TEACHING THE BIBLE TO LITTLE CHILDREN

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Abstract

Teaching the Bible to little children is far more complex than may be expected. The contents as well as the manner in which a Bible story is related may affect a child's religious development and religious experiences. Traditional didactic approaches are critically assessed with specific reference to stereotyped curricula and undue focus on cognitive performance. The view is advanced that these approaches need to be complemented by an alternative approach in which a specific hermeneutical model plays a central role. This approach includes the acknowledgement of religious potential, the restructuring of curricula, the creation of a supportive learning environment, and an emphasis on mediating rather than teaching the Bible.

1.   Introduction

In order to do justice to this topic it will be necessary to define some concepts quite clearly, and to focus sharply on specific issues that need to be addressed. The contents of key words in this topic will firstly be scrutinized after which a traditional didactic approach for conveying the message of the Bible to children will be critically assessed. Finally, an alternative didactic approach will be proposed for conveying Biblical truths to children.

The words 'little children' in the topic are in a certain sense ambiguous. On the one hand, they may refer to children in a certain phase of *human development* (in physiological and psychological terms) in the age group of approximately two to twelve years. Hence, a distinction is normally made between toddlers ($\pm$ 2-3 years), pre-pubers ($\pm$ 6 - 8 years) and pubers ($\pm$ 9-12 years). On the other hand, reference may also be made to a group of children in various stages of *religious development*. It is well known that children may be in different phases of religious development which do not necessarily coincide with the general phases of human development (Fowler 1985:119-211, Roux 1993:35-42).

From a didactic point of view it is extremely difficult to teach the Bible simultaneously to such a diverse group, in the hope that each and everyone

will understand the message. Ample empirical evidence exists to support this view (Roux 1988a). Hermeneutical as well as didactic considerations lead to the conclusion that it is imperative to focus on specific target groups, i.e. on groups sharing a specific stage of religious development, when teaching the Bible. For the purpose of this article the term 'little children', will refer to children in the age group three to ten years. Although the religious development of a child does not necessarily coincide with the specific age-group of a child, children in religious phases one and two will be referred to as 'little children' (see Roux 1993:35-40). The different stages of religious development will be discussed in more detail later on.

The other word in the topic which needs attention is 'teach'. In itself this word may be controversial when it comes to Bible contents. Can one really teach the Bible to children? The word implies 'to instruct, to discipline' or 'to educate', but the question arises as to whether this is compatible with the contents to be conveyed? The position taken by the author is that the nature of the biblical contents and message rather calls for 'experiencing' than anything else. This interpretation will similarly be explained later.

Parents and teachers who teach children the Bible are probably in the most privileged position of all educators:

> Adults who would teach children the Bible embark upon exciting adventures with children, an adventure marked by unknowns, unexpected turns and delightful surprises (Gobbel 1986:66).

However, it is equally true that this is a daunting task:

> The issue of teaching children the Bible remains a distressing and perplexing problem for many. We have observed with discomforting frequency that many adults want first to know how to teach children the Bible without considering what the task is and without asking why do it. Any problems that we may face in teaching children the Bible will not be solved by focussing first on the *how*. The issue of children and the Bible is far more complex (Gobbel 1986).

The process of teaching the Bible to children also involves numerous role players: parents, teachers, pastors, all of whom play an important part in this process. The specific role of parents as the first and most important educators in Bible education in early childhood is emphasized strongly in the literature (see Berryman nd.:207). A significant factor that also needs to be taken into account is the fact that the average child is exposed to approximately thirty-one adults who are involved in teaching the Bible to him or her between the age of two and eighteen years. This situation brings a specific question to the fore: do adults and teachers really know what the (religious) needs of children are? Or, rephrased, are the needs, experiences and religious development of various target groups of children taken into account in a presentation of the Bible? This question desperately needs an answer if we take into account the

apparent loss of interest in, and negative attitudes towards, the Bible found within specific age groups.

