A CASE STUDY OF CHILDREN'S RESPONSES TO BIBLE STORIES

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Abstract: This qualitative research explored the question "What meanings do children make of the Bible stories presented in Sunday school?" It consisted of a 3-month case study of one elementary Sunday school program. Data included field notes, audio recordings, photographs, and artifacts. Analysis of the data suggested five main categories of children's responses to Bible stories: (a) prompted or prescribed meanings, (b) associative meanings, (c) original and creative meanings, (d) dissenting or contradictory meanings, and (e) imposed but resisted meanings.

Introduction

A few summers ago I taught the Bible lessons at an academic enrichment camp for educationally disadvantaged children that was sponsored by my church. Every day I presented a new installment from the story of Joseph. On the morning after I had narrated the episode about Joseph's resolute resistance to the temptations of Potiphar's wife, a young girl came up to me and predicted with a smile and supreme confidence how she expected the story would turn out: "I think those two gonna get together." This incident prompted me to consider how children actually experience the Bible stories that they read and hear in church and other Christian educational settings.

Since the 1980s, a surge of research has investigated the responses of children and young people to stories and literature, involving participants from preschool through college age, in entire classes, small discussion groups, and one-on-one conversations. Two general conclusions become obvious in many of these research efforts: (a) children often interpret stories in highly individualistic ways, and (b) the meanings children make of stories are frequently not the meanings that storytellers or authors intended or expected them to make.

Because Bible stories constitute the primary subject matter for children's instruction in many churches on Sunday mornings and because the meanings that children make of Bible stories significantly affect their ideas about God and Christian faith, it seems important to attend to what sense children are making of these stories. Are children in fact hearing the stories that teach-

ers believe they are telling? What implications or inferences are children drawing from these narratives? To explore these issues, I designed a research project around the core question "What meanings do children make of the Bible stories presented in Sunday school?"

Precedent Research

In preparation for my investigation of children's responses to Bible stories, I reviewed numerous research projects involving children's responses to stories in general. Because I planned to study elementary-age children, I limited my literature review to participants in first through sixth grade, or approximately ages 6 through 12. From the 25 studies that I selected and analyzed, several significant themes emerged.

Deliberate Meaning-Making

The first theme that I discerned was evident in all of the studies that I reviewed: children are aggressive and inventive meaning-makers. Children work hard to make the world around them make sense, and this includes the stories that they hear and read. For example, Peggy Rice (2005) explored the responses of four boys and four girls in a sixth grade class to four realistic short stories involving Hispanic protagonists. These white upper-middle-class students were perplexed about a character in one of the stories who hauled and sold junk for a living, until they finally decided that he must have been an antiques dealer. They struggled with the content of this story until they came up with an explanation that made sense to them. Similarly, researchers Maryann Eeds and Deborah Wells (1989) were impressed by the way children in small groups led by student teachers worked together to build meaning from the books that they shared. According to these authors, "teachers regularly admitted that they hadn't thought of a particular interpretation offered by a child" (p. 26).

Resourceful Meaning-Making

A second prominent theme I discovered was that children make meaning from stories by using the resources that are available to them. Ann Trousdale and Janie Everett (1994) observed and analyzed the responses of three young African-American girls to three short stories that had been written by Everett. One of the stories referenced a disappointing prize that one of the characters had found in a Cracker Jacks box. Mary, one of the respondents, was unfamiliar with Cracker Jacks, so she reinterpreted the event in that story in terms

that made sense to her: "I think you mean Cracker Barrel, like the store. He got his stuff out of them machines there" (p. 9). In this case, Mary relied on the resource of personal experience in her attempt to make sense of something unfamiliar in the narrative.

Another resource available to children is cultural context. Marion Colledge (2005) found that cultural background impacted the way young children understood illustrations in picture books. However, a group of studies investigating children's responses to "culturally conscious books" (Sims, 1983) suggested the somewhat surprising conclusion that cultural similarity with the setting and characters in stories was a helpful but limited resource in meaning-making (Egan-Robertson, 1993; Grice & Vaughn, 1992; Leung, 2003; Liaw, 1995). Culture seemed to be one factor among many that conditioned children's responses. At the same time, Susan Lehr (1995) found that with sufficient background information, generous opportunities for discussion, and intensive probing of students' responses, children were able to relate to books depicting cultures vastly different from their own.

