

Give Them
TRUTH



TEACHING ETERNAL TRUTHS
TO YOUNG MINDS

Starr Meade

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For Paul, long-suffering husband, enthusiastic fan, favorite friend,
and still my sweetheart after all these years

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Preface

“For who cannot see that thinking is prior to believing? For no one believes anything unless he has first thought that it is to be believed . . . everybody who believes, thinks—both thinks in believing, and believes in thinking.”¹—AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

Pendulums swing. They never move from one extreme to the correct balance and then stop. Instead, in their quest for balance, they first swing from one extreme and then move all the way to the opposite extreme. This is just as true with ideas as it is with a physical pendulum. As Christian parents and teachers longing to pass Christianity on to our children, we understand that it is not the possession of information, no matter how much of it is possessed or how well it is known, that will make our children into godly, faithful followers of Christ. Our children must believe in and love the Lord Jesus. For many of us, that triggers a great sweep of the pendulum off to the opposite extreme, and we begin to neglect the *head* as much as we had feared to neglect the *heart*.

Our culture’s attitude toward study and reflective thought only makes matters worse. In twenty-first-century America, the proverbial man on the street has little use for “academics” in any discipline. Such commitment to learning is for a gifted—or nerdy?—few who like that sort of thing. By and large, evangelicals in America hold the same cultural perspective when it comes to Christian truth. Who studies theology? Who reads commentaries? Who knows the Bible well—not just favorite psalms and New Testament passages, but the whole Bible? Pastors,

1. Augustine, *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*, 2 vols., ed. Whitney J. Oates (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1980, 1948), 1:780.

professors, and young men bound for seminary. Who else would need that much academic knowledge?

This book hopes to call those responsible for the Christian education of children to a fresh commitment to *educate children's minds*. I paused here to see how a dictionary would define *educate*, and I found the word defined as “to impart knowledge or skill.” Another definition was “to train to be discriminative in taste or judgment.” The intellect, or the *head*, is the subject of education, and it is to the head that I long to see Christian educators of the young address themselves anew.

Right up front, let me state loudly and clearly, so as not to be misunderstood, my recognition that imparting Bible knowledge and Christian truth to the mind is not all there is to Christian teaching and discipling. Not by a long shot! I do contend, however, that it is a starting place, and one so basic that there can be little sound discipling without it. I also contend that, in spite of its basic and essential nature, it is a starting place commonly neglected.

And perhaps this is so nowhere more than with children. For whatever reason (that swinging pendulum, I suppose), we view Christian teaching with a hands-off approach that we use with no other aspect of child rearing. We worry that if we teach Christian truth too much or too diligently, we will be “forcing” Christianity upon our children, and they will rebel against it. Yet with no such anxieties we require them to eat carrots and cucumbers (when they would prefer cookies and chips) and to go to bed on time. Requiring children to do what's good for them is simply part of being a parent or teacher.

When it comes to imparting a thorough familiarity with the riches of Christian doctrine or of in-depth Bible knowledge to children, most of us are surprisingly laid-back. We make sure children attend church and perhaps a children's class once a week, and we read them a Bible story every now and then, and we seem to think they will get the rest of what they need on their own. The foolishness of such an approach becomes apparent when we imagine teaching reading or math in so haphazard a way. We insist that children study those subjects daily. We make sure that capable teachers follow a plan for increasing children's

knowledge incrementally. We require children to drill and to exercise their new skills on a regular basis. Why do we think that learning the most profound content that exists does not require similar diligence? Why do we think that the knowledge essential for living life to the fullest, knowledge that is, in fact, a matter of life and death itself, deserves less of a commitment of time and energy?

This is not a book on parenting. It is a book on teaching, and it is directed to anyone—parent, grandparent, teacher, or pastor—who teaches children. I have been teaching children and teenagers for three decades (wow! how did *that* happen?). My teaching has been in churches, in Christian schools, and in my living room with homeschooled children. So I work exclusively with children whose families identify themselves as Christians and who attend Protestant churches. While I am delighted that many of my students' parents provide diligent, consistent instruction in Bible and doctrine (sometimes better than what I provided for my own children), the majority of my students come to me with appalling ignorance of the Bible and its teaching.

My hope in writing this book is to expose that appalling ignorance to those who are in a position to do something about it. The book is in three parts. Part One makes my case: too many children from Christian homes do not know their Bibles and do not grasp Christian doctrine. Yet the possession of such knowledge is essential for everything else we desire for the spiritual lives of children. We will help prepare our children for every trial they will face as they live in a fallen world when we give them a firm understanding of the Bible and the teaching it provides.