There are essentially two possible approaches towards relating the Bible to children: on the one hand, the focus is primarily on the subject matter. The material to be conveyed is identified, mainly on the basis of 'anything in the Bible goes'. A taxonomic curriculum is designed and the material is 'ready to go', with the conviction that the Holy Spirit 'will see to it that everything is understood'. This approach has in the past been at the core of traditional didactic approaches, as will be shown in the next section. A second possible approach involves a focus on

(i)   the *religious needs* of the child, as well as on

(ii)   the presentation of *relevant* Bible material.

This approach will be elucidated in the final section of this paper.

2.   Traditional Didactic Approaches

Traditional didactic approaches are basically content-orientated and display the following characteristics:

2.1   A stereotyped curriculum

A comparison of school curricula for Bible education in Southern Africa, reveals little change over the past twenty years. Compared to other subjects, where new curricula have frequently been designed with new contents, these curricula have stayed more or less the same with fixed contents. While it is certainly true that the content of the Bible is fixed, it is equally true that the approach to Bible content need not become fossilised. There is ample evidence available (see Roux 1984) that not all Bible stories are equally suited to be presented at specific ages; however, these findings do not seem to have found their way into curriculum design.

Parents teaching the Bible to their children initially rely heavily on Children's Bibles where stories of David, Solomon, Samson or Paul figure quite prominently. The problem, however, is that the same Bible stories will most probably be used for the next twelve years. The selection of Bible stories, especially for very young children, is crucially important for their religious, moral and emotional development. Consider the impact of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. In Children's Bibles this story is usually accompanied by graphic visuals depicting Abraham wielding a knife over the bound Isaac. It is surely not possible for a child of four or five years to grasp the full theological and historical content of this story. Nevertheless, it is presented as a 'story' to the child moments before bedtime. Can it really be expected that, within a particular stage of religious development, the child's perception of God will not be without fear?

Children's Bibles, which often also find their way into various pre-primary educational institutions, all reveal a stereotyped 'curriculum'. This becomes quite evident when the contents of these Bibles are compared (see Roux 1984); this is particularly true for Afrikaans Children's Bibles. The problem to be solved concerns the compilation of relevant Bible material that will stimulate the child's religious development and simultaneously foster an understanding of and love for Bible education. A hermeneutical approach to curriculum design may provide an answer in this regard.

Unfortunately cathegesis currriculum design seems to be in exactly the same position as that of school curricula. The extreme emphasis on contents makes little or no provision for addressing the specific religious needs of the child.

2.2   Emphasis on historical Biblical events

Traditional didactic approaches, for one reason or the other, place great emphasis on historical Biblical events. The smallest detail of events and the chronological order of these events are presented to the target group as if these events on their own form the core of the Biblical message to mankind. It is certainly true that some historical facts of old Israel can benefit the child in understanding certain customs depicted in the Bible. Furthermore, it may be equally true that the use of certain words can help the child to understand symbolic meanings. However, the impression is gained that the necessary perspective to these Biblical events is actually obscured by the focus on the event as such. Conveying historical Biblical events alone should not be a goal in itself as so often seems to be the case. These events need to be put in appropriate perspective and should be complemented by extra-Biblical information to spark and keep the child's interest. The question, however, is how many of the teachers and parents operating at this level are really equipped and knowledgeable enough to handle such a situation? In school Bible education is very often passed on to any 'available' teacher who may have little or no specialized training, resulting in the stereotyped teaching of historical events.

2.3   Emphasis on moral issues

In traditional teaching of the Bible to children, parents and teachers have a tendency to bring moral issues to the fore, whether they are called for or not. In this form, moralisation of Bible stories more often serves to promote the educator's particular views. Adults, wittingly or unwittingly, moralise to shape belief-systems and to build a good-mannered society. The question, however, is whether the Bible may be used in this fashion:

> The Bible is certainly an adult book. It was written for adults. It was never intended by its writers as a quarry of stories for children. Neither did its writers intend odd verses to be taken out of context and used for moral instruction of the young (Holm 1973:141).

In empirical research on adults' religious experiences from childhood, Robinson comes to the conclusion that unwarranted moralisation can have a negative effect on the child's religious development:

> Evangelical Christianity in particular, with its obsessive insistence on a sense of sin as the key to morality, sometimes shows particular insensitivity to the feelings of children. It is not that children do not need moral guidance, and they may be particularly open to such influence when very young. The conflicts set up by those who so clumsily exploit this passivity without any awareness of the strength of feeling already there may take years to sort out (Robinson 1983:95).