A third resource upon which children rely in making meaning of stories is cognitive development. In a study of children's responses as indicators of reading comprehension with respondents in grades four, six, and eight, Cullinan, Harwood, and Galda (1983) found that "there are clear developmental levels in children's comprehension of literature" (p. 37). Similarly, Susan Lehr (1988) observed that children's sense of theme in narrative appears to develop along with maturity and experiences with books. In her study, younger children tended to state themes in terms of concrete details of the stories ("stay away from wolfs" [p. 350]), compared to older children who were able to articulate abstract concepts derived from the stories ("You can sacrifice things to make people happy" [p. 348]). In a study of 7- and 8-year-old children's responses to a story with an allegorical spiritual message, Ann Trousdale (2005) discovered that "the children's responses indicated that they understood the story on a literal level, but their interpretation of the story did not go beyond the literal, concrete level" (p. 33)—yet another indicator of the influence of cognitive development.

Idiosyncratic Meaning-Making

The third general theme that emerged from my reading is derived from the first two: since every child responds to narratives out of the resources at his or her disposal, and since every child's set of resources will be different, every individual's story responses will necessarily be unique and personal in some respects. One of the most significant findings of Barbara Kiefer's (1983) research was the vast range of variation in children's responses to books, demonstrated in the many different ways they chose books, looked at the pictures,

and talked about the stories, as well as in what they noticed in the books and what products and behaviors resulted from their engagement with the books. Similarly, Lawrence Sipe (2000) categorized five different facets of literary understanding evident among a class of first- and second-grade children.

Many of the researchers emphasized not only the inappropriateness but also the futility of teachers and storytellers imposing a particular interpretation on a story and insisting that the hearers or readers interpret it that way (Cullinan et al., 1983; Trousdale, 1989, 2005; Trousdale & Everett, 1994). In explaining the moral lesson derived from the story of Snow White, for example, one of Trousdale's (1989) participants bypassed the obvious destructive effects of jealousy and claimed that the lesson was "Don't ever trust your eyes like Snow White, 'cause she trusted the wicked queen and she was gonna kill her" (p. 42).

Furthermore, the various resources that hearers and readers bring to bear on a story interact in ways that make responses unpredictable. Leung (2003) found that her Jewish Eastern-European participant resonated more fully with a story about an American girl born in China than did her three Chinese American informants, on the basis of her emotional similarity with the main character of the story.

Multiple Meanings

A fourth and final theme that impressed me from the studies that I reviewed was that narratives have the capacity for multiple interpretations. They do not mean exactly the same thing to every reader and hearer on every occasion. As noted above, both Cullinan et al. (1983) and Lehr (1988) observed changes in the way children at different developmental levels responded to books. Several studies (Anzul, 1993; Jacque, 1993; Yocom, 1993) recognized growth in both volume and complexity of children's responses over time, in some cases even to the same stories (Jacque, 1993; Trousdale & McMillan, 2003). Both Hickman (1981, 1983) and Kiefer (1983) produced comprehensive classification systems describing the many different verbal and nonverbal ways that children responded to books and stories.

Implications for Children and Bible Stories

The overwhelming impression that I took away from all these studies is that the traditional educational approach to sharing Bible stories with children—the classic method in which I was trained and which I taught to others—is not compatible with the way children appear to respond to stories. Foundational to this standard Christian education approach is the specification of one accomplishable, measurable aim that a teacher or curriculum

writer derives from the Bible story, around which all the learning experiences related to the story are structured. What this approach amounts to, in essence, is deciding for the children what the story means and then insisting that the students derive that meaning from it. None of the research projects that I found for my literature review supports such a treatment of stories, neither Bible stories nor any other kind.