Part Two showcases basic Christian doctrines children should grow up learning, providing some hints on ways we can communicate these things to our children and pointing out some of the clashes that occur between these teachings and the ideas of the culture our children will inhabit. Part Three details some specifics for teaching our children: first, general principles, then specific Bible content, and finally, doctrinal truths. As an acknowledgment that there is more to the Christian training of children than simply imparting information, the book concludes with a list of added resources. Some of the resources will help with the

Preface

studying and teaching that is urged in this book; other resources will help with additional aspects of raising children so that we point them to Christ as they grow.

My hope in writing this book is to call parents, teachers, and churches to the Christian education of children's minds as a means to an end. I hope to remind Christian educators of all kinds of the importance of a most basic foundation. I want to encourage them to impart knowledge, facts, and truth to children's heads *first*, in order to give their hearts something to love and to live by.

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PART ONE

Why Our Children Need to Know

1

Head First: Truth Is for Knowing

She had longed for this all her life. She had never had a name for it, but the desire had hovered in the back of her heart when she was busy, and had burst forth demanding attention when she had the time to stop and notice. She lived a comfortable life, was a member of a family that loved her, and had no complaints. Yet nothing ever satisfied. She had always longed for something more without being able to identify exactly what. Now she knew. All the dry places in her soul soaked up, with glad greediness, the words that rained around her. And still she thirsted. “I will never have enough,” she thought, looking up into the face of the speaker from her cushion on the floor. “I will always want more, and more, and more.”

“Lord!” Mary jumped at the harsh voice from the doorway. She looked up and saw a woman with a stack of serving dishes in her hands, her hair coming loose from under her head covering and her face glowing with perspiration. Mary knew what would come next. She felt a guilty flush rise up her neck and cover her face. “Do you not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Tell her then to help me,” demanded the woman in the doorway.

Mary prepared to scramble to her feet, but sank back onto her cushion at the sound of Jesus’ voice, gentle, yet scolding, and addressed, not to her, but to Martha. “Martha, Martha,” Jesus said, “you are anxious and troubled about many things, but one thing is necessary. Mary has chosen the good portion which will not be taken away from her.”¹



1. See Luke 10:38–42.

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He handled pearls as other people handled small change. He knew their value—who better?—yet, for him, they were the stuff of his ordinary, workaday world. He had dealt in pearls all his life. He could tell at a glance which ones were a waste of his time, fit only for purchase by a farmer needing to appease an offended wife. This merchant sought out perfect pearls, the roundest, the ones of greatest luster. The dealers in pearls would see him coming and pull out only their best for him, and, still, he purchased very few of all he saw.

This pearl, however, had forced all the air from his lungs and replaced it with a sharp ache in his chest and his throat. *Could there really be a pearl such as this?* It glowed sweetly among the other pearls on the table, and they were little clods of dirt by comparison. The merchant picked up the pearl with careful fingers, placed it in the palm of his other hand, and lifted it up near his face. It was larger than most pearls, and the closest thing to perfect roundness the merchant had ever seen. All pearls had their imperfections; the trick was in finding pearls with such slight imperfections that a buyer would not notice them. The merchant could not see a single fault in this pearl. All he saw was his own face, reflected, tiny but clear, on the pearl's surface. He set the pearl down, and remembered to breathe. "How much?" he croaked. "How much for the pearl?"

When the answer came back, the merchant did not hesitate. He drew the bag of gold from inside his cloak and held it out. It contained his whole allotment for purchasing pearls for the rest of the year. "Take this," he ordered, "and hold the pearl for me. I will be back with the rest." The merchant hurried out the door, on his way to sell everything he owned so he could buy the pearl of great value.²



Who respected him now? That excellent education he had acquired, where he had always been at the top of his class, no longer meant a thing to all who had been so impressed before. The rising star he had ridden,

2. See Matt. 13:45.

both in scholarly and in religious circles, had gone down in flames. He sat, imprisoned, writing a letter to friends far away. Time dragged on—a year, two, several—while he waited for a trial and wondered what would happen. Would he be set free? Or would he be put to death? He had committed no crime, yet plenty of people longed to see him dead. The prisoner picked up the pen and wrote, “But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”³



We would all like to see our daughters in Mary’s seat at Jesus’ feet, choosing the one thing necessary. We would all wish for our sons to give all they have with joy in exchange for laying hold of the kingdom of God, as the merchant did for the pearl of great value. The heart’s desire of every Sunday school teacher or teacher of Bible in a Christian school is that their students, like Paul, would count everything else as rubbish for the sake of knowing Christ.

