Alternative Methods for Teaching Scripture

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Introduction
This paper comprises an adaptation of Chapter 3 of the 1996 Masters Thesis ‘Educating into Discipleship’ by Margaret Carswell. It reviews five methods of using scripture with children identifying in each aspects which might contribute towards a model for teaching discipleship to students.

A. Biblical Methods advocated by Theorists
1. Godly Play
Berryman advocates a method based on Montessori principles, particularly as applied to Religious Education by Sofia Cavalletti.¹ ‘Godly Play’ as he calls this method, takes place in a room which contains all the physical elements of religious language. Story boxes complete with biblical figures, liturgical objects, religious symbols and cloths fill the shelves that line the room, completely surrounding and immersing children in the word of God. Here, children are invited 'to enter sacred story, parable and liturgical action in a seriously playful way and so learn the art of its appropriate use'.²

The format for Godly Play parallels the structure of the Eucharistic liturgy: children gather, hear and respond to the Word, share food and finally, leave. Scripture is not read but told with the aid of the concrete materials which fill the room. Berryman argues that telling the story allows children to orient

with the speaker, thus enabling them to think and play as they imagine what they hear. The role of the teacher is that of storyteller, who invites students to wonder and discover, rather than transmits details, facts and answers. At the conclusion of the formal lesson, children are invited to respond individually to the story they have heard by 'playing' with any of the creative materials present.

Berryman's method has been developed specifically for small groups of children in a once-a-week liturgical setting, a setting very different from the catholic primary school where religious education is part of the daily curriculum. The physical environment Berryman utilises is not available to most teachers. Berryman's commitment to the telling of the scripture story and to the use of concrete materials to enliven this telling and encourage the children's interaction and engagement with it however might transfer well to the classroom.

2. **Biblical Themes**

Bastide advocates a thematic approach to biblical teaching with themes drawn from the Bible itself. Bastide's method follows a pattern typical of the thematic approach. Teachers select the theme and identify their aims. The examples provided by Bastide are broad and general and would be difficult, if not impossible to assess. The manner in which the theme will be developed, the content to be covered and the activities which will support this, are then outlined. The activities Bastide mentions are 'tried and true': discussion, story, drama, music, research, drawing on the children's experience, art work. Bastide does not offer processes through which teachers might explore the scripture text with children: however he urges teachers to be discerning in their selection of texts, to ask whether the text would be a stumbling block or a stepping stone in the development of the child's understanding.

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3 In the theme *Shepherds*, Bastide lists as an aim, 'to provide the tools for the children to see more perceptively into the significance of shepherd as a religious symbol'. This aim would need to be written more specifically if it were to be assessed. D. Bastide, *Religious Education 5-12* (London: Falmer Press, 1987) 121.
The important point about the use of the Bible stories with young children is that teachers should ask themselves whether the story is helpful to the children in the long term development of their religious understanding or whether it will set up unhelpful attitudes or images.

Bastide acknowledges that teachers need to be well informed if they are to teach effectively from Bible themes. He identifies the Bible, recent findings in archaeology and other historical writings, such as Josephus, as worthwhile sources of information and introduces his extended themes with a detailed review of current findings in the area of the study.

Most classroom teachers would be familiar with the thematic approach to teaching, so from one perspective, Bastide's method is not new. What is new is Bastide's insistence that the theme should be drawn from the world of the Bible and not from life. This has great potential for the area of study I am concerned with: discipleship.

3. Engagement in and with the Bible

R. and G. Gobbel use the analogy of children exploring a playground to describe their method for using the Bible. Children, they assert need to know the playground before they can really play in it. They must have knowledge, not just of the individual pieces of equipment, but of the feelings, wonderings and imaginings that each piece evokes in order to make meaning. In getting to know the 'equipment' in the playground, students must therefore be allowed to play with it directly. The teacher's role is therefore to encourage and assist play, 'to deliberately and intentionally arrange environments, devise means and engage in activities so that the Bible may be brought to bear on the lives of children'. The authors suggest that this might be done through the posing of questions which either elicit information and knowledge from the children, or which invite them to wonder and make

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4 Bastide, Religious Education 5-12, 117.

meaning. It might also be done through the provision of creative activities appropriate to the students age: conversation, drama and poetry are mentioned.