Obtaining a Biblical perspective on moral issues, rather than moralising Bible stories, will probably be of more value to the child in understanding the society in which he or she lives.

2.4 Focus on cognitive performance

The main problem with the abovementioned 'fixed' curriculum is probably its implicit and explicit focus on cognitive performance. For many years adults have

> ...bombarded children with Biblical content, assuming that if they remember the content, they know the Bible... (Gobbel 1986:66).

This emphasis on cognitive aspects leaves little room for religious experiences, which should be part and parcel of teaching the Bible to children. Educators should be more aware of the ways in which children experience religion, as well as how they think, feel and experience the world in which they live.

The child's expectations of religious education are furthermore a key factor that need to be taken into account.

> Religious education at school is often 'school-up': it does not stimulate or allow experiences that are relevant for religious development (Nipkow 1992:78).

It appears as if the child's perception of God at a particular age, and his or her religious development and needs, are seldom taken into account when drawing up curricula. It seems as if knowledge of the content of the Bible is the only issue at stake. One example may suffice: how can one present the Covenant to Christian children from different denominations without taking their respective religious experiences and traditions into consideration? They may know the content but what about their experiences? The child's experience and expression play a vital part in understanding and (eventual) belief. Teaching the Bible to children therefore not only implies the development of cognitive skills but also creating an environment for the expression of religious needs and experiences.

> Freedom of expression - the ability to use the resources of their present level of development as possible - depends upon other factors. These include encouraging children to express themselves in ways that mean the most to them, showing respect for the child's point of view and sharing the child's perspective and conversation (Gobbel:1986:72).

It needs to be realised that

> We are not in the business of unzipping empty heads, filling them full, and zipping them up again - hoping that not anything will spill out (Gobbel, 1986:66).

In conclusion: in school specific didactic approaches are prescribed (or recommended) for each subject in the curriculum in order to give the child the best opportunity to develop his or her potential. Children are put into different classes, according to their learning abilities. Learning environments are created to give them the opportunity to learn, understand and experience content specifically suitable for their developmental behavior. However, when it comes to 'teaching' the Bible to children it seems as if most of these generally accepted didactic approaches are forgotten or not regarded as important.

In view of the vast knowledge available on child development, and more specifically on religious development, it is certainly not appropriate to present the contents of the Bible

> (i)   without any selection whatsoever, starting from Genesis and proceeding through to Revelation, or

> (ii)   in a quasi-abridged form only, i.e. as a Children's Bible, as far as contents is concerned,

to a group of 'small children', in the conviction that because it is the Word of God children will eventually 'understand' everything they are taught.

It seems as if two points need to be addressed. Firstly, it will be necessary to reconsider the selection of Bible material on the basis of the level of religious development and known needs of the target group. Secondly, it is necessary to develop an alternative didactic approach, specifically one that makes provision for cognitive as well as affective components. The Bible is more than just a handbook for cognitive development.

In the following section some aspects of such an alternative approach will be discussed.

3.   An Alternative Didactic Approach

In order to relate the Bible to small children not only at a cognitive level but also addressing their religious needs, a more hermeneutical approach needs to be employed. Such an approach, described in Roux (1988a, 1990:462), has shown good results at primary and secondary school level. This hermeneutical

model contains three components, i.e. biblical contents, biblical perspective and children's experiences. These components in turn function on a principle of 'elementarization' (Stock 1979) taking religious potential and development into consideration. This principle encompasses four major aspects i.e. the elementary structure of the text, an elementary perspective on historical and theological elements, an elementary commencement and elementary appeal as evident in the biblical text. This model, however, is not applicable to Religious Education in a multifaith classroom environment.