In order for our children to choose the one thing necessary, to supremely value Christ and his kingdom above all else, there are things they must *know*, and that is the reason for this book. *Knowing*—holding truths in our minds with which we are well acquainted and of which we are certain—has taken quite a hit in Christian circles in the last generation or two. We want to *experience* our Christianity; we want to *feel* our Christianity; we want to *demonstrate* our Christianity with acts of love and service. But knowing things, filling our minds with content, has come to seem less than spiritual. And so, without realizing it, we often neglect the very foundation of all that we desire for our children.

WHY THIS BOOK?

“Whatever else they don’t have, the most important thing is that my children have their own relationship with God.”

3. See Phil. 3:7–8.

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“The goal of my teaching is for my children to consistently apply the Word of God to their lives.”

“What I hope to pass on to my children is a heart for the kingdom of God. I want them to have a passion for Christian mission and service.”

“I want my children to embrace the gospel for themselves and to share it with others.”

“It’s very simple; I want my children to love Jesus. I want them to live for him, seeking him and serving him.”

The desires in that list make valid, worthwhile goals. Reaching these goals, however, requires a multileveled foundation. In my experience, most of the time, the bottom level—the foundation for every one of the goals listed above—is neglected, sometimes even deliberately rejected.

Knowledge—facts, doctrines, propositional truth, redemptive history, *head knowledge*, if you will—provides the basic foundation for every desirable goal in that list. Mary’s choice, Paul’s values, and the pearl merchant’s hunger all presuppose a measure of understanding. Yet in my experience, “Christian education” for children often falls into one of two categories: it either neglects methodical, diligent instruction in Bible and doctrine, or it deliberately shuns it.

In my three decades of teaching children and teens, I have worked almost exclusively with children of Christian parents, parents who have a church they attend and love, parents (usually) who have chosen Christian school or homeschool for their children precisely because they want them to grow up knowing and loving Christ. These parents assume their children are getting all they need from their churches, their youth programs, their parents’ example and teaching. Yet I find, increasingly as the years go by, that the children and teens I teach know only the most common stories from the Bible—and they don’t know those very well. Their ideas of basic Christian doctrine are even weaker. My experience is that parents think they are raising their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord while, in reality, their children (who are usually well-behaved and polite) possess very little understanding of the faith they supposedly embrace. One honest homeschool mom I know sees the problem and gives this analysis of the reason: “There are so many

areas in which it's important to keep up—math, science, language arts; we can't let our kids get behind. Then there are the sports and the music lessons and practice for both. When we run out of time, it's easy to think, 'We'll get to Bible later.' But then, we don't."

Please understand that when I advocate Christian education for children, I mean more than church attendance, involvement in youth group, prayer before meals, and occasional home Bible stories or devotions. What our children need and, for the most part, are not receiving, is systematic, intentional—dare I say it, even rigorous?—instruction in Bible and in Christian doctrine, instruction provided as though these were subjects we expected our children to master. I'm calling for children to know the overall organization of the whole Bible, the big picture of the history it recounts, at least the important stories of all its main characters, and how the people and places and events of one Bible era relate to those of other eras. I want them to have a comfortable familiarity with basic Bible themes and to know definitions for concepts that are critical in understanding Christian doctrine. I desire to see them growing steadily in their ability to articulate these things.

Nothing in the universe challenges the mind like the consideration of the person of God. Knowing God involves far more than merely knowing *about* him; still, it certainly begins there. God has given us a whole book—a fairly long, fairly dense book at that. Surely he intended for us to know what it contains. The truths of Christianity and of salvation in particular number among the most complex, deep ideas humans have ever considered. To master content as rich and substantive as that which God has given—and we do want to master it, don't we, if God has given it?—requires diligent study and work. Why would we think our children will know God and understand the doctrines of Scripture if we have not deliberately, diligently, consistently taught the truths God has revealed? An occasional reading from a Bible storybook, a quick prayer before dinner or at bedtime, and regular trips to church do not supply all the Christian education children need.

I have met well-intentioned parents and teachers who neglect rigorous teaching for children on purpose. They fear that in-depth Bible

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teaching, memorization, and doctrinal instruction will turn into “head knowledge” for children, something to avoid because of how it might work against what we really want for them.

“We’re not interested in giving kids mere head knowledge,” I hear. “We’re looking for application. Christianity needs to be from the heart.” *Of course* learning information is not enough. An intellectual awareness of all the right things does not equal biblical Christianity. *Of course* the ultimate goal is applying Scripture, loving Christ, and obeying God from the heart. But too many times when parents have told me they don’t want “*just* head knowledge,” they’ve made it clear that they really don’t want head knowledge at all; they want something else instead. They want character lessons and moral maxims their children can apply immediately. They want experiences for their children that will result in positive feelings about Jesus now. Many adults seem to believe that, if we teach Bible diligently and purposefully, at best, we will bore children. At worst, they think, such teaching will make children proud of what they know, resulting in hardened, self-righteous hearts.