Children make sense of all the stories that they hear and read in light of what they already know, and because every child's prior experiences are unique in some respects, his or her responses to a story will also be unique to some degree. Although educators may try to tell children what a story means and although children may be able to repeat these interpretations, these prescribed responses may or may not be the sense that the children have actually made of the tale (Trousdale, 1989).

In my investigation I sought to discover whether these claims about children's responses to literature generally hold true for children's responses to Bible stories as well. How idiosyncratic are children's responses to the stories presented in Sunday school? If their reactions are as individualistic as much of this research literature suggests, is it good Christian education practice to prescribe a specific meaning that all students are expected to derive from a particular Bible story? And if it is not, how might we teach differently?

Research Design

Research Paradigm and Genre

I chose to investigate my research question from within a qualitative research paradigm (Creswell, 1998). Within this broad perspective I decided to conduct a case study (Merriam, 1998) of one elementary children's Sunday school program, with the expectation that this specific group would represent one particular case or instance of the phenomenon in which I was interested. I observed this group every Sunday over a 3-month period and collected multiple kinds of data.

Research Site

My research site was a mid-size, mainline-denomination church in the Pacific Northwest. This congregation has a total Sunday morning worship attendance of about 550 people in two services and is staffed by 4 full-time and 17 part-time employees. It is composed primarily of middle- and upper-middle-class families, mostly white, and mainly professional and white-collar workers. I selected this site after many weeks of e-mailing, phoning, and/or

visiting over 30 churches in our geographical area. This church belongs to the same denomination as the congregation of which I am a member, but I had no relationship with them prior to my site search for this investigation.

During the school year in which I conducted my study, the children's department was beta-testing a new Sunday school curriculum being developed by a major Christian publisher. The church staff leaders had decided to explore this curriculum because of its strong emphasis on family ministry and the primary role of parents in the spiritual formation of their children. The curriculum was also distinctive in its organization around the metanarrative of the Bible, presenting selected episodes from Scripture in chronological order and connecting each story to the larger storyline of the Bible. My 12 weeks of observation coincided with the spring quarter of year one of the curriculum, in which the lessons reviewed events from the life of Jesus. By this time the leaders and children had already worked through a series of lessons from Genesis and Exodus in the fall quarter and another set of lessons from Joshua, 1 & 2 Samuel, and 1 & 2 Kings during the winter. After 6 months of experience with this program, the volunteers seemed comfortable with the Sunday morning routine, but occasional comments suggested that sometimes they were still either unclear or unconvinced about the underlying philosophy of the new curriculum.

Research Sample

Of the many varieties of purposeful samples (Merriam, 1998) possible for qualitative research, I elected to use an intensity sample—a group of children in whom the phenomenon of interest was present extensively but not extremely (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). I hoped to observe plenty of instances of meaning-making with Bible stories, but did not want a sample so unusual that readers of the research would be unable to relate to the setting or the participants.

The program I investigated offered large-group instruction to about 25 first- through fifth-grade students assembled together, followed by interaction in small groups that were divided by grade level and/or gender. During small-group time I stayed with the third graders every Sunday. In this group 4 girls attended consistently and another 11 children showed up once or a few times.

The weekly Bible story was presented in the large assembly and was narrated by one of five skilled storytellers who rotated this responsibility. Small groups were led by at least one "shepherd" who met with the same children every week. A limited amount of interaction between leaders and children took place in the assembly, but the main venues for discussion and responses to the Bible lessons were the small groups. Although the curriculum provided

a complete script for every Bible lesson, it encouraged the storytellers to use their own words and presentation styles in telling the stories; thus adherence to the script varied by presenter. Similarly, the curriculum provided discussion questions to guide the shepherds during small-group times, but use of this material varied from week to week in the small group that I observed. In both the large assembly and the small groups, the staff and volunteers conscientiously incorporated the various learning activities described in the lesson plans. The large group segment usually lasted about 45 minutes, and the small group time about 30 minutes.

