



Teaching our children to understand the Bible

To understand the Bible, a child must understand its words. And the key to understanding words in the Bible is to read the succession of connected happenings in the Old Testament. The meaning of each word becomes apparent to the child as he reads, as if he were watching a real life drama. The reader comes to understand the words "anger" and "mercy" by reading what happens in the Old Testament when someone was "angry" or "merciful". He understands the word "sin" by reading which activities in the Old Testament were called "sin". The same is true of the words "idolatry", "adultery", "repentance", "believe", "righteous", etc.

Two small children were sitting side by side in Monterrey, copying Genesis 5 into their notebooks. The five year old leaned over and said to the seven year old, "**BEGAT means they had children.**" No one had told him. He could understand the word by the way it was used in the story.

First the Bible uses words in Old Testament stories, and later it uses them in the New Testament. Take for example the word "sanctify". It first appears in Genesis 2:3 where "*God*

blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made.” It does not appear again until Exodus 13:2, where God commanded, *“Sanctify unto me all the firstborn, whatsoever openeth the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and of beast: it is mine.”* The word “sanctify” is used 110 times in the Old Testament. That is a lot of times! In the New Testament the word means the same thing, as we see in Matthew 23:17, where Jesus said, *“Ye fools and blind: for whether is greater, the gold, or the temple that sanctifieth the gold?”*

So when Jesus speaks the word “sanctify”, those who have understood it through the Old Testament will understand him when he prays, *“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth. As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I also sent them into the world. And for their sakes I sanctify myself, that they also might be sanctified through the truth.”* (John 17: 17-19.) Jesus’ words are impossible to understand for the person who has not understood the concept of being “sanctified” from the Old Testament.

Let’s look at another example. The first time that the word “righteous” appears in the Bible is in Genesis 7:1, which says, *“And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation.”* The definition of “righteous” is not given; rather it is defined by the context of the story in which it appears. The next time this word appears, is in Genesis 18:23, when Abraham said: *“Wilt thou also destroy the righteous with the wicked? Peradventure there be fifty righteous within the city: wilt thou also destroy and not spare the place for the fifty righteous that are therein? That be far from thee to do after this manner, to slay the righteous with the wicked: and that the righteous should be as the wicked, that be far from thee: Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?”* Again, a definition of the word “righteous” is not given, but it is contrasted with wickedness. The words “righteous” and “righteousness” appear 411 times in the Old Testament, which is a HUGE “dictionary” from which the child can perceive the meaning of the word. In

the New Testament the same words “righteous” and “righteousness” are used 144 times, and they mean exactly the same thing.

All the important Biblical words can be learned in this way. The word "sin" is first introduced in the story of Cain in Genesis 4: 6-7, which says, *“And the LORD said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him.”* Here "sin" is described as a predator crouching at the door, not as a powerful ruler controlling Cain’s decisions. Cain was told that he could rule over sin.

The word "believe" occurs for the first time in Genesis 15: 5-6, which says, *“And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be. And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”* Here the first seed is sown to understand the connection between the words “believe” and “righteousness”.

Jesus used the word "fox" symbolically when he called King Herod a "fox", but before that, the word "fox" had been used several times in the Old Testament, and the qualities of a "fox" were thus defined.

When I studied linguistics with the Wycliff Bible Translators, I remember one illustration very vividly. One of the Wycliffe translators had been translating the New Testament for a tribal people, and he was reading his translation to a group of them. When he read the translation of Luke 13: 31-32, the people all broke out in laughter! This verse says in English: *“The same day there came certain of the Pharisees, saying unto him, Get thee out, and depart hence: for Herod will kill thee. And he said unto them, Go ye, and tell that fox, Behold, I cast out devils, and I do cures to day and to morrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.”*

The translator thought he had possibly used a word incorrectly, but when he asked why they had laughed, they answered, "We didn't know that Herod spoke with a high voice!" They imagined that Herod spoke with a high tone of

voice, and it seemed humorous that a great king would talk like that. Why did they think that Herod spoke like that? Because Jesus called him a "fox", and in their culture, that is how the word "fox" is used. If you have ever heard a fox bark, it has a very high yappy tone.