But consider how basic a correct, intellectual knowledge is to all those admirable goals listed earlier.

“Whatever else they don’t have, the most important thing is that my children have their own relationship with God.” True, but what God do we mean? There are almost as many ideas of who God is as there are persons to have those ideas, and what most Westerners have come to mean by “God” does not resemble at all the God who has revealed himself in Scripture. How will your child know the difference between people’s *ideas* of God—including his or her own ideas—and the true God, who has revealed himself in his Word? Many religions, pseudo-religions, and cults offer a way to what they call “God.” All those paths cannot be right. How will your child know whom to listen to and whom to ignore when people promise her “God”? God is so *other* than we are that we can never arrive at knowing what he’s like on our own. With amazing concision, God packed all we need to know about him into one book—but it is *one whole book*, after all.

It required centuries for God to reveal, in the written Scriptures, all he wanted known about himself. There we find what he is like, what hinders us from having a relationship with him, how he has addressed that hindrance, and how we can continue in a relationship with him once we've entered it. To the degree that our children do not know the fullness of God's Word, to that degree they will not know God as fully as he wills to be known.

"The goal of my teaching is for my children to consistently apply the Word of God to their lives." True, God gave his Word so we would apply it, but there can be no shortcut to application that ignores the arduous task of learning what that Word contains. Before we can apply truth, we must know, comprehend, and accept it. We can only apply a biblical truth correctly when we understand it as God meant it. While we can begin to apply a tiny piece of truth as quickly as we learn it, our application will be much more accurate when we rightly understand its context—and, ultimately, the context of any biblical truth is the entire Bible. We will not wait until we know everything in the Bible before we begin to apply anything at all; still, the Bible is a book. It's not a box of fortune cookies. As with any book, we only know the whole when we rightly understand the parts. While our goal is application, there is a place for teaching our children Bible facts, stories, and content which they may not necessarily run out and apply this very afternoon. We can wait on application. We can teach content while our children are young, applying what we can now, but waiting for greater application later. If our children grow up with only a cursory idea of the high points of what the Bible contains, how can we expect them to accurately apply God's Word to their lives?

"What I hope to pass on to my children is a heart for the kingdom of God. I want them to have a passion for Christian mission and service." When Jesus came announcing that the kingdom of God was at hand, he relied on the entire Old Testament as the background for his words. He expected that people knew what he meant because he expected

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they knew the Scriptures. Can your children care about the kingdom of God as Jesus meant it without a thorough understanding of what it is? From the Bible's perspective, what would it mean to "seek first" the kingdom of God? How will we—and our children—know this without a profound acquaintance with the Word of God, which is the source of this expression? And how will our children know they are serving God as he wants them to serve? Where will they find the motive and the power to persevere in a life of Christian mission and service when results are few and far between? We address these questions when we give our children roots that go down deep into Christian doctrine and biblical knowledge.

"I want my children to embrace the gospel for themselves and to share it with others." It took God the entire Old Testament to explain why we need the gospel and what to expect from it. It took him the whole New Testament to explain what it is, what it cost him, what it does for those who believe it, how we appropriate it, and how we don't. Can our children understand, appreciate, and love the gospel as they should, let alone have the words to articulate it to others, if they have not come to know and understand what God has taken care to communicate about it in his Word?

"It's very simple; I want my children to love Jesus. I want them to live for him, to seek and serve him." Which Jesus? Almost everyone agrees that Jesus was a real human being who lived and died in history. But was he a good teacher and a virtuous man, or was he God in the flesh? Was he the unfortunate victim of violence or the deliberate Savior of the world? Is he really the only way to God and why? Who is he and what has he done that makes him able to save? People have argued for centuries about who Jesus is and what he did. What if our children end up loving an idea of Jesus that isn't really Jesus at all, as so many people do, and they never know the difference? How can they avoid this if they are not thoroughly acquainted with the Word in written form, which alone reveals the Word made flesh?

The attaining of any of the goals in our list requires a firm, solid foundation of knowledge and doctrine. Our children cannot apply Scripture without knowing what it says. They cannot love Christ without knowing who he is. They can't obey God without knowing what he has commanded. And they will not know these things if we do not provide deliberate, thorough, rigorous instruction, just as we would do for subjects like math or grammar.

