

A few remarks of critical appreciation

on GROWING AS JESUS GREW

Open letter to Dorothy Lennon Molan

Dear Mrs Molan !

Your Teacher's Book has been sent to me, and I was supposed to fill out the evaluation form attached to it. But I find that my "further comments" are such that it would not make much sense, if I answered the beginning of the questionnaire. Also it seems easiest for me to address my comments to you directly, as I seem to know you a little through your book. I hope you will give them a hearing and that you will have the patience to evaluate, for your part, the suggestions which I have written into your mimeographed Manuscript.

KBA 17790

/

A few remarks of critical appreciation

on GROWING AS JESUS GREW

To Dorothy Lennon Moten

About the concept "Identification with Jesus"

In LOOKING AHEAD, pg 2a you write : "As the children identify themselves with Jesus, they should be growing in their ability to follow him and his teachings." And again in Purpose of Session 7 ; "To help the children to identify with Jesus .."

Identification with Jesus is never asked for in the New Testament, and certainly not for the reason that this term or concept wasn't known in those days. On the contrary, the New Testament makes it very clear that identification takes place, and that even this identification is the great event which for us marks the turning of the tide. But it is the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 2) who does it, "being born in the likeness of men", "Being found in human form" "Christ who lives in me" (Phalippians 2:7; Galatians 2:20). Our privilege is to "follow after him", to "bear our cross after him", to "die with him", even to "rise with him", and to "be in Jesus Christ". All these expressions mean something very different from identifying ourselves with Jesus.

I can see 5 reasons why the term "identification" is not and should not be used for describing our relationship to Jesus Christ.

1) It gives the impression that we are able to become identical with the Son of God - which of course is impossible.

2) It gives the impression that we can do (or suffer) the same as Jesus Christ. "We are able ..." say two of the disciples (Mark 10:39) "to drink the same cup ...". And Jesus tells them: "You will drink the same cup that I drink ..."; but then and there he points out to them that this will by no means make them identical, or even equal, to him. Here, as nowhere else, it is true that, if two do the same, it

isn't the same at all. Compare also Mark 14:27-31. Evidently the shepherd identifies with the sheep; the sheep cannot identify themselves with the shepherd. Or Luke 17:7-10 : even if we did all that is commanded to us (maybe dying on a cross) Jesus would still be the master, whereas we would find ourselves among the servants who only do what is their duty.

3) It destroys the reverent distance between Jesus Christ and his followers which we observe throughout the New Testament. It is apt to lead into a certain chummy or shoulder-patting attitude towards Jesus which, though it may take highly refined and even highly religious forms, nevertheless at its deepest is irreverent.

4) It encourages us to project into the person of Jesus our own favorite concepts and values, whereas in reality (as in the Bible) Jesus Christ always confronts us, always surprises and catches us, always proves far beyond and above - close to us only through his own effort which we call : grace.

5) It favors the misconception that salvation comes by identification and hence by works. Compare f.i. the explanation given in this book for Psalm 90:17 (Let the favor (grace) of ^{the} Lord, our God, be upon us. And establish thou the work of our hands!): "This means that we want to be pleasing to God. It pleases God for us to be good workers. ... If we do our work well, it will last." (Session 2- pg 11)

An acknowledgement and a Suggestion

It seems to me that without too much of a change you could drop the delinquent concept (and pedagogical trick) and retain most of your material. I can see a legitimate purpose in what you are engaged . It is this :

Keeping in mind the identification which God's Son undertook to be in our likeness, "like his brethren in every respect" (Hebr.2:17)

you want to point out to the children that Jesus Christ, in his childhood, has been a real boy, just like one of them ^{and one they would have loved to have as a friend.} However, he lived ^{now} in another country, at another time (he is not a timeless dream- or superman!) which means that his surroundings and relationships, although ~~basically~~ similar to our's in many respects, were not quite the same. You want to make the children familiar with the cultural setting in which he grew up and which was to be the background of his teaching and of his whole life's story.