Data Collection

I entered this research site as an observer-participant (Merriam, 1998); that is, the children and leaders were aware of my presence and purpose, but my main responsibility was data collection rather than teaching or helping. Before and during the sessions, I wrote continuous field notes in a notebook. I also audio-recorded everything that happened after the opening singing time, during both large-group instruction and small-group discussion. In addition, I collected samples of projects that the children made; sketched or photographed settings, props, and teaching materials; and saved lesson plans and e-mail communications pertaining to the program.

My handwritten field notes were expanded after every session into a full description of the event. Audio recordings were transcribed, and artifacts that had been collected were labeled and catalogued. Every week I also wrote an entry in a researcher journal in which I tracked my own reactions to the research experience and recorded procedural problems and decisions. In addition, I wrote an analytic memo every week, in which I pondered emerging themes and possible explanations about what I had observed (Graue & Walsh, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Merriam, 1998).

Data Analysis

From the outset of data collection, I was alert for evidence of anything that the participants were doing with the Bible stories that were presented. Thus my unit of analysis was "an experience with a Bible story." I began looking for possible categories of experiences with Bible stories from my very first Sunday of observation (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Maxwell, 2005). The list of potential categories grew over the weeks of data collection, and the themes that I identified were refined and regrouped in many different ways before I finalized my classification system. I ultimately assigned a two-letter code to each type of response that I discerned and labeled segments from my data record according to the type of response that each segment exemplified (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992).

Results

During my 12 Sundays of observation, I noted children's responses to the activities surrounding each Bible story narration as well as to the stories themselves.

Making Meaning Around Versus Making Meaning Of Bible Stories

What I noticed almost immediately, and what remained constant throughout the period of data gathering, was that in this Sunday school the emphasis was not so much on making meanings *of* the Bible stories as it was on making meanings *around* them. In other words, the primary focus of instruction when a Bible story was presented was not the Bible story itself, but some concept or principle or generalization that someone had drawn from the story. Certainly a Bible story was narrated every session, and it was generally offered in an interesting and appealing manner. However, the activities both preceding and following this Bible story presentation nearly always directed the children's attention to an abstract idea extrapolated from the story rather than to the story itself—ideas such as giving up something for God or asking God for help or declaring devotion to God.

This consistent emphasis on ideas and principles derived from the Bible stories contrasted sharply with the research projects that I had reviewed prior to my investigation. Studies reported in the literature concentrated on the ways in which readers and hearers engaged stories *directly*—on the readers' feelings, reactions, and judgments as they became deeply involved in the narratives. I had hoped to observe the same kinds of active, intense involvement with Bible stories in Sunday school as was evident in these explorations of experiences with stories in school, community, and home settings, but that sort of involvement was relatively infrequent in my case study.

However, even though direct engagement with the biblical narratives (i.e., making meaning *of* the Bible stories) was not as frequent or as extensive as I had hoped it would be, it was definitely there. Occasionally during the large-group storytelling times and sometimes in the small-group discussions, the children *were* encouraged to respond directly to the stories. Other times they responded spontaneously—without waiting for an invitation. I decided early in my investigation to continue observing the program exactly as it was being conducted without trying to change anything, even though I was not seeing exactly what I had hoped to see.

I glimpsed meaning-making with Bible stories in all phases of the lesson presentation, in spite of the fact that most of the planned activities were oriented toward a proposition derived from the story rather than toward the story itself. I intentionally made my unit of analysis broad enough to encompass not only direct interactions with the Bible stories but also responses and

reactions in the activities surrounding and derived from the stories. Thus, the types of responses that I categorized occurred both in making meaning *around* and in making meaning *of* the Bible narratives.

Categories of Responses to Bible Stories

I ultimately identified five general categories of responses to Bible stories: (a) prompted or prescribed meanings, (b) associative meanings, (c) original and creative meanings, (d) dissenting or contradictory meanings, and (e) imposed but resisted meanings. Within each of the first three of these main categories I also discerned several subcategories. These categories and subcategories are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

Categories of Responses to Bible Stories

Category	Description
Prompted or Prescribed Meanings	Specific answers or reactions elicited from the respondents.
Factual Answers	Responses to questions about informational details.
Modified Answers	Responses that are accepted and then changed by the questioner to conform to the desired answer.
Automatic Answers	Obvious, expected, unreflective responses.
Guessed Answers	Attempts to produce the exact response that the questioner is seeking; sometimes elicited through hints or repeated questioning until the desired answer has been obtained.
Suggested Answers	One response from among multiple equally possible options offered as an illustration and then chosen by the respondents.
Associative Meanings	Connections of respondents' previous knowledge and experiences with fragments of new information and experiences surrounding Bible stories.
Immediately Accessible Connections	Connections between aspects of Bible stories to events or experiences that are currently going on in the respondents' lives.