In our American culture most of us have not ever heard a fox bark. Rather we have related the fox to his slyness. The fox is considered to be tricky and crafty. Many of us remember Uncle Remus' fable of the fox that made a tar-baby to catch a rabbit. Foxes are remembered for their cunningness in our culture.

The Encarta Encyclopedia describes the fox's alertness: "The great alertness of the red fox, and its keen senses of smell, hearing, and sight, enable it to live close to human habitation without being easily noticed."

The Bible Almanac says the fox is destructive: "Foxes were not dangerous, but they were very destructive... They are cunning hunters, eating small animals and birds and having a fondness for certain fruit (see Song 2:15.)" Packer, Tenney, and White, The Bible Almanac, Thos.Nelson, Nashville, 1980, p.229

When Jesus called King Herod a "fox", what did he mean? Did he mean Herod spoke with a high voice? Did he mean Herod was cunning? Did he mean Herod was alert? Did he mean Herod was destructive?

At this point I refer you back to the idea that words are defined in Old Testament stories. The fox is mentioned in Judges 15:4, Neh 4:3, Ps 63:10, Song 2:15, Lam 5: 17-18, and Eze 13: 3-4. These verses speak overwhelmingly of the fox's destructiveness, not of his other qualities. Therefore anyone who had meditated upon the Old Testament would know exactly what Jesus meant when he called Herod a "fox".

Most of us err, like those tribal people who thought that Herod spoke with a falsetto voice, because, "*not knowing the scriptures*", we use the definitions of our own American culture.

Most of us would think that Herod was wily and crafty, according to our culture's idea of the symbol of a fox. We

would not realize that the fox is a Biblical symbol of destructiveness, not of craftiness. This is a minor error of no consequence, but it serves to illustrate how we can misinterpret the words of the Bible if we are not grounded in the Old Testament.

Although the biblical meaning of the word “fox” is of minor importance, other words, such as “grace” are very important. If we err in our understanding of “grace”, following our culture’s erroneous ideas of that word, there could be serious consequences.

If we interpret the New Testament in the light of our American culture, not in the light of the Old Testament truth, we could fall into serious error. We live in a very lax and permissive society, and we therefore interpret God’s grace to be very lax and permissive. We imagine that God has turned off the metal detectors, and lets any terrorist into heaven if he will just say the sinners’ prayer. However, if we “*search the Scriptures daily*” and “rightly divide the word of truth”, we will not err. The key to understanding is to read and meditate upon the Old Testament along with the New Testament.

The knowledge of the Old Testament is absolutely necessary to be a leader and teacher in the church today. Why? Because the Old Testament defines the words of the New Testament. The New Testament writers used words whose definitions were already established in the Old Testament. Words such as "sin", "law", "anger", “judgment”, "grace", "sacrifice", "believe", "humble", "repentance", "forgive", “righteousness", "salvation", “666”, etc. had already been defined by Old Testament usage. Jesus and the apostles used those words with the same definitions.

We are under grace now, but the meanings of words have not changed, not even a jot or a tittle.

Imagine the confusion if someone were to try to change the meanings of Old Testament words. That would cause a breakdown of communication between God and men. Words must maintain their definitions.

For example, when a new employee starts working in a restaurant, he uses the terminology which existed in the

restaurant before he arrived. He calls a plate a plate. He calls a spoon a spoon. He calls a dollar a dollar. He would NOT call a cup a saucer. Neither would he call a saucer a cup. He would NOT call milk water, nor water milk. Words must maintain their definitions in order for language to work.

Consider a Biblical example: What did Jesus mean when he said, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”*? (Matthew 5:3.) What does it mean to be *“poor in spirit”*? How would you find out?

If you habitually read the notes in your Bible, you might fall short of the true meanings of many words. Why? Because God did not put those notes into your Bibles. God put the Old Testament into your Bibles. Yes, I know it is much easier to read the notes, but it is safer to rely on the knowledge of the Old Testament.