All of this seems quite important to me and very much worthwhile to ~~have~~ the primary children's imagination and zeal for learning engaged with. You certainly succeed in bringing this little carpenter's boy from Nazareth very close to the totality of today's children, in fact closer than if you had described him either as a little suburbanite (a danger which you have perhaps still not completely escaped) or as a little contemporary from a rural district of this country. Moreover, besides pointing to a cultural heritage, you have found a clever way to introduce some of the Old Testament Scripture which, in this whole setting and as the children learn together with the boy Jesus, seems to come alive quite readily. By this method the Old Testament serves as a picture book which shows how God, at different stages, has dealt with Israel, or with this or that man in particular for the purpose of making himself known to his people and of saving them from dispersion and despair. By your method the danger of using the ~~bible~~ Old Testament as a dump heap of history from which to rescue brilliant examples of faith and wisdom, and blameless heroes of courage and strength can easily be avoided.

~~Unfortunately I cannot attest to you that you always took advantage of your chance. It seems to me that you are mainly interested in depicting persons with whom the children could and should identify themselves in order to follow their example. To attain your purpose~~

I wish that in this respect you would have taken even a little better advantage of your own device. I feel as though in several instances you might have pointed more decidedly to the active part that God took in the story of his people. You seldom refer to God as to one who speaks and acts. Whenever you mention God (like in the stories of Samuel, Jacob, and Solomon) you seem to try and ring a bell in the children's mind/s, taking it for granted that they know whom you mean. But they don't. Maybe they have a notion, some kind of empty compartment in their brains which they are readily filling with all sorts of allusions to God. But they do not, they cannot know the living God; the God who to Jacob was known ~~as~~ through his dealings with Abraham; The Lord of Israel, of whom it is never said that he "needed" anybody, but who "established" Samuel as his prophet; the God who saw to it that Solomon became king (I King 2:15), the good old king David needing some prompting. Unless the children come to hear of this God, they will never know him.

Again in your presentation of the cultural and religious setting, I miss a note of specific reference to the Lord of Israel. You are perhaps coming nearest to it in the outcry of the people: "Zion, the city of our God!" But as the script stands, I do not think it will make sense to the children. It was my intention to help in this regard, when I made the suggestion to tell about the building of the Temple.

About our Objective in Teaching

When you speak of "the teacher laying foundations through which the children ^{may} ~~may~~, in later years, accept Christ as their personal Savior" - I am not sure whether I understand what you mean. Would you agree to the following statement:

We teachers are responsible for telling the stories of the Bible in such a way that what settles down in the children's minds and memories

A few comments on The Use of the Bible in Church School

on account of an effort to evaluate Ruth W. Russell's Book for Teachers:

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO ?

On the whole the "Bible Material" underlying this Teacher's Book seems well chosen to undergird, stress, and bring out the point that its author wants to make in each particular Session of a Vacation Church School. However, the question arises, whether such usage of the Bible is legitimate ? Maybe it is, sometimes. Maybe it is for such an exceptional occasion as a once-a-year ten days teaching period. -- if in their Sunday School Lessons during the year the children have been exposed to the good news about the God of our fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and about his Son, our Lord, Jesus Christ. This, I feel, is not done in the regular Judson Material for primaries. And here certainly another chance is missed.

The difficulty in using the Bible as a reference book or as a collection of examples - as is the case throughout the Judson Material for this age group - lies, of course, in the fact that the Bible was never written as a handbook for good behavior, nor compiled as a moral code, nor edited as an anthology of stimulant thoughts and teachings, nor given to the world as a wonderful selection of truths and principles. In its main parts it rather is a history book, but one of a unique kind. It tells about the history that God made on earth, particularly his history with his chosen people which came to its fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Moreover, this history - because it is God's history - is NEWS for all times. For through the witnesses of the Old and New Testament, the One who was and is and is to come confronts us men of today as he confronted those who first came to believe upon his word. Since the Word became flesh and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, the news of God's dealing with men have definitely become GOOD NEWS for all men. And ^{this is} these are the News of the Bible, of which we too are to

be messengers.

If we bypass the Bible's main purpose, which is to tell about the God who cares and acts, the God who saves in Jesus Christ, if we chose our own purposes and back them up with what we call "Bible Material", we are on dangerous grounds. In the Teacher's Book that is before me, I see at least two respects in which it fails to do justice to the Biblical witness.

