



**Bibletelling for
Children's Ministries**

Mickie O'Donnell, DDiv

DEAR WORKSHOP PARTICIPANT,

If you have time, please read through pages 1-6 of background information on why a Bibletelling model for children's spiritual formation and discipleship is so needed. Then the remainder of the document are pages we will work on together during the workshop. This includes two sample story lessons, activity options, a note page, and a Story board template for your use and duplication.

I. BACKGROUND INFORMATION :WHAT WE HAVE DONE TO OURSELVES:

For more years that we would like to admit, the local church has been using the “Schooling” model of education for Christian discipleship-making with children and youth. It has not been effective. In 1976, John Westerhoff wrote in *Will Our Children Have Faith* that using the traditional schooling-instructional model for imparting the Christian faith, will probably simply produce “educated atheists.” Westerhoff’s call for new paradigms to be found and used so that the children of that day would grow to be faithful disciples and not educated atheists, was prophetic. I think we can clearly see that many of today’s adults (who were children in the 70’s/80’s, are these educated atheists moved and swayed by the culture we live in, no longer finding truth in the Biblical texts.

I believe that there are two key reasons why this has come to pass, and we did it to ourselves.

One: We spent 40 years separating children and youth being from their Worshipping Community.

Recently, Pastor Tim Wright (ELCA) wrote a blog titled “Sunday Schooling our Kids Out of Church” where he correctly chronicles the shift churches made 40 years ago when we separated children from parents during the Worship service hour. In an effort to evangelize the disenfranchised Boomer generation back to church services, he says “...we didn’t want anything to interrupt their focus...like squirming or crying or screaming kids. Church leaders sensed that Boomer parents wanted the one-hour break from their kids—that they wanted to focus on their own spiritual life for an hour away from the distraction of their children.” He notes that while there was a surge in church attendance during that time, there was also a huge unintended consequence. “We have raised the largest unchurched generation in the history of our country.”¹

And with these years of Sunday school, how effective has it been in producing people of mature faith? Over 25 years ago The Search Institute (Minneapolis, MN) studied various denominations to test whether the goals which Church educators, pastors and theologians had for their congregants (becoming mature Christians) was actually being reached. Theologians and pastors agreed upon Eight Dimensions of Faith Maturity so that a quantitative research study could be attempted.

These eight dimensions are as follows:

1. Trusts in God’s saving grace and believes firmly in humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ
2. Experiences a sense of personal well-being, security and peace
3. Integrates faith and life- seeing work, family, social, political life as part of one’s religious life

¹ <http://sixseeds.patheos.com/searchingfortomsawyer/2014/08/sunday-schooling-our-kids-out-of-church/>

4. Seeks spiritual growth through study, prayer, discussion and reflection
5. Seeks to part of a community of believers
6. Holds life-affirming values
7. Advocates social and global change to bring about justice
8. Serves humankind consistently and passionately through acts of love and justice

After devising questions that encouraged answers from faithful congregation members to share what they truly believed and how they lived out their faith the results were amazingly sad.

Hoping for “integration” between faith and life/saying and doing it was discovered that only a minority of churched people demonstrated maturity. The breakdown by denomination was as follows: (*And as can be expected, teenage boys demonstrated the poorest level of faith maturity*).

- Disciples of Christ 31%
- Evangelical Lutheran Church 24%
- Presbyterian Church USA 34%
- Southern Baptist Convention 49%
- United Church of Christ 29%
- United Methodist Church 34%

Since 1990, many other studies (Barna Research, Sticky Faith, etc.) have reaffirmed these findings. Much has also been written about the importance of modeling by parents and other adults in the church for the formulating of faith maturity in our teens and yet, little, if any change in methodology for passing on the faith has been instituted. If church effectiveness is this poor, producing generally less than 34% mature churched people, than is it any wonder that we are hardly reaching the un-churched world for Jesus?