Table 1

Continued

Category	Description
Inaccurate Connections	Connections between details from the Bible stories that are understandable but inaccurate.
Literal Connections	Literal or concrete interpretations of abstract or metaphorical concepts.
Confused Connections	Failure to make sense of the Bible stories or of the activities surrounding them.
Original and Creative Meanings	Evidences of original thinking and lively imagination.
New Insights	Ingenious new perspectives on standard interpretations.
New Topics	Unexpected and unprompted introduction of new subjects.
Spontaneous Reactions	Unsolicited expressions or exclamations suggesting some form of emotional response.
Dissenting or Contradictory Meanings	Comments that challenge the general flow of the discussion.
Imposed but Resisted Meanings	Interpretations that leaders attribute to respondents but that the respondents reject.

Prompted or prescribed meanings. The most common form of experience with a Bible story that I observed was a response that I labeled *prompted or prescribed meanings*. It consisted of specific answers or specific reactions that a leader or storyteller was trying to elicit from the hearers.

Factual answers. Within this category, the most common variety was *factual answers* or responses to questions about informational details of the story. For example, Miss Denise stated that "God created this garden, and he called it—what?" to which Jonah promptly replied, "Garden of Eden." This kind of interchange occurred over and over in the course of the story presentations and also later in conversations about the stories.

Modified answers. A second variation of prompted or prescribed meanings was something that I labeled *modified answers*, and it was also surprisingly common. In this form of elicited reply, the respondent's statement was

accepted as if it were correct but then modified by the questioner to conform to the desired answer. When Tammy answered "Palm Sunday" to a question that Mr. Bill asked about John the Baptist, Mr. Bill answered, "Close. Kind of. It has to do with Palm Sunday. I think he's talking about Jesus coming into the world. Right."

Automatic answers. Sometimes the children offered quick, generic responses to questions that were raised during Sunday school instruction. These replies were often religious terms (God, Bible, pray, sin) that were global enough to apply in many situations but did not seem to have much thought behind them. I called these responses *automatic answers.*

Guessed answers. Other times it was obvious to the children that the leader had a particular answer in mind and that he or she wanted the children to figure out what it was. Sometimes the leader gave elaborate hints until someone produced the answer that was sought. For example, when Darrin was trying to get the children to mention Noah's ark, he kept adding details until somebody got it: "Ahhh, well, an event. . . . It had to do with rain. Rain? Lots of rain." These kinds of responses I labeled *guessed answers.*

Suggested answers. I assigned the name *suggested answers* to the situation in which many different personal responses might have been possible, but a significant number of children chose as their own the one response that a leader offered as an illustration. In a discussion following the story about King Solomon's failures in later life, the storyteller asked the children to think about things that might be keeping them from wholehearted devotion to God, and she suggested video games as one possibility. Of the 24 written responses that I reviewed later, 8 of them (one-third of the respondents) mentioned entertainment media such as video games or iPods.

Associative meanings. The second general category of responses to Bible stories that I observed had to do with connections that the respondents made between their own previous knowledge and life experiences, and fragments of new information and experiences surrounding the Bible stories. In ways that were sometimes startling and not always accurate, the children linked ideas and recollections about the Bible stories with other Bible stories, with their developing understanding of the Christian faith, and with familiar elements in their own lives. I called this type of response *associative meanings.*

Immediately accessible connections. In one sub-category of associative meanings, children related aspects of the Bible stories with events currently going on in their lives. Thus I named this type of response *immediately acces-*

sible connections. For example, a discussion about giving things up in order to be wholeheartedly devoted to God following the story about King Solomon prompted the children to begin describing things they were giving up for Lent, possibly because this lesson was presented shortly after the beginning of Lent.