The following diagram illustrates the main components of such a hermeneutical model:

Biblical content

Religious potential

Religious development

Biblical perspective ——————————————— **Child experience**

Elementarization
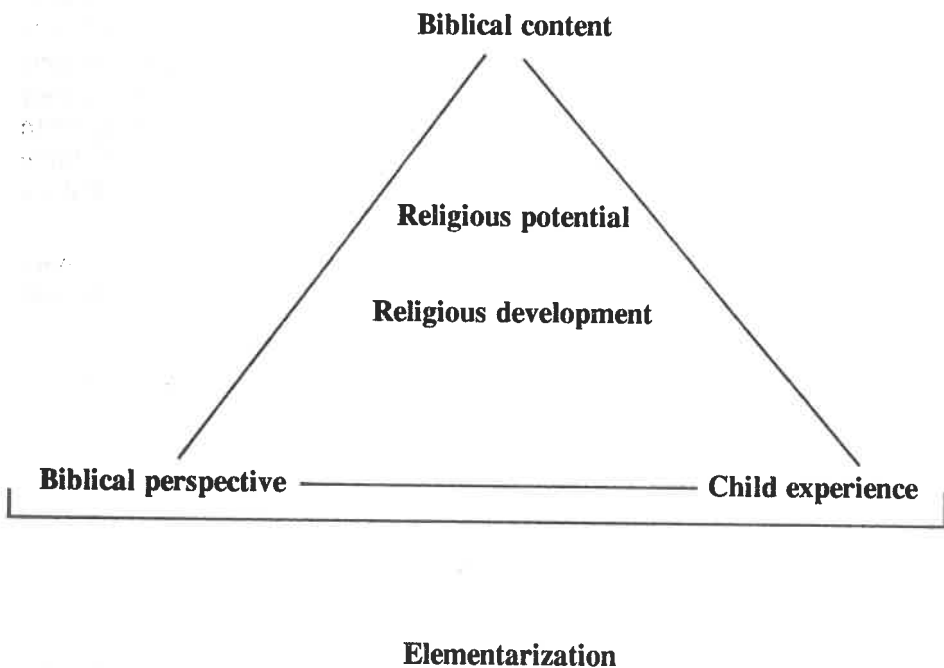
Implementing this model entails the following actions:

3.1 Redefining core concepts

The concept *teach*, with its strong emphasis on an unidirectional action covertly implying passivity on the part of the child, needs to be revised to *mediate* or *facilitate*. Similarly, the resulting action, i.e. *learn*, needs to be redefined as *experience* and0 *understand*. Details on how this may be achieved will be exemplified in the final section of this paper. The theoretical

basis underlying this alternative approach, however, needs to be clarified in advance.

3.2   Acknowledging religious potential

The proposed alternative approach is vested in what is informally known as the 'religious potential theory' (RPT). In short, this theory proposes that each and every child is born with an inherent religious potential. The development of this potential, which may be manifested in various religious experiences, may take place quite independently of cognitive development. Cognitive development as such is no prerequisite for the development of religious potential. Even hearing impaired children show distinct traces of religious potential (Roux 1991). On the other hand, naturally, cognitive thinking may be used positively in religious thinking and education.

It is well known that various views exist on the nature of religious development in children {see for example, Goldman (1964) and Fowler (1981)}. Goldman, a proponent of the cognitive religious development theory, claimed that religious thought requires formal thinking and this had an impact on curriculum design for religious education. Many scholars, however, have since then taken him to task, specifically on the nature of his (restricted) empirical tests:

The children may have understood the biblical text better than did Goldman because they had a sense of story and composition (Nipkow 1992:160).

Sofia Cavalletti, who did extensive empirical tests on children aged between three and eleven years, comments as follows:

> All modern psychology points out the incredible capacities of early childhood. Could the religious realm be the sole exception to this? During our times, when we speak of children able to read at the age of three years of age, could the child be irremediably 'illiterate' only in the area of religion? (Cavalletti 1983:28).

It is important to note that the religious potential theory is based on, and supported by, several empirical studies not only in Europe and the United States but also in South Africa. In the latter case several tests were conducted (mainly with Afrikaans-speaking children) all of which supported the theory (see Roux 1987, for details). Four different stages of religious development may be identified. There is an age overlap in the different religious stages due to the religious potential of the child. The definition 'little children' refers to children of approximately three to ten years of age and they are normally in religious stage one and two. However, some ten year olds may even be in religious stage three. For the purpose of this discussion attention will be given only to some aspects of the first three stages. A full discussion of all four stages may be found in Roux (1993).