1) Jesus is presented primarily as one to be imitated. He seems to follow a Christian way rather than to inaugurate it - or even to be it, as John puts it. His uniqueness is completely obscured. His divinity seems to lie in the fact that he is the perfect example. His authority is explained away (f.e. by the conditioning of Matthew), rather than made to be felt. He frequently is called friend, never master (whereas in the Gospels he only calls the disciples friends, never vice versa). His teachings seem to be valued higher than his person (compare the "Greeks" whose wish to see Jesus immediately is translated into wanting "to learn the Good News of God's love that he was teaching"). He somehow remains in the background, the main and enlarged figures always being the persons whom he helps (or who "help" him!) - the ideal of a do-gooder, but certainly not true to the accounts about Jesus Christ, who whether he acts or suffers cannot help being the person at the center of every scene. It seems that the author wanted to make him appealing to a middler. Yet, he does not need this extra effort : picture him the way his eye-witnesses saw and rendered account of him, the rest he will do himself.

2) By shifting the emphasis away from the center and by using Jesus merely as an example (f.e. his prayer in Gethsemane) the author is not spared the temptation "to add to or to take away from the words" of the Gospel, which to my understanding she has not always escaped.

Perhaps I should be a little more explicit on this point.

About the telling of Bible stories.

For good reasons, I think, this Teacher's Book does not advise the reading of the Bible stories to the children, nor does it make an attempt simply to paraphrase the Bible texts. It wants the stories told, which certainly is the best way to transmit implicitly their message of good news. ~~Admittedly~~ Telling a story of course means to reproduce it, to reshape it. F.e. a good story teller certainly does not want to interrupt ~~his~~ story at its dramatic climax in order to give a necessary description or a general explanation. So ~~he~~ has to find a way of introducing strange objects or customs etc. at the beginning of ~~his~~ account or at some point where they do not hinder the flow of events. ~~He~~ also will certainly use more words than the original text has. And ~~he~~ will summon ~~his~~ imagination, guided by every possible research and minute study of any lead or clue given in the text, in order to see the story happen. All of this, if it is put into the service of the actual message of the story, is not the kind of addition that necessarily falls under the verdict of Revelation 22: 18-19.

Story telling is an art, all the more if it is to be true to the original Bible text. For then you are bound to bring out not only what, according to the historical facts that we are given, actually happened; but also what makes it, according to the author or editor of your Bible text, a message of good news. Are we true to the message of our text? This to me seems the big question that hangs suspended like the famous sword of Damocles above every preacher's and teacher's head. This is where the matter of adding or subtracting to the words of the text comes in. Are we not deluting, altering, or secretly substituting the gospel of our story?

This is the point where true reverence for the biblical texts will show. Do we really listen to them, or do we use (abuse) them, manipulate, cut, hash, strain, condense, or evaporate them to fit our own

pedagogical goals and religious purposes? This, I guess, is the impending question that, first of all, editors of Church School Material will have to answer. But it also concerns every one who is responsible for teaching and preaching in the church.

It is true that the biblical texts always seem larger than the small cash we expect them to yield for our distribution to the crowd in need. But should we begrudge God the abundance of spiritual food he has in store for us, because we have resigned ourselves to live on ~~xxx~~ alms and crumbs?

I readily admit that you always have to consider whom you are teaching. You cannot simply throw the whole Bible at middleers; ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ you are going ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ you will have it to ~~xxx~~ administer ~~them~~ by the spoon, not by the scoop. But here again it is a question of being true to the Bible message, rather than a question of completeness. Who will ever be complete in his witness? We have to make choices and decisions about which stories to tell, and which traits of a particular story to stress for a particular age group. But in our choosing and deleting, we are not at liberty, we are bound to give, if not a complete, then at least a true witness. What we chose has to be good news for the children, a part of the central message of the Bible and not a ~~side~~ ^{issue} edition of it. For if we make a ~~main~~ ^{corollary} look as the cardinal point, we will end up in a distortion of the truth. It is our responsibility as teachers in the Church School ~~to lay a solid foundation~~ ^{to} ~~by~~ making known the witness of the apostles and prophets, ^{and thus} to lay a solid foundation upon which our children may ^{be} ~~based~~ the house, ~~xxx~~ of their faith and life. The chief corner stone, which is Jesus Christ himself, we cannot provide, but we can point at him from the very start of our teaching.

About the absence of the Bible in the core of the Worship Service.

In the Teacher's Book by R. Russell an every day story is told during worship time in place of the sermon. Surely children shouldn't be sermonized - but so shouldn't adults. The preaching of the Word of God (according to the sermons we find in the New Testament) is the proclamation of the Good News. These news ^{does} ~~do~~ not consist of telling people that they will find strength and joy, if they chose to do the right thing; nor do ^{as it} ~~they~~ present an assemblage of solutions to ethical problems that would help people to make their own choices and decisions - which seems to be the author's concept of a sermon. The Good News its real news. ~~They are~~ ^{It is} always surprising, ~~that~~ ^{it} can never be presupposed as generally and sufficiently known truths. For God alone is the truth; and the share of his good news that we will catch today is all we get at a time of the truth, and sufficient to keep us going.

