



This Year, Give the Kids a Biblically Literate Christmas

by Phyllis Swartz

Ask the kids in a Sunday school class at your church, and they will tell you that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that David killed Goliath, and that Lydia sold purple. But how many of them could place Isaac's birth, Moses' time in Egypt, Saul's death, and Judah's exile in chronological order?

According to research at Wheaton College, half the entering students, who represent almost every Protestant denomination from almost every state in the country, couldn't do just that.¹

And it hits closer home. Each year students entering Rosedale Bible College take a test generated by the Association of Biblical Higher Education, RBC's accrediting association. The test measures general knowledge of biblical content, asking students, for example, to place four epistles in the correct biblical (canonical) order. This school year, entering students earned an average score of 42.89% on the test, which consists of 135 questions.

Why has this happened?

Perhaps this has happened because we emphasize devotion more than theology, what is therapeutic more than what is instructive, what is easily attainable more than what it takes to have an understanding of the whole. Perhaps we've used Bible texts for springboards to focus on hot topics, rather than as a way to increase our fascination with God himself. Perhaps we've delivered a milkshake curriculum because we and those we teach don't have the patience for chewing the steak.

Why does it matter?

As Anabaptists we place a high value on individuals interacting directly with God's word, seeing danger in relying on someone else to be a broker of the Bible to us. We believe we should actually read the Bible itself. And if children are to grow into adults who obey the biblical command to study—to rightly divide the word of truth—they need the savvy to wend their way through the structure of the Bible as adeptly as they navigate their computers.

You won't find a whole lot of help.

Most Sunday school resources are strong on relevance, high on application, and replete with innovation. That's good, as far as it goes. Children, of course, need to see that the Bible impacts their days and that the Bible is exciting. But you won't find a lot

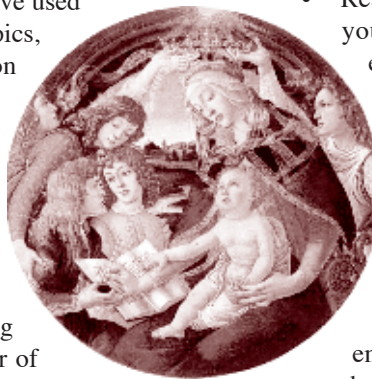
of help on chronological or geographical context, on how to use the Bible itself in a lesson, or on how what happened to Baby Moses is similar to what happened to the baby of the Christmas story.

What can you do?

How can you get your students' and children's hands on their Bibles? How can you equip them to interact individually and directly with the sacred text so they will develop into proficient dividers of the truth, so they will not just know the Christmas story, for example, but have an increased understanding of the grand, centuries-in-coming plan of redemption?

Start with simple, practical initiatives. Here are a just a few suggestions for what students can do in Sunday school:

- Color, label, and draw maps
- Sort pictures of Bible stories into Old and New Testament stacks
- Sequence cards with names of people or events
- Construct timelines
- Locate books of the Bible
- Play Bible quiz games—finding answers in the Bible
 - Read and hear words directly from the Bible: In younger years, listening and raising their hands each time you read a key word; in middle years, reading a passage together as a class; in older years, using a readers' theatre format—narrators and character parts.



Conclusion

Biblical literacy is not about memorizing names and regurgitating timelines. Rather, it's about respecting God's word to us, about having enough background to skillfully defend the faith and maintain a correct world view, and about catching increasingly knowledgeable glimpses of God himself and of the fullness of God's revelation to people.

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¹ Gary M Burge, "The Greatest Story Never Read: Recovering Biblical Literacy in the Church," www.christianitytoday.com/ct/9t9/9t9045.html.