

## The Bible in Godly Play and Catechesis of the Good Shepherd: A Critical Comparison

The Rev. Joyce Scherer-Hoock

As an Episcopal Priest and advocate for Christian Formation, I am often asked about the relationship of two popular programs, *Godly Play* and *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. On the surface both programs look very much alike. Both claim to be based on Montessori teaching principles. Both use wooden figures which are moved while telling Bible stories. Both have special child size rooms set up to let the children play or work in a self directed way. So what is different? Are the differences important?

There are number important differences between *Godly Play* and *Catechesis of The Good Shepherd*. In what follows, I want to focus in on one key difference- the way the Bible is used each of these methods.

Scripture is central in *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*. In *Godly Play*, Scripture's has been role marginalized and "shaped" by an underlying existentialist philosophy and an over reliance on storytelling as a vehicle for faith formation.

In *Godly Play*, the content of the Bible is used as the basis Godly Play story scripts written by Jerome Berryman and sold as Godly Play Stories, Volumes 2-8. Adults "storytellers" are told they should learn these scripts "by heart." The actual text of the Bible is never read as part of a Godly Play story, nor is the story teller encouraged to make reading the text part of her preparation, but is instructed to repeat the script verbatim. In addition, never in the published materials or trainings, as far as I have been able to discover are adults encouraged to tell the children that the Bible is the source of the story they are hearing.

In contrast, in *The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd*, all the Biblical material presented to the children comes directly from the actual text of the Bible. The Bible is introduced to the children at the beginning of each year in a lesson called "The Bible at the Prayer Table". John 8:12 "I am the light of the World" is read and pondered connecting the children to Christ as the Word of God. A lovely Bible is then "enthroned" on a Prayer Table where the children gather regularly. As children begin to read they are given Bibles and encouraged to follow the text. During the class sessions Bible narratives and passages are offered as "mediations" with the children gathered around as the adult slowly reads the text and moves figures with the action of the narrative. The text is read solemnly and pondered with open ended, "wondering questions" which encourage hearers to listen with heart as well as mind. Before each Biblical mediation, a candle is lit as a reminder that the Scripture is God's light for our path. In a handout given in every course for adults, "How We present Biblical Texts" Cavalletti recalls she learned not to give lengthy introductions or summaries before reading the actual text when she noticed that the children were restless and unfocused during her introductions, but when she went right to the text they became still and an atmosphere of intense engagement was created.

*"What we say in introducing the text is meant to focus our attention on the text itself, to stir up wonder and to open our ears to the hearing of the text. As catechists, we must never take center stage in the presentation of scripture. Our words must not impede the child's direct access to the text; instead they must prepare us to hear that text. Our few and carefully chosen words are meant to allow for the fullest possible impact of the text on the child. Otherwise, we are assuming a role which is not ours; that of*

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*mediating the dialogue between the inner Teacher and the child.* (Level II Formation Handout, National Association of Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, USA Section IV, p 55)

The approach to the Bible in *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* offers the Bible directly to children. From the youngest age they are being taught *lectio divina*, the ancient Christian practice of Bible study. (Basil Pennington (1998) *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures*) The adult catechist is encouraged to open the Bible, find and read the scripture passages being pondered with the children. Adult formation courses spend a significant portion of time with the adults practicing *lectio* as a group using passages they will later ponder in with the children.

On the other hand, *Godly Play* uses the Bible as the basis for “Storytelling”. Telling Bible stories is time honored Sunday school custom, but one with pitfalls. One pitfall is distorting the message by inserting one’s own preoccupations and interpretations into the story. Another is that the student only gets a secondary, predigested version of the text. Also, while story telling is seen as a way of giving color and drama to a supposedly dry text, the drive to be entertaining often leads to trivializing the text by dressing it up in superfluous ways, inserting sweet, sentimental touches. Because American religious education has relied so heavily on the storytelling approach many have come to think of the Bible as being like Aesop’s fables, or Hans Christian Anderson’s fairy tales. One mom told me that when her husband proposed taking their children to Sunday school, she said, “Why should I bring them to church to learn fairy tales?”

In fact, in a number of places Berryman has made choices that project his philosophical slant into the story. As Berryman makes clear in his book, *Godly Play: An Imaginative Approach to Religious Education* (Berryman, Augsburg, 1991), he sees Biblical stories as a way to deal with existential questions. The value of religion is that it offers “*religious language: that does special job, it frames in a big picture (world view) which is hemmed in by the boundaries of death, need for meaning, the threat of freedom, solicitude. These are existential limits.* While many adults don’t think they are, children are aware of these limits and need a way to deal with them.” Berryman believes children do indeed have an awareness of their existential limits and need to acquire “*The language tools to help them build a life that takes such ultimate concerns into consideration.* “

When comparing the *Godly Play* Scripts to the Biblical text one finds a troubling tendency to paraphrase in ways that insert this philosophy into the story obscuring the Biblical picture of God. Three examples from retellings of the patriarchal narrative follow.

