how familiarity with the ending of the story has possibly desensitised some from appreciating the enormity of what Abraham was asked to do. Do we also wonder how we might have entered into this exploratory conversation without stifling it?

Allowing the Bible to speak into the child's imagination and encouraging the child to respond to what God is saying are the foundation stones of Godly Play<sup>7</sup>. This approach to story telling, developed by Jerome Berryman, opens up the Bible using simple materials and 'wondering questions'. As the story of Bartimaeus unfolds, for example, the child will be invited to 'wonder' how it feels to be blind, why Jesus would listen to Bartimaeus when others just tell him to be quiet, why the first thing that Bartimaeus does after he can see is to follow Jesus, how Bartimaeus feels following Jesus on the way to Jerusalem, and who they identify with in the story.

Godly Play welcomes the unexpected response. The pace is slow and thoughtful, providing for reflection. The narrative is uncluttered by extra detail. Silence and space allow children to make connections between the story, other parts of Scripture and their own story, and invite them to think not only about what God *did* but who he *is*.

Of course, conversations and questions are only one form of response. Creative multi-sensory alternatives should be explored: art, drama, play, music, prayer, silence, worship, movement, letter-writing, drawing and celebration are all avenues to be investigated. So too is the call to action: 'Go and do likewise,' was Jesus' instruction to the enquiring expert in the law after he had told him the story of the Good Samaritan. The Bible is not a book of theory. It is intensely practical and children can appreciate that it urges them to make a difference in their communities.

### ***Making a difference***

Encountering God in Scripture opens the door to transformation - of the mind, the emotions, of our behaviour and the impact we make on people around us. For a child, it is very often in the 'behaving', that he learns what it means to follow Jesus. As he engages in the acts of kindness that are identified with Jesus' followers, so he learns what it means to be a follower. When we provide opportunities to serve, we also help the child to make an abstract concept (e.g. loving others) into a concrete understanding (loving Tom means to stand up for him against those who are bullying him).

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.godlyplayfoundation.org>

Around the world the Bible inspires action that brings transformation to individuals and communities. A family in Europe who was reading the Advent story, began to ask: 'How should we celebrate Christmas this year?' They decided on a departure from their usual frenzy of meals and gifts and helped as a family at a shelter for the homeless. A group of teenagers in Cameroun spent a week planting trees in a rural area as a response to their understanding that the God who created a 'very good' world, wants his people to be involved in creation care. An unplanned outcome was that because of the relationships formed with the villagers and the needs they could see, they returned shortly after to build a latrine. A group of children in Australia wondered how they could be part of letting 'justice flow like a river'. They joined a campaign against poverty, petitioning members of parliament and contributing to a food bank in their community. Another Australian boy noticed that his neighbour with an intellectual disability was the sort of person whom Jesus would have befriended. He has done the same and invites his new friend to football games. Children in Latin America whose country boasts high levels of violence are learning approaches to relationships and to resolving conflict through a program that addresses these issues through Bible stories. So positive are its outcomes that the government is requesting it to be offered nationwide.

As children respond to the Bible in Christ-like action, they are learning to live as 'two-culture kids'<sup>8</sup>: identifying with the values of God's kingdom while living in the world's culture. Social justice, appreciating diversity, helping others, caring for creation all become part of everyday living. The Bible becomes the lens through which they view and interact with their world.

### **Taking children seriously**

The approaches described so far acknowledge that children do not come to the Bible devoid of experience. We take children – and contemporary learning theory – seriously when we respect the experiences that each child brings, and provide for them an interactive learning environment in which to explore the Bible and to act on what God is asking them to do.

They come to God's word with their emotions, able to feel the joy of celebration, the despair of betrayal, the anger at injustice.

They come to it with their curiosity, unimpressed by superficial answers.

They come with a sense of expectation that anything might happen.

They come with humility, more likely than adults are to accept its authority.

They come with their intellect, ready to discover and ponder new things.

They come able to identify with the people they meet – and ready to act in response.

They come with unique family and community backgrounds: we cannot assume their respect for Scripture, or an understanding of Christian basics, or a family where love and trust characterise relationships.

And they will *continue* to come if their experience of the Bible makes a difference to their own life and to the way that they view and relate to others.

### **Providing safe community**

Children thrive in a *community* where they can learn together with others and where the faith community expects to be enriched by their insights and enthusiasm. Faith grows in an environment where children know that their opinions are valued. This echoes the mutual

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<sup>8</sup> Karen Yust, *Real Kids Real Faith*: (New York John Wiley & Sons 2004), 28f

learning that took place in the informal yet intentional mentoring in the community of Israel: 'These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up'<sup>9</sup>.

