

Getting “Into” the Bible:--Helping our Children Get “Into” the Bible

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"I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin...." (Psalm 119:11)

One of the great challenges of the Christian life is that of understanding the Bible. Many Christians are simply not “into” the Bible. That is, they do not desire to read it, study it, know it, or understand it. They do not hunger and thirst for it. They do not miss it when Bible reading is absent from their daily activities.

Equally, one of the great challenges of Christian parenting is determining how we can help our children get “into” the Bible. Perhaps we begin by making Bible study fun. Perhaps our children learn the Bible in little, unnoticed ways so they do not even realize that they are learning the Bible.

This article focuses the need for Christians to grow in appreciation of the Bible. It also overviews the challenge parents face as they try to bring their children to knowledge of the Bible and faith.

My Journey “Into” the Bible

As I look back to my childhood, I realize that the primary activity of my biblical training at home was saying “grace” at mealtimes. My family did not read the Bible together. My sister and I were reminded to say our prayers when we went to bed, but I remember very few family prayer sessions at bedtime. I do not say that to fault my early training—I am certain that these items were not easy in a single-parent home in the 1950s. My experience with and love for the Bible began in Bible classes at church. I remember being drawn into the Bible in some of my early Bible classes, both in the church we attended in St. John, Kansas, and also during extended summer visits to Grandmother’s house, when we attended a church in Huntsville, Arkansas. I was curious, study was fun, and I enjoyed the competitions.

When I went to college at Wichita State University, I learned about the inspiration and encouragement of prayer by watching Maurice and Marie Hall and their prayer life. It was also during this time that I learned about the encouragement that was available in the Bible. I made my first concerted effort to read through the New Testament, and eventually the Old Testament. I was excited to find the overviews of the individual books of the Bible which appeared in the “study helps” section of my new Bible. I experienced a deeper level of Bible study and prayer through “Timothy Club”—a student religious group on campus at WSU.

Eventually, in the grace of God, I learned more and more about the Bible, and came to appreciate the Bible in new and spiritually refreshing ways. I took a couple of religion courses at WSU, then transferred to Oklahoma Christian College and took all of the Bible courses I could in two years (5 semesters) before I earned my degree in Bible and biblical languages. I took all of Dr. Jones’s Old Testament courses, and most of the New Testament courses offered. I see now that I was being drawn into a personal interaction with the Bible that has continued throughout my ministry. I found the Bible engaging—I was “hooked” and “hooked up”.

For me, the process did not stop there. While my first connections with the Bible were because the Bible study was fun and enjoyable, I also liked studying the Bible so that I would know more about it. Later I realized that it is not about knowing the Bible—it is about knowing God and his nature so that one can understand and appreciate God’s plan for individuals and for the world. This new insight brought me back to the text of the Bible with a new set of questions and a new reason for engaging the text. Blessed with the opportunity (or imperative) to study the Bible daily as a minister, I found out how important daily communication with God can be—both in listening to the Word and in sharing through prayer.

Christians and the Bible

My journey “into” the Bible was unique, and my vocational choice of full-time service in religious contexts had an influence. Nonetheless, it seems that it is ideal that every Christian find his or her way “into” the Bible. Christians who are “into” the Bible are more apt to be daily students, to attend Bible classes at church, and to be actively involved in the work of the church.

In fact, one of the great challenges of the Christian life is to understand the Bible. Many Christians are simply not “into” the Bible. They do not desire to read it, study it, know it, or understand it. They do not hunger and thirst for it. They do not miss it when Bible reading is absent from their daily activities.

I do not have all of the answers concerning the “how”. My purpose is to suggest a “what” that is essential for the Christian life. That “what” is mature interaction with the Word of God. Daily Bible reading is good, and it may help a person on a journey “into” the Bible, but it is no substitute for the real thing. Let me encourage you to get “into” the Bible.

Parenting: Helping our Children Find Their Way “Into” the Bible

Amazingly, my own personal experiences and my ministry commitments seemed to make the task of bringing the Bible into the home more difficult when my wife and I had children.

Especially in the home of a minister, it was like “church” seven days a week.

As a minister whose children have been out of the nest for almost 20 years, I believe parents are still confused about how to train up their children. We tend to make Christianity a regimen rather than a natural part of life. Many parents think they have to mold their children while they are young and “make” them into Christians so that will not go astray. The thinking is that if we don’t seize the moment, we will miss the opportunity. When our children are less committed than we would like, or when they go astray, such thinking is self-condemning, for the entire problem is parental and none of the responsibility is attributed to the choices made by the child.

We must return to an awareness that salvation is from God, and that the purpose of the Bible is to find God, since the Bible is a revelation (revealing) of God. A premature (and often faulty) “salvation” experience brings a false security to both children and parents. We tell our children that they are saved because they have been baptized, and the processes that have led up to their baptism were such that they are not saved, or if they were saved, did not have the spiritual roots or foundations to continue the Christian walk.

This may be better understood against the background of faith development. One memorable model suggests that faith development occurs in four stages—experiential (first by proxy, then observation and initial involvement), assimilation (baptism in my faith tradition), searching, and ownership. This model suggests that the real search for personal faith does not begin until after the decision to be assimilated or “join” (a word my faith tradition doesn’t like). The result is that the real search for personal, owned faith begins at the very point when many parents are inclined to breathe a sigh of relief and assume everything is alright in their child’s faith. The point of assimilation is often the time when our children need the greatest direction and encouragement to make right decisions.

Ultimately, however, the salvation of our children does not fall into our realm of parental obligation. Our responsibility is to instruct our children. This is first a responsibility of parents in the family system, but the process for most Christians includes the instruction children receive in the church Bible class program. The instruction at home and at the church must be more than mere Bible stories. Ideally, the study focuses on finding and understanding God (appropriate to the age levels of the children), and also includes how to study and understand the Bible. The parental responsibility to instruct our children does not free parents from all liability—it is still the case that lots of things can go wrong from the parents’ perspective, e.g. poor examples, poor choices, priorities not set on the things of God or Christianity, inconsistent lives, lack of instruction or communication. On the other hand, understanding that the parental responsibility is primarily to instruct our children, to “give our children a chance” (borrowing a phrase from the recent, popular movie, “Blind Side”), can lighten the burden (and the guilt).

The parental task is scriptural instruction that helps children see God; the responsibility is to model and mentor. Christian parents must demonstrate the Christian life, including the fact that they themselves are engaged by the word of God, despite their imperfections and sins. Christian parents must walk alongside their children as mentors. A Christian example will also include apologizing to children when we are inadequate, so that shared forgiveness is also learned.