The *Godly Play* telling of the call of Abram titled “The Great Family” begins, “*In the city of Ur, the people believed that here were many gods. There was a god for every tree, every rock, every flower... The world was alive with gods. But there was one family that believed that all of God was in every place. They did not know that yet, but that is what they thought. Abram & Sari were part of that family. When it came time to move to a new place, they were not sure God would be there. So they wondered what the new place would be like. They walked toward Haran... Some time Abram would go out to the edge of the*

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*desert. Then God would come so close to Abram and Abram to God that he knew what God wanted him to do."*

Contrast the above to the directness of Genesis 12, "Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your family to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless those that bless you and make you great, so that you will be blessing.' So Abram went, as the Lord had told him. " Genesis 12: 1-4 a

The Biblical Abram does not discover or develop the idea of the transcendent God via his own mental process. It isn't that he and his family have a new, novel idea about God and go on a journey to test it out. God speaks to Abram and God issues the call, "Go." God tells Abram to leave what is familiar. They don't decide to take a road trip to see if God is omnipresent.

Similarly in the Exodus story, the *Godly Play* script states: "One of the people, whose name was Moses, comes to the Pharaoh and says, 'let my people go!' By contrast the Biblical narrative tells us that in the agony of their slavery the people cried out, "Their cry for help rose up to God and God heard their groaning and remembered his Covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Genesis 2; 23-25. God hears and God acts to deliver the people by calling Moses to be his servant. God is an active deliverer in the Bible, while in the *Godly Play* script Moses seems to just pop up out of nowhere with his demand for the people's release. There is no context for Moses sudden demand. This tendency to downplay God's activity in the Exodus narrative continues in the elimination of God's instructions to Moses as the people are trapped between the Egyptians and the Red Sea. "Stand still and I will fight for you. ", and "Stretch out your hand ". (Genesis 14: 13- 16) God's action in driving back the sea in verses 21 & 26 is also eliminated in the *Godly Play* version of the Exodus story.

In "The Ten Best Ways to Live" Berryman's version of the giving of the law on Sinai, "When Moses was on top of the mountain, he came so close to God and God came so close to him that he knew what God wanted him to do. God wanted him to write the 10 best ways to live on stones and bring them down to the people." In the text of Exodus 20, it is God who tells speaks. "God spoke all these words and said I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt..." The Ten Commandments follow. Exodus 34:1 and Deuteronomy 10: 1-4 states that it was God, not Moses who actually wrote the words on the stone which Moses was instructed to cut for that purpose.

In the Hebrew Bible God is pictured as active, the one who seeks out a wayward humanity and who initiates the covenant of creation, the Abrahamic covenant and then Noetic covenant with humanity. Finally, in Exodus God comes to deliver a people from slavery creating a chosen people with whom he makes the Mosaic Covenant. While *Godly Play* scripts seem to imply that human activity comes first, the Bible gives us a God who reveals God's own self to human beings. In so doing God, not humankind initiates the covenant. The New Testament picks up the Hebrew Bible's theme of a God in search of humanity with Jesus' incarnation. The familiar

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John 3: 16 & 17 *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him?*”

Not only is God’s initiation of covenant obscured by Berryman’s narrative choices, his often repeated introduction “The desert is a dangerous place ... People do not go there unless they have to” seems unnecessarily eerie. Why would one choose to give a spooky ghost story type introduction to the Old Testament narratives to preschoolers? But there is another problem with this phrase. It is simply not true. Abram and his people were accomplished desert dwellers. The desert was their environment; they knew it and respected its dangers. They didn’t avoid the desert; they made a living in the desert as sheep herders. Berryman makes a similar and puzzling choice in speaking of the famine which brings Jacobs sons to Egypt from Canaan in search of food. “The desert is a dangerous place, the people of God were living in a place where rains the not come. The crops had no water; there was no grain to grin to make bread. Everyone was hungry. The children cried out in their sleep so their mothers and fathers decided to go to a new land...even if it was across the desert.” The Bible simply states, “There was famine in the land.” So why introduce the anxiety provoking details of to hungry children crying out in their sleep young hearers? Is it because the underlying intention of this choice of words is to provoke a sense of dread and existential angst? This storytelling trope is both inaccurate and emotionally manipulative.