Two: We used an ineffective approach to teaching the Bible via Sunday School

Since, during these past 40 years, our only input for spiritual formation has been one Sunday School hour, we have used a “schooling/instructional” methodology for passing on the faith. So we have focused on a basic “factory model,” i.e. Information IN – Product OUT. In doing this we have appeared to be simply interested in teaching *about* the Bible, *about* theology, *about* our Creeds and Confessions, so that product OUT can be measured by rote information. However, since these methods tend to teach ABOUT the subject matter, it encourages Christian Educators, Children’s and Youth Pastors, etc. to use an eisegetical approach. This eisegetical process (interpreting a text or portion of text by first starting with one’s own presuppositions, agendas, or biases which are then read into the text) is basically how most publishing companies approach Sunday School material.

How often have we opened teaching material to note the highlighted “Main Point” of the lesson and then see several different Bible verses used to support that point sprinkled throughout the lesson. While there might be one Bible story told, the supporting texts are from all over the Bible. There is no historical continuity and no context. The focus of the lesson’s main point is mostly to lead to a life application concept, not to actually knowing the Biblical story in context. Single Bible verses are pulled together to be memorized for the main purpose of driving home the moral/value main point of the lesson.

We can really see how this methodology has been encouraged in youth ministry curriculum. We want our kids to steer clear of drugs, or sex, or gossip, or bullying so we pull stories and various texts and try to make everything applicable to today. While there is a place for these

kinds of discussions with students in the course of relationships with them as mentors, pastors and teachers, it hasn't proved very effective for understanding and internalizing God's Word.

Our students need to come to the text and wrestle with what God is saying through it. We do not need lead them down a garden path of what we have preconceived for them. That is not discipleship.

Then there are publishers who focus on fun and games, pat answers, coloring pictures, gizmos to play with, etc. but there has been little time for wrestling with, or bringing our own wonder and prayerful consideration to, the Biblical texts. After so many years of this eisegetical approach, the Bible is viewed as irrelevant. We have focused more on the "principles" of the Biblical stories than on the fact that Scripture IS the very breath of God and can actually speak to us.

SO?

If you combine these two conditions; **40 years of separation** and **eisegetical teaching**, it is really no mystery that our local churches are dying and that many adults today have no understanding of God's Word. But how do we go about fixing this? Do we continue doing the same thing the same way and expect a different result? I pray not. Why don't we return to what God gave us in the first place: His Word.

It is time to help our children, youth and adults actually know the Biblical text, not just *about* it. We need disciples of Jesus who are filled with the knowledge of God's Word, who have internalized the Word and allowed it to become part of who they are. How? Through being able to tell and re-tell God's Word, lives of faith can impact others and bring people into the Kingdom. Appropriating the Word itself and making the connections with the reality of who God is; this is what will help us all truly live out a Biblical world-view.

II. THE POWER OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT AS NARRATIVE:

Hebrews 4:12 tells us that Scripture is alive and active, more powerful than a two-edged sword. If we truly believe this, then it is important for us to know the Biblical narratives not just know about the text. In our discipleship-making, we should tell the stories of the Biblical text naturally in and throughout our conversations. We are still an "oral" culture. Who doesn't love it when someone says "That reminds me of a story"?

God wrote the Bible as narrative. Some say 60-75% of the text is in story form. Easy to learn and to tell. 15% of the Bible is poetry and song. Easy to sing and repeat. Only 10-25% of the Biblical text is didactic style teaching or basic theology and even still, most of that is wrapped inside a narrative.

God gave us Story. Not in a "once upon a time" fairy tale, but a historical narrative outlining God's work on earth with humankind, leaving nothing out concerning human frailty, failure, and disobedience. But it is also the true story of God's saving grace, overriding love and God's amazing rescue plan.

When speaking of the Bible I often say to the children and youth that the Bible is totally true but it's not always happy and the people don't always do the right things, but God loves us and the stories show us how God worked to fix everything that people ruined. In this way, I am trying to circumvent doubts that may come from future conversations these children will have with their peers who say things like "How can you believe the Bible when it shows people doing such bad things?" Or "How can you believe in a God who let those things happen?"