While it is true that children do read the Bible on their own and that this should be encouraged, it is also far more likely that they will *continue* to read it when they have the opportunity to do so with others. In 1879, a young woman in the north of England wanted to encourage the children in her Sunday School class to read the Bible each day. Every Sunday she wrote out lists of passages for them to read during the week – with the promise that the next Sunday they would discuss together what they had read. Out of this opportunity to read and explore the Bible both individually and together, was born the Bible emphasis of Scripture Union, an international children's agency that exists today, where in different communities - camps, schools and on the streets - children still listen to God together. John Westerhoff, in his work on faith development<sup>10</sup>, uses the metaphor of pilgrimage, emphasising both the relational journey and the value of each step taken on the journey. On this journey, faith grows as – at different times - family, church, peers and other communities provide the contexts in which the person experiences, identifies with, explores, tests and finally 'owns' faith.

The key element of community is safety. Genuine questions, comments and experiences are welcome because God is at work through his word – to the extent that a person becomes secure enough in their convictions to challenge the community when conscience dictates. While this is unlikely to happen in childhood, the foundations that we lay are vital if faith is to grow up with the child.

### **Aim high: The Bible is God's Big Story**

The Bible is one big story – not a series of unconnected stories. If our approach is continually to focus on particular stories without setting those stories in their overall context, children's understanding may be incomplete, superficial or wrong. The children who responded to the story of Abraham and Isaac need the opportunity - over time - to see it in the framework of Abraham's life story, of God's establishment of a nation who would act differently from those around, of a God who acts with grace and compassion in sending Jesus.

We stand in the tradition of a long line of people called to pass on the story of faith to a young generation, to share 'the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done'.<sup>11</sup> Telling the 'big story' helps children to make connections and to explore the overarching issues of the nature of God and the relationship he longs to have with them. It is an approach

'that is rooted in biblical tradition. "What do these stones mean?" ask the children of Israel long after the crossing of the River Jordan. The elders reply with the story of their deliverance from the Egyptians (Joshua 4:6,7). The telling of the story not only served to consolidate the community, uniting its members in a common history. It also gave opportunity

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<sup>9</sup> Deuteronomy 6: 6-7

<sup>10</sup> "A Journey Together in Faith" in John H. Westerhoff: *Bringing Up Children in the Christian Faith*. (Minneapolis: Winston Press, Inc., 1980)

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 78:1-4

for the younger ones, who had not experienced the original events, to identify with the community, appropriating the story for themselves as it was told and retold by their parents and grandparents. As Christians, this is an aspect of our common life that we should perhaps recover – making the most of our ‘highlight festivals such as Christmas and Easter.’<sup>12</sup>

A 2013 winter camp in Moscow adopted as its theme ‘Not Just Christmas Trees’. As the five days unfolded, children experienced the Big Story through the idea of celebrations. Through ‘New Year’ (the Jewish Rosh Hashanah), they explored new promises, new expectations and new covenants, recalling the creation of humankind. Next came Sukkoth, the Feast of Tabernacles with its meaning that we are wanderers and exiles. Children talked about their trust in God and their hope in him. Through Purim (in the story of Esther), they meditated on God as our protector and saviour. On the fourth day, Christmas showed how our saving God became one of us. The climax on the last day recalled how at Easter, we celebrate the forgiveness and reconciliation that Jesus’ death and resurrection make possible. At the end one boy, Joe, commented: ‘I so liked reading the Bible! I’ve never read such an interesting book before!’

As children build up the framework of the ‘Big Picture’, three things are happening. One is that children are piecing together a picture of the God who creates, promises, judges and rescues - and meets them in their own life.

The second thing is that children are building up an understanding of the content of Christian faith (of doctrine), not by learning a set of propositions, but by discovering (in small steps and giant leaps) who the God of the Bible is and what it means to live with him. And as they learn more, each new insight reshapes their understanding. Gradually we help children to develop the tools that they need to become independent Bible explorers. This means that we may need to explain a word or idea that may have lost its meaning. For example in some parts of the world where bread is a luxury a child will not understand in what way Jesus is the Bread of Life unless they appreciate that bread was everyday food for all in Jesus’ time. As children mature, their tools become more sophisticated; older children will discover the difference it makes when they understand the genre of the writing. And their understanding of God and of what God expects deepens. And so does their relationship with him. The third thing that is happening is that children are learning how to communicate with a God whose ways are different from theirs, to pray and live by faith amid the puzzle.

These are approaches that let children explore the Bible text in ways that that will equip them for living life with God now, but won’t let them down, as they get older.

