

Teaching Children the Story of Creation

BY ANDREA HARRELL MOORE

We can teach our children to understand God's relationship with creation, God's relationship with His people, and their own relationship toward the creation. In addition to teaching these important truths found in the creation story, we also must teach them how to respond. But this will require students and teachers to move out of the ordinary church classroom setting.

When I think of the creation story and its place in Christian theology, I'm reminded of the summer when one of our sons, then a toddler, visited the beach for the first time. He danced a dance of celebration as he stood on the wet sand and watched the tide cool his bare feet. Then, with dogged determination, he skipped to the sand dunes, filled his chubby little hands with moist sand, and ran as fast as he could to the edge of the foaming water to offer his gifts to the sea. His mission, it seemed, was simple: to restore to the ocean the grains of sand lost with each great exploding wave. "Thank you God for your great, big, beautiful sea," we recited as we ran together to greet the waves and share his newly gathered bounty. The sweet, spontaneous giggles that erupted from deep within his soul as he threw his arms up in victory became our "Amen."

Our toddler had experienced for the first time the wonderful gift of one of God's greatest creations and his heart had danced. How wonderful it would be if we all approached the creation story with such expectancy and exhilaration. We give a great gift to our children when we share the story of creation with the same joy and celebration. By telling and retelling

the wonder of God's majesty in creation, we, like our son, can restore what has been taken away from God's creation; in the process we strengthen our relationships with God and with the world through which God blesses us.

DEFINING OUR GOALS

Unfortunately it is easy to fall into the habit of teaching as we always have taught, or even as we were taught ourselves. Like many parents I have welcomed those colorful pictures and creative designs depicting the seven days of creation that my children have brought home from Sunday School. They have learned to recite easily the daily acts of creation beginning with "On the first day..." and continuing to the end of the story when God rests. However, too often the lesson has stopped there.

We want more for our children. Merely appreciating the vivid and majestic drama in the opening chapter of Genesis is not enough; we must all understand *our role* in the story. The creation story is our story and our children's story. It is the story that gives us breath and life. Only through a deeper understanding of it will our children be able to live well in the place given to them for well-keeping by the Creator. Thus our children and we will be better stewards of God's word and God's world.

So, let's define what we want our children to learn. We desire for them to know of God's infinite greatness and to grasp their relationship with their Creator. The creation narrative is our first introduction to God, and it is, therefore, where we first begin to learn about our unique relationship.

Then we want our children, through a careful study of how God created our world and assigned each of us to care for it, to understand their role in the story: that they were created miraculously and wonderfully, and called by our Maker to celebrate rather than corrupt, and to preserve rather than destroy. We long for our children to view the world through the windows of the creation story.

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In addition to teaching our children these important truths found in the creation story, we also must teach them how to respond. Through careful teaching and modeling we can guide our children to establish good habits of stewardship. This will be challenging for two reasons: in addition to requiring faithful stewardship from teachers and the church community, this will require students and teachers to move out of the ordinary church classroom setting. Not only good stewardship practices, but also a grasp of why we do them is essential for our children on their life journeys. The

creation narrative provides clear reasons why we must tend the gardens of the earth and care for their well-being, and our children need to understand this theological rationale. Finally, and most importantly, we yearn for our children to accept the call to restore the created order, for this is an essential aspect of God's redemption of the world.

Although it is challenging and time-consuming to think in new ways and to gather the support for nurturing new teaching methods, we owe it to God, as well as our children, to rethink the ways that we traditionally have taught children in our churches. In the process we will open our own minds to rediscovering our relationship with God and the creation.

The question is often asked, should we integrate recent environmental concerns with the idea of responsible stewardship when teaching our children? Truly we cannot teach the creation story effectively and responsibly to our children without integrating them. They go together, in the words of my older son, like peanut butter and jelly. Neither seems quite sufficient without the other. When teaching our children, we must intentionally interrelate our scientific knowledge of God's world with our understanding of God as Creator. Only then are we able to present a clear and faithful picture of God in relationship with His people.

TEACHING FAITHFUL STEWARDSHIP

Here are practical ways that we can teach our children to understand God's relationship with creation, God's relationship with His people, and their own relationship toward the creation.

God's relationship with creation. Scripture teaches us that the God of Israel is not merely a deity to be praised, but is the Holy One who began creation and remains ever sovereign. Through an understanding of the majesty and sovereignty of the Creator our children will appreciate the magnitude of being chosen to work with God. We must avoid a pantheistic view that deifies nature and invites us to worship it; a clear distinction needs to be drawn between Creator and creation. Nor do we go to the other extreme that encourages an arrogant exploitation of the world in which God placed us. We should not treat nature as if it were God, but neither can we abuse the natural world as if we were God.¹

We can teach our children to avoid pantheism and human arrogance, and to worship God as creator:

- ♦ Guide children to look for ways people have neglected or abused the natural world and encourage them to offer solutions by which they help to make a difference. Ask probing questions: "When we see all these pieces of trash on the ground, what message are we sending to God?" "When we see the skies turn brown and black because of exhaust fumes, what must God be thinking?" and "How do we treat the things we care for and the people we love?" Sometimes the best way to explain an abstract concept like *worshipping the creator*

is to show in concrete ways what it is not. Our world offers innumerable tangible ways in which our treatment of the creation indicates that God is not worshiped.