Inaccurate connections. Sometimes children combined information from the Bible stories in ways that were understandable but inaccurate, resulting in a second sub-category that I labeled *inaccurate connections.* During the small-group discussion about the raising of Lazarus, Miss Julie asked the group what other people were present, to which one of the girls replied, "Mary and Martha," and another girl concurred that it was "Mary and Martha Magdalene."

Literal connections. Sometimes in the associations that the children made between the Bible stories and their own experiences, they made *literal connections* when the leader's intent had been metaphorical. As a follow-up to the story about how John the Baptist prepared people for the coming of Jesus, the children were guided to prepare small cups of soil in which to plant seeds. The symbolic connection about personal spiritual preparation was very difficult for at least the third graders in this program to grasp. Whenever they were asked what the project was about, they repeatedly responded that it was about getting the dirt ready for the seeds.

Confused connections. Sometimes the children were simply unable to make sense of the Bible stories or of the activities surrounding them. In the story about Nicodemus, the narrator used a large, hairy stuffed dog to represent Nicodemus, intended no doubt as a visual joke. However, when the third grade group discussed the story later, all they could talk about was that Nicodemus was a dog. I think they understood that Nicodemus was a man in the Bible, but even if they did, this prop thoroughly confused any meaningful conversation about him—a vivid example of what I identified as *confused connections.*

Original and creative meanings. In contrast to the occasional confused and inaccurate meanings made by the children, there was also delightful evidence of original thinking and lively imaginations at work. Thus I labeled this general category *original and creative meanings.*

New insights. Sometimes children offered *new insights,* coming up with interpretations of aspects of the Bible stories that were genuinely innovative and insightful. One of my favorite examples took place during a small-group

dialogue about the story of the woman who touched Jesus' robe and was healed. Mr. Dale had made the comment, "I always wondered if Jesus really *did* know who that was, 'cause he *is* God." One of the boys in the group responded: "I bet he really did know who it was, but he wanted, he wanted the lady to know to come up to him."

New topics. Periodically a child would introduce an entirely *new topic* into the conversation and send the discussion off in a new direction. During the seed-planting project, one of the boys suddenly remarked, "He [referring to Jesus] has a brother," which led to an interesting exchange about James ("James Christ?") and the fact that Jesus and James had the same mother but not the same father.

Spontaneous reactions. Within the category of original and creative meanings there were also *spontaneous reactions*, the label I gave to unsolicited expressions or exclamations from the children that suggested some sort of emotional response to the narrative. During the story about the man who was lowered through the roof to Jesus, as the storyteller was describing the sad plight of the paralyzed man, one of the girls sitting near me muttered softly, "That sucks." It was not even loud enough to capture on the audio recording, but I jotted it down in my field notes as evidence of unselfconscious, unprompted engagement with the story.

Dissenting or contradictory meanings. One of the most fascinating aspects of meaning-making from Bible stories that I observed consisted of brief and subtle remarks made by children that challenged or contradicted the general direction of a discussion and that often went unheard or unacknowledged. The title that I eventually settled on for these responses was *dissenting or contradictory meanings*. This type of response occurred during one of my pilot studies when the teacher was talking with the children about being accused of doing something wrong when they had not done it, and how bad that would make them feel. One boy, however, commented, "But isn't that kind of good?" He was alluding to the fact that it was a *good* thing the person had not in fact committed the transgression in question, but no one else apparently heard or acknowledged him.

Imposed but resisted meanings. The final category of responses that I identified in this study described occasions when a leader or teacher tried to read more meaning into a child's response than the child was willing to allow, and the child resisted the interpretation. In one small-group session the children were instructed to paint a symbol onto a poster that represented some area of their lives in which they needed to experience God's love. Heather was busy for a long time painting small marks across the poster. When asked what

they were, she explained that they were footprints, to which the leader responded, "Oh, is it Jesus carrying you during hard times?" "No," answered Heather, "it's a bird." Not one to give up easily, Miss Julie then asked, "OK. And can you tell us how that reflects a problem in your life, or not?" Heather finally replied, "It, it does, no, it was just . . . birds."