The method advocated by R. and G. Gobbel is difficult to describe as it has no clear starting or finishing point. Rather, it seems more to be a gathering of teaching strategies, questions and activities around a central belief: that the Bible will be taught best by the people who know it well. This aspect of teacher knowledge seems to be emerging as a common thread among the methods described thus far. Another insight that might be drawn from the analogy of the Bible as a child's playground is that children must play with it directly, as their age and level of development allow. It follows therefore that children need direct access to scripture to which they should be allowed to respond freely.

4. Teaching Biblically

Furnish's method, Teaching Biblically, proceeds from two convictions: (i) that debate about whether the Bible or Life should be the central focus of religious education is artificial and should be avoided and (ii) that the starting point of using the Bible with students and assisting them discover meaning in their lives must be teachers who have a sound understanding of the nature of the Bible. She claims 'exploration is dependent on the help of sound biblical scholarship. There can be no other place of origin'.

The first step in Furnish's method requires that teachers assist children to enter into the text. This might be done by asking students to consider experiences they have had so that they begin to engage with the text and identify with the biblical characters or the events described. The second step invites students to meet with the text and be confronted by the experience of human and divine encounter it records. In

6 The fact is, the two are inseparable, to say the Bible is to say life'. D. Furnish, Exploring the Bible with Children (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1975), 87.

7 Furnish, Exploring the Bible with Children, 14.
meeting a text students should have the opportunity to get to know it, to feel it, participate in it, handle it, own it and be confronted by it. Furnish argues that just as the events recorded in the Bible confronted the people to whom they occurred, so biblical stories can confront us now:

Furnish suggests drama, conversation and the posing of ‘wondering’ questions as examples of activities which assist children to be confronted by the text and encounter God. The final stage in her process invites students to respond personally to the text, to consider how they might respond to what they have experienced. Responses in art or writing are typical of this step.

Furnish claims that unlike other methods which concentrate on preparing children for meaning in the future, Teaching Biblically allows students to gain meaning for ‘now’.

Our primary concern is not that the Bible be meaningful to children at some time in the future, although the future is important. We want the Bible to be an important part of the child’s ‘now’ world.

Although the activities Furnish suggests in her method are routine, her three step method is easily defined, leaves ample room for the inclusion of creative alternatives and could realistically take place in a classroom. Furnish’s commitment to the complete integration of faith and life and her recognition that in learning about the Bible students should be enabled to find meaning in their lives now are also relevant to this study.

5. The KITE Method

Stead’s method also proceeds from the conviction that sound biblical scholarship should precede teaching. She claims that ‘How to teach becomes clear as you come to terms with what you are

8 Furnish, *Exploring the Bible with Children*, 102.


10 Furnish, *Exploring the Bible with Children*, 95, 96.
teaching." Stead argues that teachers must engage in critical study prior to the teaching of any text, thus she provides teachers with a biblical interpretive model based on a series of questions drawn from the historical-critical and literary-critical methods of interpretation. These relate to the setting of the narrative, its structure and context, and the characters, customs and speech found within the passage. Stead argues that the scripture text should be actively taught rather than simply used with students, but that teaching of the Bible does not preclude the use of the imagination, life experiences of the students or prayer. This she demonstrates in her method known by the acronym KITE.