The Bible is a historical record and, like the story of when my daughter was about to be born and we were in a car accident, it's not always a happy story – it's just true.

Therefore, my teaching methodology is simply helping people of all ages hear, tell and retell the Biblical stories. Bibletelling² as the main method for learning the Biblical text as we not only tell the story but encourage the students to retell it often using different activities to help in that retelling and using “Wonder Questions” for reflection.

III. BIBLETELLING: AS A TEACHING METHODOLOGY

Bibletelling is a very simple method since it simply uses the narratives of Scripture. One can use various translations of the same text, read them out loud several times, and then try to retell them without worrying about memorizing

John Walsh, internationally recognized Bibleteller has crafted all the stories of the Bible into a free download available at www.bibletelling.org. You will find the stories true to Scripture without embellishment (which is one of the dangers of many who are “storytellers” – adding to the Biblical text with extraneous material as if one needs to enhance the story for better understanding).

The steps are quite simple for any one person who wants to learn the Biblical narratives for themselves:

1. Read the text in the Bible
2. Read the story as found in “All the Stories of the Bible”
3. Outline the story by dividing it into key words or concepts to help trigger memory of the story's pattern
4. Draw a picture gram of the story using a storyboard sheet
5. Retell the story to five different people without trying to memorize it or tell it perfectly
6. Reflect on it on what this story now means to you.

As you can see this can be done without cost or extensive outside resource material.

The Seven Questions Template: When using this methodology for teaching children and youth, one will use specific reflection questions, which we call Wonder Questions, and specific tactile activities to facilitate the student in re-telling the story as well as remembering it while re-telling. This methodology encourages theological thinking, internalization of God's Word, and allows us to wonder about how God interacts with us in the everyday.

There are seven basic questions that form a framework from which more detailed questions specific to each Biblical story can be crafted. These are as follows:

1. What does this story make you wonder about?
2. What does this story tell us about the people in it?
3. What other Bible story do you think this one is like?
4. Why do you think God put this story in the Bible?
5. What does this story tell you about God?
6. What was happening before and after this story?
7. What do you think God wants you to do now that you know the story? And to whom might you tell this story?

²www.bibletelling.org

I believe that this method of starting at the beginning of the Biblical story and strategically learning the stories within their historical context and constantly making connections between the stories as well as connecting the texts with our historical theological documents will make theological understanding the norm for our student's lives.

We know that we remember 75% of what we say while only 10% of what we hear. Therefore, we want our students to be saying God's Word. Not merely isolated verses, but complete stories. The International Orality Network is a great resource for reading about the effective use of oral methods of teaching. Read I-58 (Navigators) article titled "Is Orality a Solid Biblical Approach? <http://orality.net/content/2003-2/>

Bibletelling – The Story of Creation: *Genesis 1 – 2:4*

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was lifeless, empty, and dark. Then the Spirit of God moved across the vast emptiness. He said, “Let there be light.” Suddenly light shone around the entire sphere of the earth! God looked at the light, and said, “That’s good.”

He then divided the light from the darkness. He looked at the light and said, “I’ll call you day.” Turning to the darkness, He said, “And I’ll call you night.” So, with the day and the night, that was the first day.

On the second day, God looked at the waters and said, “Be divided!” Immediately, the waters started to separate. Some went up and the rest stayed down. God looked at the waters that were above, and he looked at the waters that were beneath. Then he looked at the space that was in between the two and said, “I’ll call you Sky.”

On the third day, God focused on the waters that were below the sky. He said, “Be gathered together into seas, rivers and lakes. Let dry land appear.” Suddenly land rose up from the waters. Rivers flowed off the land separating the hills and causing valleys. Lakes and seas were everywhere. God looked at the dry land and he looked at the seas and said, “That’s good.”