We need to cling to every one of the worthwhile goals in our list. But we also need to back up a step and acknowledge the priority of—yes, I'm going to say it—*filling children's heads with knowledge* of Christian truth. God could have ordained for us the ability to simply intuit truth about him—but he didn't (although most Americans act as though he did). He ordained a book, studied like any book, as the primary means of acquiring knowledge of God. Yes, we may rely on the Holy Spirit to bring to our children's minds what they need to know when they need to know it, but God has ordained Word and Spirit to operate together. In his usual way of working, the Spirit will not bring to our children's minds what has never been put into them.

We worry that if our children don't act on each piece of biblical information we give them, they are not making proper use of God's truth. We need to realize that, with children, a large part of our teaching must have, as its goal, the simple provision of information to believe. If our children possess an adequate, Christ-centered, biblical belief system, we can guide them in applying it now, and they can find ways to apply it again and again later, all through life. In one sense, right believing is its own application. Immediate "practical applications" can never substitute for a comprehensive grid of Christian thought against which to measure every life event. A piano teacher requires his students to master scales. This is a prerequisite for all the complex works the student will go on to play later. The scales, well-learned, provide the automatic reflex on which a life of music can be built. Christian doctrine, well-learned, gives children the skills they will need to examine each new idea, every sudden temptation, and each difficult decision as it comes along. Like drilling and practicing piano skills, learning such a system of truth will

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require time and concentrated effort. But it is worth doing! It does not need to be justified by a demonstration of how it can be applied right this minute.⁴

Why Know

- The knowledge of God is the most profound knowledge the human race has; it requires diligent study.
- God has revealed himself in a book. Knowing him well begins with knowing that book well.
- Applying biblical truth begins with knowing that truth.
- Seeking God's kingdom requires a scriptural understanding of what that kingdom is.
- Realizing how to serve God faithfully and staying motivated to do so depend on knowing God's will and promises.
- True understanding of, appreciation for, and belief in the gospel come from knowing what God has revealed about it in his Word.
- We know Jesus, the Word of God incarnate, through Scripture, the Word of God written.
- Every spiritual goal we have for our children requires a foundation of Christian knowledge.
- God has ordained Word and Spirit to work together.
- A thorough belief system based on knowledge of Scripture can be applied over and over, throughout life.

DO WE REALLY NEED TO MAKE SUCH STUDENTS OF OUR KIDS?

In an excellent article in *Modern Reformation*, Rev. Dr. Brian Lee addresses the argument that a more rigorous, more academic Christianity is only for those who like that sort of thing—seminary students and theology geeks and, in the words of his article's title, "eggheads."⁵ If intellectual study is what those types like, says the argument, let them have

4. The scales illustration comes from John H. Walton and Kim E. Walton, *The Bible Story Handbook: A Resource for Teaching 175 Stories from the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 18.

5. Brian Lee, "Is Reformation Christianity Just for Eggheads?" *Modern Reformation* 21, no. 5 (September/October 2012): 16–20.

it, but they have no right to require the rest of us ordinary Christians to memorize catechisms or study doctrine—or study anything for that matter. Dr. Lee refers to the often heard half-truth that biblical Christianity is a matter of the heart, not the head. After all, says this argument, don't we find in Acts 4:13 that learned religious leaders marveled at Peter and John's bold defense, knowing they were "uneducated, common men" who had simply "been with Jesus"? The mistake that both the religious leaders and this argument make comes in assuming that *being with Jesus* refers to some kind of warm, so-happy-together emotion. We must remember that Jesus chose his apostles to be with him for the purpose of *learning* from him (see Mark 3:14; 4:33–34). Jesus' primary priority was teaching. Being with Jesus meant exposure, 24/7, to one who spoke of God and heaven from experience (John 3:11–13). Somehow, we've missed the point that the religious leaders, in thinking the apostles were uneducated, were *incorrect*. They knew the apostles were fishermen, tax collectors, commoners, and the like. They knew they had not received formal, religious training in the rabbinical schools. But these "common" men had spent three years, night and day, with Jesus Christ himself. Once Jesus had risen, he waited to return to heaven, "appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). "And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (Luke 24:27). He told them, " 'Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures" (vv. 44–45). Apostles ("sent ones") were first of all disciples, and the word *disciple* means *learner*. As he prepared to leave them, Jesus told his followers not just to baptize, not just to make converts, but to make disciples, to teach people of all nations to observe all he had commanded. People marveled at the arguments and the teaching of the apostles because no one knew where they had received such intense training in the Scriptures, but receive it they had.

Dr. Lee reminds us in his article that revelation through a book that would require study was God's idea. When God first wrote the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone, how many people in that great

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crowd of Hebrew ex-slaves could read? Yet God chose to reveal himself through words Moses wrote at his command. On through the following centuries, God commanded his prophets and inspired his apostles to write. Consequently, when God requires his people to know, love, and obey his Word and to teach it to their children, he's requiring them to read, to reread, to study, and to memorize.