Another weakness is that the *Godly Play* stories are offered without a theological framework or context. The storyteller is told to provide a safe space and the materials and the children will work out the meaning of the stores on their own. This process seems more in line with play therapy than Christian Formation. It does not connect the individual stories to the themes of Covenant or Salvation History. But the largest and most egregious issue to those familiar with the needs of young children is that In spite of *Godly Play’s* claim to be a Montessori based method, it does not select the stories presented to young children on the basis of their developmental appropriateness. Bible stories are offered chronologically, beginning with the Garden of Eden and on through the Old Testament. There seems little understanding of how troubling some of these stories are to young children. Case in point: the *Godly Play* presentation of the story of Noah’s Ark to the youngest children seem incredibly oblivious to fact that the themes of God’s judgment leading to the drowning of people and animals can be deeply troubling to young children.

*Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* however takes into account the child’s need to be oriented to the mystery of time.\* Time is a cosmic mystery and the Bible offers an “intelligence of history” which is the capacity to discern a deeper level of meaning beneath the surface events of history. While *Godly Play* sees time as a threat to the child as they come up against their own existential boundaries and begin to feel dread, *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* sees the child as in need of being oriented to the mystery of time. *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* does this in two ways. It arranges the Biblical narratives according to the developmental needs of the children and also connects them to an overarching story of God’s redemptive action and intentions in history. Using Montessori’s structure of growth and

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development as their starting point, Cavalletti and her collaborator Gianni Gobbi articulated three corresponding stages of spiritual sensitivity that guided their use of the Bible at each developmental stage. Bible narratives which correspond to the need for protection and relationship are given at ages 3-6. This means the children are introduced to Jesus the Good Shepherd first, before the Old Testament narrative. The underlying theology is Christological- Trinitarian. The historical narratives of the Old Testament are largely reserved for the older children at 6-9, and 9-12 because as the “reasoning mind” develops they have greater capacity to begin to ponder meaning and history. Also, having built a relationship of love and trust in God at the youngest age, by 6-12 the children are more prepared to appropriate parables and historical narratives that have a moral element including God’s judgment without becoming anxious or fearful. Because the Bible offers a global, cosmic meaning to the human experience of time and history from 6- 12 comprehensive timelines are offered which help visualize the “golden thread’ of God’s plan to bring humanity into a cosmic unity with God and each other.

Finally, Origin said, “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ himself.” Christian Formation for children as well as adults should help those being formed meet Jesus Christ in the pages of Scripture. Children and adults should be empowered to read the Bible itself. Any introduction or explanation of a passage should avoid “eisegesis” staying as close to the text as possible. The *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* does these things. It offers scripture directly to children. It is careful to avoid putting anything in the way of the child’s direct contact with the text. It also offers adults who take a *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* adult formation class skills to open and read the Bible in a way that makes their faith come alive in a new way. *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* teaches that even at a young age for children can listen to Scripture directly, ponder its meaning deeply and thus “fall in love Jesus the Good Shepherd.” This is the basis of the Christian life. Unfortunately, *Godly Play* manifests a number of serious deficits in its approach to and handling of the Bible. As illustrated above, its scripts are historically inaccurate. They contain questionable interpretive choices. They include unsuitable, emotionally manipulative dramatic “embellishments” that can be troubling to young children. *Godly Play* does not encourage adults to engage directly with the Bible. Its focus on repeating a script based on a predigested Bible passage robs the adult of wresting with the text personally under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is a missed opportunity to help adults become more mature in the faith. Because *Catechesis of the Good Shepherd* selects and arranges the biblical material according to the child’s developmental stage and adjusts its presentation style as the child grows, it is an authentic Montessori based approach to Christian Formation. *Godly Play* lays claim to the Montessori Method, but does not follow through with a truly developmentally based introduction to Scripture. In conclusion, individuals and churches that care about Scripture, should carefully evaluate their curriculum for the way the Bible is used. It is my observation that while *Godly Play* appears to be both child friendly way and pedagogically sophisticated its approach to children’s formation it actually perpetuates many of the classic mistakes of traditional Sunday school. The result may be a continued ignorance of both Scripture and of Christ himself.

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\* In a chapter entitled, "Time and the Bible," Cavalletti begins by surveying the dimension of time in relation to the essence of being human. She concludes that "Time is a cosmic dimension which offers a 'window on eternity' and is charged with the strongest religious content." (ROPC: 6-12 Years Old, p. 14) "Our experience of the mystery of time is very similar to our experience of the mystery of life itself... (It) is intrinsic to my being and yet transcends me. And this is the source of very religious phenomenon. She quotes Rabbi Abraham Heschel "Time, however is beyond our reach, beyond our power. It is near and far, intrinsic to all experience and transcending all experience. It belongs exclusively to God." (The Sabbath, Abraham Joshua Heschel)