Then He said to the land, “Bring forth vegetation! Let there be grasses, vegetables, herbs, and trees. All of them will have seeds, so that life may continue on.” Immediately plants started growing across the entire earth. There were grasses, flowers, and vegetables. There were trees of many different kinds. Some would become tall, while other would remain close to the ground.

Some of the trees would produce different kinds of fruit. All this vegetation grew from that day forward, and they all had seeds so life could continue on.

On the fourth day, God looked into the heavens and said, “Let there be lights – a greater light to rule over the day, and a lesser light to dominate the night. They’ll divide the day and the night, and be for signs and

seasons, days and years.” Immediately the sun started moving across the sky, giving light and warmth to the earth. The moon and stars filled the night with splendor and brilliance. God looked at the sun, the moon, and the stars and said, “That’s good.”

On the fifth day, God looked at the sky and the waters that were below it. He said, “Bring forth life! Let there be birds in the skies, and fish and sea creatures in the water.”

Immediately sea creatures started moving in the seas, lakes, and rivers. Some were large and others were very small. There were fish of all different sizes, shapes, and colors. Birds appeared in the skies. Some flew high up in the air, while others stayed close to the ground. They had different shapes, colors, and sounds.

God looked at the sea creatures, the fish, and birds. He said, “That’s good.” He blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the seas and skies.”

On the sixth day, God said to the earth, “Bring forth living creatures. Let there be wild animals and others that can be tamed.” Immediately, animals started walking across the earth. Some were huge, and others were very small. God looked at them and said, “That’s good.”

Then God said, “Let’s make people. We’ll make them to be like us. They’ll rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the animals that move across the land.”

So God made a man and a woman and he blessed them and told them to multiply and fill the earth with people. He told them to rule over all he had made. He then gave them fruit, grains, vegetables, and green plants to eat.

Then God looked at all he had made, and he said, “It is all very, very good!”

On the seventh day, God rested from all that he had done. He blessed the seventh day and made it special.

This is how God created the heavens and the earth, and brought forth life in the first week of time.

Sample Lesson 1 for small group time
After the telling of the story - follow this format

Ask two questions:

What was your favorite part of the story?
Why?

Give each child time to answer these two questions. The flow of conversation will bring up other thoughts and observations, as well as more wonder questions. We believe that God's Word is powerful and speaks for itself. Guide the discussion, listen respectfully and keep the kids focused. Use the Wonder Questions on the back of the story to help you ask probing questions.

Choose an activity:

Decide which of these three things you might want to do with your group. If time permits do more than on

DRAWING: Hand out the story board pages and have the children draw out the story in "scenes" in the boxes. (See Story Board pages attached) Start by saying: "*How does the story begin?*" and then follow that up with "*And then what happened?*" or "*What happened next?*" Once they have finished their storyboard have them tell their stories to each other

ACTING: Help the children act out the story. Start by saying: "*How does the story begin?*" and then follow that up with "*And then what happened?*" or "*What happened next?*" Have the children pretend to be the different parts of creation. Use costumes, and puppets if available.

WONDER: Use Clay and have the children retell the story while they change the shape of the clay into the different things that God created. Begin by asking them to hold the clay in their hands and see if they can speak the clay into a different shape or to come alive. Use the Wonder Questions below.

Younger classes also have activity pages (download these from www.bibleactivities.com it is worth the subscription

Wonder Questions:

1. What does it mean to believe? How does believing in God help us understand how the world got started?
2. Who made everything? Why do you think God made it?
3. How does God show what being "Almighty" means?
4. Does the Bible tell us exactly how God made everything?
5. Why couldn't you make the clay come alive but God could breathe into dust and it did?
6. What does this story tell us about God?

Close your class time with prayer requests and repeat together the first four lines of the Apostles' Creed

A Meal and A Walk

John 6:1-10, Matthew 14:14-33

Jesus went up a mountain where he taught his disciples. A large crowd went with them so they could hear him teach.