Discussion

In this section I will draw together some conclusions based on my observations, and then speculate about some possible explanations for what I observed and suggest some possible alternatives for sharing Bible stories with children in church.

What Was Going On?

It became clear to me as I analyzed these children's interactions with Bible stories that they generally constructed the kinds of meanings from Bible stories that they were invited to make. They generally attended to the information and the principles to which the leaders and teachers called their attention, and they tried to produce the answers or responses that the storytellers seemed to be seeking.

I also realized that the kinds of meanings intentionally solicited by teachers and leaders in this program consisted primarily of responses within the first of my five broad categories—prompted or prescribed meanings. The children in this case study were most often invited either to recall specific information about the Bible stories or to respond personally to predetermined principles derived from the biblical narratives.

Then it occurred to me that the kinds of meanings solicited from the children in this case study were usually *not* the same sorts of meanings that children are often invited to make of stories and literature in other settings. I had hoped to observe in Sunday school conversations about Bible stories the same sorts of discussions that I had encountered in numerous research studies of children's responses to literature in classrooms, book clubs, and one-on-one conversations. I wanted to listen in as children talked about Bible stories in the same way that they were learning to talk about other stories in their schools, libraries, and literature circles. However, in the Sunday school program that I researched, stories were generally not approached with the same kinds of open-ended questions that seem to be the mainstay of children's book talk in other places.

This is not to say that responses other than prompted or prescribed meanings never occurred. The children in this case study clearly experienced the Bible stories in other ways as well, and the other categories of responses that I

named represent diverse and interesting research findings. The difference is that *invitations* to respond to the Bible stories in original and creative ways were relatively infrequent, and even when they occurred, the discussions that ensued often seemed to be shut down prematurely, before the ideas proposed by the children had been fully explored. In addition, the children sometimes offered unique or divergent ideas that went unheard or unacknowledged.

Why Might This Be So?

Why might the children in this case study have been guided to engage in Bible stories so differently from the ways they are often encouraged to approach stories in other contexts?

Time constraints. One factor was surely the limited time available during the Sunday morning session to accomplish all the planned activities. Every lesson plan included an arrival activity, opening singing and prayer, a second activity to stimulate interest in the story, the Bible story presentation, and a response activity in the large group, followed by conversation about the story and then one or more response activities in the small groups. Guiding thoughtful, reflective interaction about a story takes patience and time, and time for Bible discussion always seemed to be in short supply.

Default to the familiar. Another possible explanation for the difference between the way children in this case study were guided to interact with Bible stories compared to the way children often interact with other stories may be that the Sunday school teachers were defaulting to a style of Bible teaching that was familiar to them. I suspect that the storytellers and small-group leaders were often presenting Bible stories to the children in the same way that the stories had previously been presented to them—that is, as instances or examples of "aims" that they were supposed to incorporate into their lives. Most likely they had also been trained to present Bible stories in this way. If these teachers believed that the main purpose for sharing Bible stories with children was to illustrate truths to believe, attitudes to develop, or behaviors to achieve, then there would have been little motivation to explore the stories themselves deeply. The emphasis would then rightly have been on the point of the lesson rather than on the story that exemplified that point.

Perceptions about bible stories. A third reason why children may not be guided to interact with Bible stories in church in the same way they routinely encounter literature in school and other settings may be that Bible stories are simply not considered the same sort of stories. Bible stories may not be presented as the kind of stories that children can have opinions about! Children are not asked or expected to experience these narratives as stories to which

they are free to respond in their own ways, to like or dislike, to question or challenge.

Furthermore, Bible stories are generally not thought of as the kind of stories that one could read with intense absorption and emotional involvement in the same way that one might "get into" a fascinating novel or a riveting movie. Bible stories are often presented in preaching and teaching as brief, disconnected anecdotes rather than as incidents within a rich, compelling narrative. The Bible as a whole is sometimes referred to as an "instructional manual for life"—valuable of course, but not exactly captivating or difficult to put down! Along the way the centrality and power of the narratives themselves are sometimes lost.

