

3.10.a Special Issues--

When and how is it OK to add to or “pad” the Bible story?

The problem with “padding “ the Bible story

The wise man had a depot full of Coke in his house in the rock,” the story teller declared. “And a freezer with every kind of ice cream cone you can imagine. He gave great parties, and...”

The children giggled with delight, but I squirmed. Sure I had added a little here and there when I told bible stories. But what about these fanciful additions? Would the children all be able to sort out the true from the false? Would they still be as enthusiastic when they read the story in the bible minus the pop machines? What ideas about the nature of the Bible were we communicating with the story? And were such vast additions really consistent with my view of the Bible as the veritable word of God?

The value of padding the Bible story

I have always recognized the need for some additions to the actual text. I call it padding. Many bible stories are extremely compressed. They are a capsule summary, and leave out a lot of details. Without some padding there would be no story, only a skeleton. Padding aids understanding and develops interest. It’s much more interesting to listen stimulated conversation than the general idea of conversation made up of indirect quotes. “I’m getting maaaaad,” Sherri screeched is much more interesting than “Sherri said she was getting mad.”

Types of padding

There are several types of padding differing in use and value. One of the most useful is historic-cultural background. If I am telling about Jonah going to Nineveh, I mention Nineveh was the capital of the mighty Assyrian Empire. A graphic description of Ur will help students understand the decision Abram faced when God ask him to leave that city. A knowledge that ancient peoples the world over have some written record of a great flood early in human history may help show students the universality of that devastating event.

Another valuable tool is what’s commonly called “reading between the lines.” As I study Bible narrative I ask myself, What must it have been like? What must it have been like for Paul who made tents in the morning hours in Ephesus and spent the hot afternoon hours teaching in Tyrannus’ lecture hall? As I describe Paul at work I use knowledge of the customs, and culture of that time, but basically I am imagining what it must have been like: The hot dusty streets, the tired manner in which Paul walked to Tyrranus’ hall. The temptation he must have felt to call it off and take a nap instead.

Another useful type of padding I call “feeling the Bible character.” When I do this, I put myself in his or her shoes. I look through Abram’s eyes at God’s promise to Abram that he would have many descendants rather than from all we know looking at it thousands of years later. What must he have felt? How must have gone through his mind? How much could he really have understood?

Another way of padding is adding conversation, and accompanying action. What did Adam and Eve talk about in the garden of Eden? How might Mary and Joseph discussed Jesus’ upcoming

birth? Adding a bit of conversation here and there greatly heightens the Scriptures’ dramatic appeal.

A fifth method of padding is interpretation. Jesus at age 12, was found in the temple and said, “Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?” One story book follows that statement with “He meant that.....” Whenever we explain the meaning we are padding with interpretation. We can also pad a story by substituting or adding parallel or modern situations: Joseph’s long coat provoked his brother’s jealousy just as if one sister gets a new suede jacket where as the other has to wear her old jacket.

Dangers in padding the Bible story

As necessary, useful, and good as padding is, some dangers lurk in the use of padding. There is the danger of making the padding so realistic that students have a hard time distinguishing from it and the real facts. There’s also the danger that we may take the Bible lightly using it as a launching pad for fanciful stories.

Distinguishing padding from Bible truth with careful wording

In studying those who I believe use padding effectively, I noticed they major on what’s true and probable excluding fanciful flights with no basis on fact or probability. They use historic-cultural background a lot. Sometimes they add things that just might have happened but always in complete compatibility with the actual text. Also they always distinguish in some clearcut way between what is Bible and what is padding. “I’d like to think that it happened this way.....” my pastor once began his sermon on Paul’s visits to the churches he had founded. “Maybe Joseph said.....,” Mary could have felt.....” These all define the difference between fact and supposition.

When you use historical-cultural backgrounds it is best to identify the source of information. “How do you know so much about Ephesus?” A student may wonder. “Many historians say.....”, History shows us that.....”, or simply “I read this week that.....” will show there is some concrete source of information.

Where do we get the excitement from?

Finally the best Bible story tellers use padding as a tool, it is never the padding they depend on to generate excitement in the Word. It is an aid to understanding the Word, but it is the scriptures that come across as challenging, relevant, and exciting.

APPLICATION:

Discuss: What kinds of padding have you heard used in Bible stories? Which were effective and which not? Why?

Practice: Distinguishing padding from Bible truth in telling a Bible story. Tell a short story. Add some padding that will be helpful. Decide what you will say that will distinguish the padding from the Bible truth. Tell the story to someone and discuss how effectively you distinguished between the two.