This, I contend, is what we're missing as we seek to train and disciple children. We take them to church, we pray with them at meals or at bedtime, we seek to mold their characters and build certain habits, we listen to and read experts who provide tips on training and discipline. But we don't methodically teach our children Bible content and Christian doctrine. We fail to familiarize them with the book God has given and with the truths he has revealed.

Why Know

- Jesus chose disciples and taught them well, then commissioned them to go on to teach others.
- God chose to reveal himself through a book, which he requires us to know through hearing it preached, reading it, studying it, and memorizing it.

THE CURRENT SAD STATE OF AFFAIRS

Christian Smith, professor of sociology at the University of Notre Dame, was the principal investigator for the National Study of Youth and Religion, a research project conducted from 2001 to 2005, with the religious experiences of American youth as its subject. Smith's findings, in a technical and controlled way, demonstrate what I have seen on an informal, daily basis in my years of teaching junior high and high school students. Most of the teens I teach freely call themselves Christians. Some have given testimonies at their baptisms. They accept what their parents have taught them and what they have been taught by the churches that they attend regularly. In the American teens Smith interviewed for his study, he found the same overall positive attitude toward the religion of their families that I usually see in my students. In his book, however, he

laments what I also observe regularly: he labels most teens “incredibly inarticulate” about their religious beliefs. It isn’t simply that they find it difficult to explain what they believe. As you question students further, Smith says, it is the beliefs themselves that are vague at best and often actually in disagreement with the faith traditions teens claim to hold.⁶

Smith cites many examples. A conservative Protestant boy’s summary of his religion was, “I’m sure God exists and, like, helps people and answers their prayers, that’s pretty much it.” A conservative Protestant girl asserted that God had done a lot of good in her life. When pressed for examples, she said, “I don’t know,” then, “I, well, I have a house, parents, I have the Internet, I have a phone, I have cable.” Concerning basic Protestant ideas regarding how to be right with God, evangelical teens held quite *unevangelical* ideas. A fifteen-year-old conservative Protestant boy put it this way: “If you do the right thing and don’t do anything bad, I mean nothing really bad, you know you’ll go to heaven. If you don’t then you’re screwed [laughs], that’s about it.” A sixteen-year-old Protestant girl gave this explanation: “Being a Christian means, um, don’t do many sins, read the Bible, go to church, living godly, that’s about it. It’s basically not committing sin, basically.”⁷

I find the same thing in my much smaller group of teens that Smith claims for American teens at large: they claim to believe, and they claim their beliefs to be vitally important to them, but they have little familiarity with the truths they claim to believe. This raises the question: can our children really believe what they do not even know? Theologian and seminary professor David F. Wells writes that in many contemporary Christian churches, “Religious words have . . . , more or less, disappeared . . . words like: ‘justification,’ ‘atonement,’ ‘judgment,’ ‘holiness,’ ‘incarnation,’ ‘sanctification,’ and ‘glorification.’ If the words have gone, so too have the doctrines of which the words were a part and by which the doctrines were taught.”⁸ Centuries ago, John Calvin wrote, “Of what avail was it to

6. Christian Smith, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 131–34.

7. *Ibid.*, 135–36.

8. David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant: Truth-Lovers, Marketers, and Emergents in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 53.

profess respect for the gospel and not to know what it meant? . . . With Christians, where there is no knowledge, there is no faith.”⁹

As Christian Smith sees it, the “Christian” youth he interviewed had a positive enough impression of Christianity, but they lacked an effective education in its truths. He writes, “The majority of U.S. teens would badly fail a hypothetical short-answer or essay test on the beliefs of their religion.”¹⁰

Smith found that few American youth see religion as having truths they must believe and demands they must obey. Rather, young people understand religion—and therefore, God—as something that exists to help them when they have special needs, remaining politely out of the way in ordinary life. With teen after teen, of many denominational backgrounds, Smith found the same idea of religion. His findings were so consistent that Smith gave a name to this religion held by so many. He named it Moralistic Therapeutic Deism (MTD).¹¹ American teens’ religion is *moralistic* because one of its central tenets is this: a person’s well-being depends on being nice, respecting others, demonstrating responsibility, and working hard at improving oneself. This religion is *therapeutic* because of teens’ misguided belief that Christianity is all about them. It exists to give them what they need to make them feel good. It’s there to help them when they’re frightened or when they feel inadequate. Its purpose is to supply whatever is lacking to make them happy and peaceful. Finally, Smith calls teens’ religion *deism* because, while teens believe in a moral creator God, they don’t see him as involved in daily life or as making demands; their God only acts when people call on him to help because a serious problem has arisen. Smith claims, “The language, and therefore experience, of Trinity, holiness, sin, grace, justification, sanctification, church, Eucharist, and heaven and hell appear, among most Christian teenagers in the United States at the very least, to be supplanted by the language of happiness, niceness, and an earned heavenly reward.”¹²

9. John Calvin commenting on Gal. 1:8 in his *Commentary on Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom41.i.html>.

10. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 137.

11. *Ibid.*, 162–65.

12. *Ibid.*, 171.

Why Know

- America's "Christian" kids claim to believe Christianity, but many of them cannot articulate what it teaches.
- Our kids can't really believe truth they do not know.

HOW HAS THIS HAPPENED AND WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT IT?

How could this have happened? Smith suggests that one of the most important paths down which American youth culture has traveled is that of therapeutic individualism, in which the self is all-important and external authority is of little consequence. Teens have been trained to esteem self, to realize self, to improve self, to trust self, and to help self. Christianity calls for exalting Christ, humbling and denying self, trusting God, and relying on the Holy Spirit. American children, even "Christian" American children, fail to think of God as one to whose demands they must submit. Rather, as they understand it, God's whole *raison d'être* is to grant them happiness and fulfillment. This message comes from all directions and must be countered with large doses of biblical truth.

David Wells has written extensively, tracing the history of how the Western church has chipped away at the truth that should serve as its very foundation. He challenges contemporary American Protestantism to return to the doctrinal seriousness it has given away in its attempt to appeal to the people of our postmodern world. Certainly we see that loss of doctrinal seriousness in what so many American churches offer to attract children and youth. Fun and entertainment take priority so kids will come, leaving only enough time for a tacked-on Bible story or a quick "Here's-how-God-can-make-you-feel-better" devotion at the end. "When our knowledge of God's truth is diminished, our understanding of God is diminished," Wells cautions.¹³ "Christianity is not just an experience, we need to remember, but it is about truth."¹⁴ Wells lists the Christian doctrines of creation, God, the nature of man, sin

13. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 18.

14. *Ibid.*, 45.

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and the fall, redemption, Christ and his incarnation, the atonement, reconciliation, and grace, given by God in the Bible. He points out that, without knowing these things, there is no real understanding of God and his salvation. Wells laments that Western Christianity does not consider Bible knowledge a priority. This would explain the comment of one of my students, a delightful teen boy from a family committed to involvement in an evangelical church with a strong emphasis on missions. When asked in history class who Abraham was and what he had to do with ancient Israel, he said, with no trace of embarrassment, “I don’t know much about the Bible; I never read it.”

And yet the Bible is the book God gave us. He wants both us and our children to know it. It is truth. We want our children to believe, to apply, and to love that truth, but they must, first of all, know it. If, as I find, even American teens from evangelical and Reformed backgrounds are as incoherent and confused in the realm of spiritual truth as Christian Smith says they are, what can we do to arrest this disturbing phenomenon? Christian Smith’s answer is to exhort parents and churches to stop being bashful about *teaching* their young people. He notes that teens can be quite clear on expressing truth related to drugs, drinking, STDs, and safe sex, subjects “about which they had been *drilled*” (his word, my emphasis). When it comes to faith and religion, Smith observes, adults hang back from teaching. Parents provide a little, but not too much, exposure to their beliefs, while churches often substitute entertainment in place of education for their young. But children and teens *need* Christian education, to remove the ignorance and misunderstanding they have when left to themselves, and to lay a foundation of truth and doctrine on which to build for the future.¹⁵

Why Know

- At its very heart, Christianity is a set of propositional truths to be known and believed.
- Without diligent instruction, children and teens will have only ignorance and misunderstanding in the things of God.

15. Smith, *Soul Searching*, 267.

JUST DO IT!

When parents and teachers become convinced that, yes, their children need to learn Bible—the Bible’s big picture, its individual narratives, its characters, its genres, its commands and promises, its doctrines, its gospel in all its fullness—or when they become convinced that they must instruct their children in the rich doctrinal truths of the Christian faith, two worries may surface. One worry is that this kind of teaching will take big chunks of time. I agree. It will. There is no way around this. It takes time to chauffeur our children to soccer practice, wait with them through the practice, and drive them to all the matches. It takes time to take our children to their piano lessons every week, and, if the children don’t spend time practicing daily, we’ve wasted the money we spent on the lessons. It takes time to make sure our children acquire competency in math, as we supply regular instruction for them, drill them on math facts, and make them finish assignments before they go play. Can we learn anything without spending time at it? The answer to this concern is not easy in our modern, overstimulated culture, but it is simple. *Make the time* to give your children (or students) rigorous, diligent instruction in the Bible and in Christian doctrine. You don’t have to teach it all overnight; you can take years to teach, then go back through and reteach. But find or create a plan, and then work your plan. Purposefully teach the whole Bible, in its broad overview and in its details, to your children. Choose a method for making sure they are learning the doctrines of the Christian faith well enough that they will be able to articulate them back to someone. Then find thirty to sixty minutes several times a week to work through these plans with your children. Forget about one-minute Bibles or five-minute Bibles or any other promises to teach the Bible in leftover minutes we won’t even notice, and *make the time* to teach your children Bible and doctrine.