**Know the Text** encourages teachers to focus on the world of the scriptures and the actual text being explored and aims to develop students' knowledge of the text and of the world of Jesus. Activities in this part of the process include placing students in the role of a character, illustrating the events that take place or memorising a particular verse from the text. **Inspire the Imagination** invites students to engage imaginatively with the text. The use of questions which encourage students to wonder and imagine, as well as poetry, art, drama and mime is recommended. In **Translate to Life** Stead expresses her belief in the capacity of scripture to enlighten human experience. She insists that students must be lead to 'the realisation that the self revelation of God to the men and women in the Bible continues in our lives'. In this part of the process, students are invited to explore the human experiences found within the text, through discussion, research or sharing appropriate to the text. The final letter in the acronym which represents **Express the Heart** deals with the expression of faith discovered or explored, through prayer.

Having come to a greater understanding of the text, students are now encouraged to reflect prayerfully on it. Stead gives emphasis to the use of mantra and meditation at this point.

Stead's KITE method is also clearly defined and could easily be utilised within a Religious Education programme and thus provide a sound basis for using scripture with children. Two insights from Stead's

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method are important: her insistence that texts be taught, not simply used and the interpretive model she has devised.

6. Summary

This review of some of the methods advocated for using the Bible with children reveals that although none stands out as perfect, insights from each might assist the teaching of scripture to children. Berryman urges teachers to use storytelling and concrete materials to engage the imagination of children. Bastide invites them to study Bible themes and the world of Jesus through the thematic approach. R. and G. Gobbel ask that children be allowed to play directly with the Bible, exploring it as individual stories as well as a whole. Furnish admonishes teachers to let children find meaning for 'now' not just for some time in the future. Stead implores them to teach the text rather than just use it and provides an interpretive model which is practical and applicable to the classroom.

Despite variation in the actual methods suggested, two features stand out as being common to them all: teacher knowledge and meaning for students. Each method reviewed insists on the necessity of understanding and knowledge for the adults who use the Bible and the deep desire that the Word of God be brought to children in a manner that invites them to find meaning in their lives. Two statements might be considered summative.

Whatever difficulties we encounter in teaching children the Bible will not be resolved by any curriculum but by the adults who use it...

Whatever teaching methods are finally chosen, the goal should be to ingrain the Book deep within the child, as beauty is deep within the wood.

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7. *Towards a Model for this Thesis*

This thesis draws on the above methods to propose a process for teaching discipleship to students. Bastide’s concept of biblical themes is accepted as the basic structure, which is developed through a three stage process. This process draws on Furnish’s belief that children should be prepared to hear the Word, Berryman’s claim that the text should be first experienced as story, R. and G. Gobbel’s insistence that students must engage with the text and Stead’s belief that children must be taught scripture rather than just use it. While the process, *Prepare to Hear the Word, Hear and Encounter the Word* and *Respond to the Word* represents a personal contribution to the discussion, the influence of the theorists is evident.

*Prepare to Hear the Word.* Here the teacher prepares students to meet the text through activities which invite them to ‘tune into’ the theme being explored. Concept maps, discussion, investigation and the teaching of knowledge necessary for students to understand the world of the text are suggested at this stage.

*Hear and Encounter the Word* focuses on the Word of God. Where possible the biblical story is told, preferably with the aid of concrete materials. Students are then provided with the opportunity to interact or engage with the written text. This might involve them engaging in critical interpretation through examination of the plot, characters, events and placement of the story. In addition, students might consider their personal reaction to the text. Placing themselves in the role of one of the characters, drama, art, the writing of contemporary narratives and data charts are examples of the activities utilised to encourage students to handle the text, ‘feel it, own it and be confronted by it’.

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15 Furnish, *Exploring the Bible with Children*, 102.
*Respond to the Word* gives students the opportunity to express their insights or response to the text. Prayer, song, poetry, diary writing, responses to open ended statements and a revisiting of appropriate introductory activities are suggested at this time.

In keeping with current educational practice, suggested student outcomes are identified at the beginning of each module and opportunities for assessment of the extent to which students have attained these outcomes are provided throughout the unit. The unit concludes with a summary of recommended resources.