3.2.1   Stage 1 (approximately three to eight years)

All indications are that the child is capable of having a positive concept of God during this initial phase. Characteristics such as the love and care of God may be strengthened through a positive and loving relationship between the child and his or her parents. Human attributes are assigned to God in this stage of development, for example, God can be good, angry, clean, worried, hungry, etc. It is also necessary for the adult to realize that the child may find extreme enjoyment in his or her relationship with God. This relationship may differ from that of an adult but should nevertheless be recognized and respected. These concepts of God should be fostered in the religious approach of the child and should be taken into account in curriculum design. Hence, topics relating, inter alia, to the love and protection of God should be addressed in the curriculum for children within this stage of religious development.

3.2.2   Stage 2 (approximately six to 12 years)

The child's personal relationship with God becomes more apparent and he regards God as his friend. Adults who believe in God are highly esteemed and hence may have a great influence on the child. Consciousness of sin develops extensively. In this stage children tend to show a great interest in extra-biblical material. This interest is very important for his or her religious development and presents a good basis for selecting appropriate material as well as for discussions on Christian values.

3.2.3   Stage 3 (approximately 10 to 16 years)

A deep faith in God starts to develop during this stage. God is still seen as a friend. Certain religious concepts and traditions are questioned and realistic answers are sought. Social acceptance becomes very important to the child, also on a religious level. The grace and love of God towards mankind become very important. Some children have a good knowledge of Bible content and will relate more to other Christian issues. This then implies a specific need for updated contemporary issues in the field of Christian ethics.

It is often very distressing to observe an ignorance concerning the religious potential of young children among some well-meaning pastors, priests, parents and teachers. It is important, however, to realize that it is God who creates and sustains this potential.

> Just as the education of physical and psychic life is nothing else than co-operation with the natural forces of growth, so the supernatural education is nothing else than the co-operation with God's grace, which provides the real urge to true process of growth in the divine life (Montessori 1965:15).

3.3 Restructuring curricula

The acknowledgement of religious potential has specific implications for curriculum design. It does not make sense to overwhelm children in stage 3 with excessive historical detail on the life of Israel in Egypt, or on Samson's wars with the Philistines, when they are more in need of ethical guidance from a biblical perspective. Similarly, the interest of children in the Bible during stage 2 may be enhanced by actively focusing on extra-biblical material.

The restructuring of formal or non-formal curricula (i.e. what parents should convey to their little children at home) is of the utmost importance to encourage religious experiences and religious development. It is simply not enough to present the same biblical content to the child for years on end and expect him or her to get enthusiastic about it. Is this lack of *relevant content* not the reason why children tend to loose interest in Bible education more or less at the age of twelve years?

Part of the new curriculum design should include clear *objectives* for every experience in Bible education. The objective will have an effect on the content and the didactic approach. In the process the child's experiences will expand within his or her religious potential. When the objective is to bring Christian children more in contact with the meaning of the Christian feasts, it will be impossible to tell the story of David during Easter or Ascension Day. The time has come to establish an appropriate curriculum for the development of Christian or religious concepts in children.

3.4 Creating a supportive environment

By providing a rich and interesting environment children are given the opportunity to have different experiences which, as such, may be helpful in understanding the Bible in its widest sense. A stimulating environment can assist in the development of religious potential, thinking and experiences:

From the point of view of the person for whom life and religion are an integrated whole, anything and everything can lead to further understanding and appreciation of God (Watson 1987:222).