I am talking about intimate knowledge of the whole history of the Old Testament and all its details. I am not talking about just knowing that David killed Goliath. I am talking about knowing the details surrounding the story, even the weight of the Goliath’s spear head. Why would details be in the Old Testament unless they are important? The great error of the modern church is the notion that truth is found in seminaries, conferences, seminars, and tapes, and not in the Old Testament. But Jesus said, *“Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth.”* (John 17:17.) Jesus himself had never studied with the Jewish rabbis, but he knew the Scriptures so well that he amazed them at age 12.

Jesus said, *“Blessed are the poor in spirit...”*, and Dr. Scofield in his Reference Bible has a note on this verse which says: “Ps 1:1; 32:1; 119:1.” Scofield is helping us by pointing us back to the Old Testament usage of the word “blessed”. This is a good help. It would have also been helpful if he had put “Isa.66:2”, which says, *“For all those things hath mine hand made, and all those things have been, saith the LORD: but to this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word.”* As far as I know, this is the only reference to *“poor in spirit”* in the Old Testament, and without it, your guess would be as good as mine as to what

Jesus meant by that phrase. This verse in Isaiah is absolutely necessary to have proper understanding. It describes a certain attitude toward ourselves and toward the word of God.

Did Jesus know that the prophet Isaiah had said this? Most certainly! Jesus' knowledge of the Old Testament was encyclopedic, flawless, and perfect. Every term which Jesus uses in the New Testament is defined in the Old Testament. What he says is the fulfillment of the Old Testament.

A word must retain an unchanging meaning for it to convey an unchanging message. Right now the letters that form the words you are reading on this page can't be changed, because to do so, would produce a different message. For example, consider the phrase "reat od". It resulted from only removing the letter G from the phrase "great God". It doesn't take very many missing letters to make a message unintelligible. A person who is unfamiliar with the Old Testament, is lacking the knowledge which is needed to understand the message which the apostles preached.

God gave us the Holy Bible. Holy men dedicated their lives to write and compile it. Young Timothy was told to *"study to show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth... continue thou in the things which thou hast learned and hast been assured of, knowing of whom thou hast learned them; And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness..."* (2 Tim 2:15 and 3:14-16.)

Those phrases *"holy scriptures"* and *"all scripture"* refer to the Old Testament. That was what Timothy had learned since his childhood. A good knowledge of the Old Testament makes the teaching of Jesus come alive. *"The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple."* (Ps 119:130.)

Such study takes time, lots of time. In fact, when properly done on a daily basis under the parents' supervision, it takes the whole childhood of our sons and daughters. We have found that

copying the Bible into notebooks is an excellent way to keep the children's short attention span concentrated upon the Scripture. Meditating upon God's word is the "higher education" that our children need *"that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works."* (2 Timothy 3:17.) - Art Dappen

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Art Dappen (1946 - 2006) was a leader in the homeschool movement in Mexico. He served for over 30 years as a missionary there with his wife of 35 years, Linn. Art created and distributed a free Spanish reading program which has been used by families throughout the Spanish-speaking world. He also published a free newsletter for families, in Spanish and English.

Much of his writing could be described as "thoughts to tear down and to build up." In an environment clamoring with promises to help us meet all the expectations of standardized tests, future employers, and college entry exams, Art was a voice raised to point christian homeschooling parents to the expectations, standards and commands of our Creator and Savior.

Art received his high school education at an elite boarding school in Connecticut, and continued on to university. One day, as a new christian in a grad-level chemistry class, he came to a realization. As he studied the equations on the blackboard, the thought came to him: "Jesus Christ did not dedicate His life to what is written on that blackboard." He left school and purposed to serve the Lord.

A daughter said, "He always felt it was a privilege to throw it all away."

For more information on this topic, check out [The Education of Kings](#), available free online as a pdf or audio book at

www.inKLEINations.com

encouraging families to

"Seek ye first the kingdom of God..." Matthew 6:33

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