- ♦ My younger children love to go on prayer walks. We thank God for all that we see. This not only encourages them to look closely at all that is around them, it helps to clarify the relationship of God with the creation. Giving thanks acknowledges and praises the Giver.
- ♦ I mentioned the teeter-totter balancing act that we must perform as we teach children to care for their world in a way that offers glory to the Maker: we must neither encourage the New Age idea of God in nature, which distorts the Creator's image, nor lean to the other extreme and relinquish our responsibility as caretakers. Children's literature and movies have made this proverbial teeter-totter go up and down with great gusto: heroes often either dominate nature or worship it. We can help our children read and view these materials critically. Using a balanced approach within the church we can teach and encourage our children to see their world through God's eyes and seek restoration of an often neglected world.

God's relationship with His people. The creation story illuminates God's love for us. The Psalmist rejoices in the knowledge that God has made humankind to be "a little lower than God" and has "crowned them with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:5). Knowing that we not only have been created in the image of the Holy One, but also chosen to "rule over the works of [God's] hands" inspires our hearts.

How do we help our children sense their calling as co-workers with God in caring for the creation and thereby partake in what John Stott calls the divine-human relationship?² This relationship involves responsibilities. Children can easily identify with personal responsibilities given to them at home and at school. By highlighting their God-given responsibilities we prepare them to understand just how much their Creator loves them:

- ♦ "Show-and-tell" gets children excited about coming to church. Invite them to bring something that is very special to them. They quickly will grasp the idea that we take good care of things that we love—so much, in fact, that we are often overly protective. If we want to keep our special things, then we must care for them in a responsible manner.
- ♦ Children are given responsibilities at home, church, and school in order to help both them and those around them. This concept is made more concrete by listing such responsibilities and discussing the consequences of failing to do what is expected. With the creation story we take this idea of responsible behavior a step farther: God gives us responsibilities for caretaking. Since an authority higher

than parents or teachers is involved, the purposes and consequences are greater and more meaningful. Children can create a new list of God-given responsibilities to care for the created world in tangible ways. They will begin to see that their responsibilities go beyond the walls of home, church, and school.

Scott Hoezee notes a falling-out today between Christians who forsake the environment in search of a deeper spirituality and environmentalists who seek only to save the earth.³ Responsible teaching of the creation story

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can help to lessen this divide. Our children can become a new generation of Christians who grow spiritually through tending responsibly to the earth and its needs.

The child’s relationship to creation. So much of our culture has taken away what children need: a joyful encounter with the natural world. How can they love

and appreciate what they do not experience? A thoughtful integration of adoration and stewardship must go beyond the printed lessons and must venture out of the classroom setting.

We can learn much from the “greening of the classroom” movement in public schools across America. Through a careful incorporation of a hands-on approach to the natural world, educators are realizing how much can be learned from the soil and its rich, fertile gardens. A recent study shows that schools with an EIC program (for “Environment as an Integrating Context”) see significant improvements in both learning and teaching.⁴ Student involvement and interest level increase as the natural habitat makes math, social studies, science, and language come alive. Abstractions become more easily understood when children have the opportunity to learn in a more creative and hands-on atmosphere. Environmental-based learning has made a big impact on many classrooms. How wonderful it would be to have a “greening of the Sunday School” in order to introduce God’s world to our children in a more tangible and meaningful way:

- ♦ It can be as simple as teaching children to care for plants in a small garden; to pick up litter; to turn off lights when they are not being used; to eat and drink with reusable cups, plates, and utensils; to not waste water when washing their hands; and to recycle paper in a separate container. A green learning environment teaches children to care for and conserve the creation.

- ♦ Through their “green” projects children can care for other people. A small garden can grow into a larger garden to help feed the hungry. A recycling project can help pay for new ministries, like playground equipment, children’s hymnals, or Christmas gifts for other children. Planting young trees can shade future generations. The ideas are as endless as our imaginations allow.

Consider several factors when “greening” your program with these new learning activities: Will the activity be Sunday morning or another time? Will the children be wearing dress clothes or play clothes? How many children will be present and of what ages? How can the wider church family support and be involved? What are the community’s needs? Children will enjoy participating in this assessment process. With the involvement of caring adults and energetic children, great ideas can become reachable goals.

However we choose to begin the blending of theological truths and environmental stewardship, we must continue to recognize the importance of both our words and our actions in portraying God’s truth to those beginning their faith journeys. The Biblical stories of creation give children pictures of faith and glimpses into God’s nature and love. Through careful teaching and modeling we can build bridges of faith that enable our children to accept God’s word as meaningful to them today, and we can bring the beauty of the natural world into our lives and our church communities. All of us truly will rejoice with the Psalmist who says,

The earth is the LORD’s, and all that is in it,
the world, and those who live in it (Psalm 24:1).

NOTES

1 John Stott, “Forward” in *The Care of Creation: Focusing Concern and Action*, ed. R. J. Berry (Downer’s Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 8.

2 Ibid.

3 Scott Hoezee, *Remember Creation: God’s World of Wonder and Delight* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 10.

4 Gerald A. Lieberman, “Putting the ‘E’ Back into Education,” *Native Plants* 18:2 (Summer 2001): 16-19.



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