The other worry that can surface when parents and teachers realize they need to exercise greater diligence in teaching their children is the concern that they themselves don’t know the Bible and Christian doctrine all that well; how, then, can they teach it to their children? Some how-tos and a list of resources, both for your own learning and for

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teaching your children, will come later in this book. For now, though, I'll say this. The answer to this worry is similar to the one for the concern about time constraints. Just begin. Begin somewhere. Begin to educate yourself and, at the same time, begin teaching your children. Find one of the many Bible reading plans available and/or a good commentary or two, or a comprehensive study Bible you can trust, and begin to get to know God's Word. Get acquainted with some of the classic creeds, confessions, and catechisms of the Protestant church, or read some of the many authors who can help you to not only understand, but also to love, theology and doctrine. One bonus of making a commitment to teaching your children is this: the best way to learn anything well is to teach it to others. Even just memorizing a catechism along with your children will open to you whole new worlds in understanding the riches of the Christian faith.

Head knowledge—Bible characters, events, places, and stories; propositional truths; specific doctrines spelled out in confessions and catechisms—this is what I'm begging Christian parents and teachers to learn to value once again as they teach their children. Biblical, doctrinal, Christian knowledge is the foundation of all we long for our children to have. If their religion consists of experience or emotions or good behavior, their religion will crumble in the end.

In the introduction to their book *Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus*, Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson write, "It's the premise of this book that the primary reason that the majority of kids from Christian homes stray from the faith is that they never really heard it or had it to begin with. They were taught that God wants them to be good, that poor Jesus is sad when they disobey, and that asking Jesus into their heart is the breadth and depth of the gospel message. Scratch the surface of the faith of the young people around you and you'll find a disturbing deficiency of understanding of even the most basic tenets of Christianity."¹⁶ The authors go on to explain how parents can demonstrate the gospel all day, every day, in how they teach, discipline,

16. Elyse Fitzpatrick and Jessica Thompson, *Give Them Grace: Dazzling Your Kids with the Love of Jesus* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 18.

and correct their children. These authors would never be content with Bible facts and doctrinal content alone for children, and neither am I. I only plead that parents and teachers take care to instill those facts and that content as an adequate foundation on which to build all the rest.

Don't be afraid of head knowledge. Supply it for your children in great quantity, beginning when they are young and able to absorb so much so easily. By all means, seek loving hearts for your children. Train them in godly character. Nurture them in spiritual maturity. Show them how to apply the Bible's teaching to life. But don't neglect to jump with them, head first, into the biblical and doctrinal *knowledge* they need.

Why Know

- Christianity based on experience or emotion or good behavior will crumble in the face of life's trials.
- Teaching Bible and doctrine to children will require a significant time commitment, but it will be time well spent, for both teacher and student.

How do you prepare children for life's ups and downs? How do you push back the harmful messages of our culture? How do you give your kids something better?



Whether you are a parent or a teacher, Starr Meade encourages you to impart a robust knowledge of God to your children from a young age, because a sound theology will prepare them for whatever life has in store. Our kids need to know God in order to grow in love for him and to live for him. When we teach the truths of Scripture to our children, we give them truth to love and live by.

Like math, grammar, piano, or soccer, God's Word takes time to learn and understand. Where do parents and teachers begin? Starr Meade will guide you and your children into the core doctrines of the Christian faith. On your journey together, you will find that teaching kids about God deepens your own understanding. It's never too late to learn, and there's nothing better to give than truth.

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"What do our children need most? Starr Meade gives it to us straight—they need truth! Children are theologians, and it is our responsibility to disciple them. Give Them Truth teaches us that this isn't a mere intellectual pursuit. The truth is personal. Meade shows how it enters into our children's lives in all their hurt and pain, all their disappointments, and all their rejoicing."

—**Aimee Byrd**, Author of *Housewife Theologian* and *Theological Fitness*; Cohost of the *Mortification of Spin* podcast

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