Soon it became apparent that they were hungry, and there was no food. Jesus knew what he was going to do, but still he asked Philip, "Where can we get food for these people?"

"Lord, even eight months' salary couldn't buy enough food for all these people." The other disciples said, "Send them into the villages so they can buy food for themselves."

Jesus said, "No, I want you to feed them."

"Lord, we have enough money to feed such a large crowd."

Jesus said, "Go and see how much food we have."

Andrew came back with a young boy. "Lord, this lad has five barley loaves and two small fish. But how can that help us with such a large crowd?"

Jesus said, "Give them to me."

He took the bread and fish, and blessed them. He then divided them among the disciples and said, "Give this to the people and tell them they can have as much as they want."

They served the food to the people, who ate until they were satisfied. There were over 5,000 people there. Then Jesus said, "Go and pick up the remains." When they did, they had twelve baskets full of bread and fish.

The people said, "This is the one the Scripture talks about – 'the great prophet like Moses.'" They started talking among themselves about making him king.

Jesus knew what they were thinking, so he sent them away and told his disciples to go back by way of the sea. And he went up the mountain and prayed.

While Jesus was praying, a storm moved over the sea. Huge waves pushed the ship out toward the middle. The men rowed hard to get back to shore, but the wind was too strong for them.

At three o'clock in the morning, Jesus walked across the sea on top of the water. The men looked out and saw someone walking among the waves. They screamed because they thought it was a spirit.

Jesus said, "Don't be afraid. It's me."

Peter said, "Lord if it's you, ask me to come to you."

"Come."

So Peter got out of the boat and started walking toward Jesus. Suddenly he looked at the waves and the wind. He became afraid, and started to sink. He cried out, "Lord, save me."

The Lord reached out and grabbed him. He said, "Oh Peter, where's your faith?"

The two of them walked back, and got into the boat. Suddenly the storm stopped. The disciples knelt down and worshiped Jesus. They said, "It is true. You are the Son of God"

Sample Lesson 2 for small group time
After the telling of the story - follow this format

Ask two questions:

What was your favorite part of the story?
Why?

Give each child time to answer these two questions. The flow of conversation will bring up other thoughts and observations, as well as more wonder questions. We believe that God's Word is powerful and speaks for itself. Guide the discussion, listen respectfully and keep the kids focused. Use the Wonder Questions on the back of the story to help you ask probing questions.

Choose an activity: This time there are two parts to this story so combine some of these activities as students re-tell each part.

DRAWING: Hand out the story board pages and have the children draw out the story in "scenes" in the boxes. (See Story Board pages attached) Start by saying: "*How does the story begin?*" and then follow that up with "*And then what happened?*" or "*What happened next?*" Once they have finished their storyboard have them tell their stories to each other

ACTING: Help the children act out the story. There are two parts this time. Create a space in your small group for a boat. Use tape to create a boat shape on the floor etc . Retell the story while holding a bowl of water, trying to think of ways to walk on water and why it's not possible. Pass the water bowl around as each student takes a turn at part of the story.

COOKING
Use pita bread or tortillas and tuna fish to use while retelling the feeding of the 5,000. I've used sardines and get a great response from the kids – it's so different and "Fish-like"
Try to divide the food to feed 100 people.

Younger classes also have activity pages (download these from www.bibleactivities.com it is worth the subscription)

Wonder Questions:

1. What part of the Apostles' Creed does this story remind you of?
2. What does this story tell us about God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth?
3. How do you think the boy felt when Jesus took his food?
4. Does the Bible tell us why Jesus used a boy's food for this miracle?
5. Why do you think Peter wanted to walk on water in the first place?
6. What do you think Peter was thinking? Why did he sink?
7. What does this story tell you about Jesus?

Close your class time with prayer requests and repeat together the lines of the Apostles' Creed

NOTES:

STORY BOARDING PAGE

1	2	3
4	5	6

STORY BOARDING PAGE