In his book *Telling God’s Story*, Peter Enns point us to the Bible as a ‘vision-setting book’ that gives us a powerful idea of what a life lived with God can be like. If our children lose this vision, he argues: ‘*they wind up abandoning their faith, blaming it for failing to “connect with” their world.*’<sup>13</sup> He argues that if their faith does not connect to the real world in which they find themselves, then it was misrepresented or mistaught in the first place. If this is true, we need to examine some of the reductionist approaches that are often used with children – usually unintentionally. Often they are approaches that reduce the Bible to bite-sized pieces that we think are palatable to children – or are comfortable for us. We can do it in a number

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<sup>12</sup> Rosemary Cox, *Using the Bible with Children* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2000), 8-9

<sup>13</sup> Enns, Peter, *Telling God’s Story*, (Virginia: Olive Branch Books, 2010), 27

of ways and when we do, we rob children of its intrigue, wonder and practical insights into life. We effectively close the Bible down.

We close the Bible down when **we sanitise it**. When we teach about David with Goliath but omit David and Bathsheba and the death of their first-born, don't we miss what *both* parts of the story express to children about God's character in choosing a man like David? Are we afraid that children will balk at God if we reveal all of his character?

We close the Bible down when **we trivialise it** – as if children can only engage with it if it is fun. Even such child-friendly creative approaches as puppetry, drama, visual aids, songs, story-telling and rap can miss the point if children become amused spectators more than participants. A youth worker in Eastern Europe wrote: 'The main issue for us is how to communicate God's eternal message to young people in a way that makes sense to them, without "losing the edge" and compromising the message, by making it cheap, reducing Jesus to the level of pop-idols and His message to the level of Agony Aunt messages in teen-magazines. The hardest thing is to find the balance'. Sometimes in an effort to contextualise the Bible into the child's world, we forget that balance. We make fun out of pathos. Think of the story of Samson. It is tragedy. Yet how easy it is to turn his life almost into a comedy. We keep the children entertained but where do they connect with God? Perhaps one reason children get bored with the Bible is because they lose their awe and wonder at the greatness of God.

We close the Bible down when **we sentimentalise it**. How does a ten year old child who is passionate about justice, think about the serious implications of judgement in the story of Noah, if his previous encounters have all been around cute pictures of hippos and unicorns dancing into the ark?

We close the Bible down when **we reduce it to a book of 'stories with a moral'** as though it is more important to be good than to know God. Lawrence Richards<sup>14</sup> states: 'You and I are not to use the Bible to club the child, or to impose demands that he or she conform. We are to use Bible stories ... as a doorway to hope rather than as a nagging demand for change'. What is the main point of the story of the boy who offered his lunch to the disciples: to encourage children to share, or to open their eyes to the wonder of what God might do through them?

We close the Bible down when **we treat it as a book of rules** without understanding that those rules only make sense within the context of relationship. What tone of voice do we use when we read the Ten Commandments? Do children hear them as the pleadings of a loving Father or as the threats of a belligerent head teacher? If it's the latter, we've missed the point: no child falls in love with such a God.

We close the Bible down when **we treat it as an owner's manual** of detailed instructions about how to live and what to do if things go wrong. The Bible does not restrict its scope by giving us a verse that exactly matches each of the circumstances a child may meet. Instead it paints a picture of what it is like to live with God in every circumstance. Joseph's story does not generally inform a 21<sup>st</sup> century child about how to avoid family conflict; it demonstrates patterns of behaviour that might contribute to family conflict and invites us to ponder the difference God makes.

We close the Bible down when **we treat it as a textbook of information** to be remembered. Is it more important that children know what kind of tree Zacchaeus climbed or to wonder about how that meeting with Jesus changed his life so radically – and what might happen if

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<sup>14</sup> Larry Richards, *Talkable Bible Stories* (USA: Fleming H Revell, 1991) quoted in Clutterham op cit p117

*they* met Jesus? Do we give them the chance to reflect, as one eight year old girl did, that 'Jesus coming to his house is like God entering his soul'<sup>15</sup>.

We close the Bible down when **we treat it as a book of stories about flawless heroes** – as if the most important character is Moses, or Abraham or Paul, when the most important character is God. When we fail to see this, we will be constantly trying to decide on the 'personal application'. But the story of Abraham is in the Bible not to show us someone on whom to model our lives; it is a story of a faithful God who responds to our failings as well as our 'successes'.

The Bible is God's story and it is far more than information, rules, entertainment and selected - often disconnected – stories. As Ivy Beckwith states: 'When we use the Bible with children simply to teach doctrinal tenets, moral absolutes, tips for better living, or stories of heroes to be emulated, we...deprive them of the spiritual story of God'.<sup>16</sup>

And in this story of God, children will find more than they expected. They will encounter God himself. They will discover that his story includes theirs and that he will accompany them as they write their own story in the world in which they live.

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<sup>15</sup> Worsely, op cit p143

<sup>16</sup> Beckwith, Ivy, *Post-modern Children's Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Youth Specialties, Zondervan 2004), 126