How Might It Be Different?

The experiences with Bible stories that were offered to the children in this case study reflect the perhaps tacitly held conviction that Bible stories are primarily examples or specific instances of general precepts, concepts, or principles. These propositions need to be distilled from the stories by a writer or storyteller prior to the presentation of the story, and then imparted to the children through a variety of learning activities, including but not limited to a narration of the story. The *essential content* in this approach is not the Bible story per se, but the principle derived from it.

However, this perception about the purpose for sharing Bible stories with children is open to question (a case that I build fully in the dissertation upon which this research is based). How might Bible teaching with children look different if direct, immediate, personal involvement with the narrative became the primary emphasis—in other words, if children were to be invited to experience Bible stories in church in a manner comparable to the way they encounter other stories in other settings?

Different use of time. Significant engagement with Bible stories requires ample time to savor details, experience emotions, and process reactions. Leaders might find it necessary to reduce the number and length of the games and projects that they incorporate into one class session if they hope to reclaim sufficient unhurried time for contemplation about the story. The frenetic ("high energy") pace of activities in many contemporary Sunday schools does not give children a chance to think much or deeply about the stories; in fact, the rush of activities might actually encourage quick, unreflective, obvious answers.

Different questions. Although informational questions are helpful in recreating and clarifying the details of a story, they are not sufficient for enabling children to enter into the stories emotionally. More effective for this

purpose are the kinds of questions to which the inquirer does not know the answers. If asked because the questioner really wants to know, they can lead to stimulating conversations not only between the asker and the respondents but also among all the individuals included in the dialogue. Interesting story talk might be elicited by asking such questions as: "How did you feel when . . . ?" "How might it have ended differently if . . . ?" "Who was your favorite person?" "What was the worst part?"

Different activities. In order to help children experience Bible stories more fully, program leaders might have to change the focus of the activities in which children participate before and after the presentation of the story. Rather than building activities around abstract concepts or themes suggested tangentially by the story, teachers and curriculum writers could search for activities that would help children relate more knowledgeably to the main story events. For example, drawing pictures or building models of Bible-time wells might help children understand more clearly stories about Isaac or the woman from Samaria.

Different preparation. Teachers will not be able to engage children in fascinated involvement with Bible stories until they have experienced the stories that way themselves. Preparation for this kind of teaching would require storytellers and small group leaders to "live in" the narratives themselves first, so that they would have their own experiences with the stories to share with their students.

Conclusion

Children are capable of experiencing stories in deeply personal and relational ways—but often they do so only when they are invited to. This case study suggests that Christian education efforts in the church may not be taking sufficient advantage of this capacity when sharing Bible stories with children.

The value of this study may lie more in the questions that it raises than in any definitive answers that it provides. What kinds of responses are Christian educators seeking from children when they tell them Bible stories? Are their teaching approaches consistent with the responses that they claim to seek?

Limitations

The nature of case study design inevitably imposed some limitations on this research. First, the sample was limited in both size and composition to the children who attended the Sunday morning program at one local church.

Secondly, the study was limited by the 3-month time frame that I established. Thirdly, the data that I obtained were necessarily limited by what I was able to see, hear, write down, audio-record, sketch, or photograph while I was present at the research site.

This study makes no claims to comprehensiveness (e.g., these are *all* the ways that children respond to Bible stories) or exclusivity (e.g., these are the *only* ways that children respond). It simply describes and reflects upon what I was able to learn by watching one group of children over a period of time.

Future Research

Investigations of real Sunday schools in action are probably the best way to understand what is actually going on in educational ministries. I would recommend many case studies of children's Sunday school classes in many different kinds of churches. Variations might include larger or smaller churches, different sociocultural contexts, different curricula, different organizational structures, varying longevity of church attendance, and attendance at Christian or secular weekday schools. Perhaps eventually some common themes would emerge that could positively inform Bible instruction in churches for boys and girls.

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