Each sermon (and whatever takes ^{the place of} the sermon in the children's worship time) should spell out the Word of God. This is a better way to honor it than lighting candles and reading Bible verses in unison. The Word of God deserves to be ^{heard and} understood. And it will not be properly heard, unless it is proclaimed and heeded for its own sake, spelled out in its own context, and accepted in its own right.

A good sermon will certainly make the ethical implications of its news item evident and compelling. The preaching of the Word will and call for action (and endurance!) determine resolutions in the hearts of the hearers. For the Word of God will not return empty. It will yield fruit such as we will wait in vain to see grow from our own stories, even if we stuffed and spiced and spiced them well with "Bible Material".

Therefore, in the children's worship time, I would like to see a story of Jesus, well told, with its own points and highlights brought out, in order that these children may "see Jesus" and hear the Lord speak to them in their hearts. If any teacher would be given the grace (I

mean grace and not skill) to accomplish this, more than the purpose set for a specific Session would be taken care of.

On the other hand, if it is felt that this is asking too much, why not drop this whole special worship business and try to have everything done as a service of worship and thanksgiving to God, especially the Bible story telling whenever it occurs.

A few questions about "Christian Education"

In this Teacher's Book, the author speaks about "building habits that make it possible for God to guide and help us" & about "developping Christian attitudes and view points that build Christian character". But how is she preparing the children for meeting the Lord God who is more and infinitely different from impersonated goodness and kindness, and for whom all things - even to have us reborn! - are possible? How does she distinguish the blessing of God, who is not just a supreme conscience but the living Lord, from the well trained human conscience ("The Shoulds of a Christian") ? How does she protect children from selfrighteousness and workrighteousness and getting themselves mixed up with Jesus ?

How can anybody presume to know what the Son of Man would do ?

RoseMarie Oswald Barth

Nov. 20th, 1959

Companion note from C.R.Andrews

Whenever someone by the name ~~sixth~~ or with the thoughts of a "Barth" comes across our work we have the ~~fasting~~ frightening feeling that a growling lion is--for no reason at all as far as we can see--tearing and gnawing at our best intentions^{ed} and most well worked out product.

We may react by putting up our best defences--these comments simply do not take into account these or those principles upon which our work is built. We may "pidgeon-hole" the comments as those of a "fundamentalist", "modernist", or some other "-ist". We may try to find the lion-keeper to get this lion off our hands and back in some cage. Or we may try to "identify" with the lion to find why on earth he growls and bites this way.

The last response may prove to be the most helpful. Not, of course, that we need to become lions too, or that we need to become members of this or that theological "school". But we may find to our surprise that this lion is not tearing at us so much as for us...trying his best to get us out of our own cage, trying to free us not to become lions ourselves but so that we will find in the open air of the Bible our own best work suddenly appearing before us. He wants us through the Bible not to become a lion but to become free to do whatever work God places before us.

It has occurred to me in reading the comments made upon the two books enclosed how important it is that we bring our Judson materials to the attention of some such "lion". Throughout the land, as we well know, we have many conservative (not fundamentalist, but evangelical) churches. Many of these criticize Judson implicitly by leaving us for David C. Cook, etc. There is nothing good in their doing so, but there may be something right in their uneasy feeling that, no matter how stuffed with Bible quotations, Judson material on the whole is not really dependent upon the Bible as its source. This is not a feeling which can be quieted with pamphlets on the enormous use of the Bible in the materials, by statistics showing how often the Bible is quoted, nor by speakers and displays urging the use of Judson. Rather, it seems to me, such a feeling can only be met by some such approach as is evident in the comments--serious Bible study, attention to the text and context, from which a series or a given lesson, by the help of our understanding of the children to be taught, flows.

With all the critical comments on Miss Molan's book, it is clear that it is because she is approaching the series from something like this point of view that a certain empathy exists between commentator and author. Because of this empathy the comments made are more positive, and imply clearly the sort of freedom in the Bible which is ours for the taking. The contrast at this point with Miss Russell's work, is, it seems to me, an extremely good illustration of what all this is about.

sig. Charles R. Andrews

Nov. 21st, 1959