Educators should be actively involved in creating a supportive environment in which they want to convey their material. One should have a good idea of the level of religious development of the child, choose appropriate Bible stories or books and create the environment accordingly. The whole idea is to create an environment that is always new, stimulating and fascinating to the child. In practice this may be the creation of peripheral stimuli in class by a teacher, or specific 'Bible corners' in pre-primary and primary school classes. In a cathegesis class, it may mean working from a Christian calendar (see Roux, 1988b) which depicts the main events in the Christian year in order to link up with everyday life. For a parent it may simply mean selecting the right time of day to engage in non-formal teaching of the Bible. Involving a tired child

moments before he or she turns in for the night is surely not very supportive. It may be a very good custom which is highly valued, but it is questionable whether this custom is beneficial, specifically with a parent who is not fully involved.
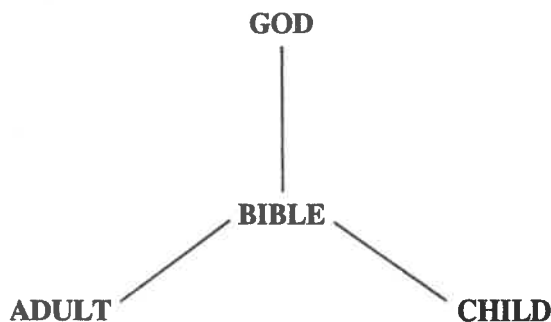
It is therefore important that Bible education should be presented only in a positive atmosphere to allow for religious experiences so as to be conducive to positive religious development.

3.5   Mediating the Bible

Arguing from the point of view that the child essentially is in the same relationship to God as an adult, the 'teaching' role of the adult and the subservient 'learning' position of the child come into dispute. Strictly speaking, God does not 'need' adults to convey His Word to little children. What is called for is that the adult acts as facilitator to mediate God's Word to children in such a fashion that the Word is mutually experienced. Experiencing the Bible with the child, without explicitly teaching it, is a primary aim of this approach. Instead of merely 'teaching' biblical contents for the sake of teaching, rather cultivate Christian values by explaining to children the roots of their religion and faith, and help them to cope as Christians in their world.

> Religious experience always assumes a certain interpretation of reality, with the people interpreting the same outer or inner impulses differently depending on their own framework. The religious frame of reference on which impulses are structured is based on earlier experiences and religious instruction in tradition (Tamminen 1983:11).

This process may be depicted by the following diagram:

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                    GOD
                     |
                     |
                     |
                   BIBLE
                  /      \
                 /        \
         ADULT               CHILD
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In order to mediate (rather than to teach) the Bible effectively, certain prerequisites regarding the facilitator and the methodological approach need

to be established. First and foremost, it is obvious that the facilitator's own knowledge of the Bible should be beyond reproach. A person conveying these truths should be totally committed to an activity that essentially also goes beyond the cognitive level. In practical terms this means that, at formal level, in a school situation for instance, the mediator should be adequately qualified for his or her task. It is highly undesirable to expect each and every teacher to 'teach Bible', whether he or she has any qualification or not. It is exactly this practice, which encourages endless repetition of biblical facts, that has led to so many negative connotations amongst children and staff alike towards Bible education. At a non-formal level, a parent should be prepared to consult additional works, dealing for instance, with extra-Biblical facts, to assist him or her to mediate Biblical truths to the child in an inspiring fashion. The parent's guidance of ethical matters and support in decision making can be more valuable than linking an everyday life situation to a suitable Bible story.

Turning to a specific method to mediate the Bible to little children in phase 1, reference may be made to the 'Open mind' approach explicated in some detail in Roux (1988b). This method entails the use of visual aids and conveying passages from the Bible in their purest form, i.e. without any subjective interpretations or rephrasing. In practice the mediator joins the children in a circle on the floor and, whilst reading the proposed passage, the events are played out with specially designed visual aids. Eye contact with the child is minimized, the atmosphere is calm, warm and supportive and the emphasis is on the Word of God. The child is allowed to discover Biblical truths and values without unnecessary (though often well meant) interventions.

This approach in relating the Bible to little children is currently widely adopted in pre-primary and primary schools, in cathegesis and in private homes. Although it is difficult to assess its success objectively, it is true to say that it has done away with the traditional teaching-learning dichotomy as far as Bible education is concerned.

4. Conclusion

The young child has the right to know God and how He presents Himself in the Bible. It is furthermore of the utmost importance to place the Bible in a hermeneutical context, and also make provision for interaction between child and mediator. Relating the Bible correctly and meaningfully to little children is extremely important as it has a profound effect on their future religious development.

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