

Laying the Foundation for Understanding

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Wouldn't it be wonderful if all parents could use the same means to instruct their children that angels use with children in heaven? Chief among these means of teaching children in heaven is a living theater of representative images (*Heaven and Hell* 335). The representative images used in angelic instruction are perfectly suited to the capacity of the children who watch them. They are beautiful and full of wisdom from within, beyond belief.

The specific examples we are given of this living theater deal with the Easter story. One set of representative images dealt with the Lord's rising from the sepulchre and at the same time of the uniting of His Human with His Divine (*Heaven and Hell* 335). The angels began their presentation of this subject to the children by presenting the image of a sepulchre along with one of the Lord. However, to prevent a mixing in the children's minds of the idea of death with that of the Lord, the image of the Lord was very remote, as if at a great distance. The image of the sepulcher was then infilled in a special way, to give an idea of eternal life from the spiritual meaning of the Lord's glorification.

A second set of representative images presented the salvation of those in the world of spirits who were infested or "bound" by evil spirits prior to the Lord's glorification. The angels showed by representatives the Lord's descent to the "bound" and then His ascent with them into heaven. In adaptation to the thoughts of the young children who were watching, tiny cords were let down by which they lightened the Lord's ascent. Great care was exercised by the angels to insure that everything in these representative images produced the desired ideas and affections among the children. One can envision the little children staring with wide-eyed wonder while these marvelous, yet simple, scenes of representatives instructed them in heavenly wisdom.

In contrast, parents in this world who seek to instruct their children concerning the Lord and His Word can often become discouraged when they see their children watch hours of television in rapt attention and then find it difficult to get these same children to listen to even a few verses from the Word. Experiences such as this one could certainly raise doubts in the minds of parents concerning the statements in the *Heavenly Doctrines* that the stories of the Word, particularly those of the Old Testament, are adapted to the states of young children. One might ask what is meant by this statement:

When [the things in the stories of the Word] are known and thought of by a young child, the angels who are with him think of the Divine things which they represent and signify; and because the angels are affected therewith, their affection is communicated, and causes the delight and pleasure which the child experiences therein; and prepares his [or her] mind to receive genuine truths and goods" (*Arcana Coelestia* 3665e, cf. 3690:2).

Clearly instruction in the stories in the Word has an important use. Also, there are some grounds for the idea that this instruction could be delightful to the child receiving it. But why, then, do we sometimes find it difficult to get the children even to listen to these stories?

Since the *Heavenly Doctrines* assure us that the stories of the Word are accommodated to the states of children and young people, one response to their apparent lack of interest would be to continue, nevertheless, to read the stories to them with the assumption that it must be doing them some good. While doggedly pursuing this course of action, one might entertain daydreams of how wonderful it would be to use the living theater of representatives employed by the angels. This daydream might be accompanied with the thought that “if only we had something like the angelic means of instruction, then we wouldn’t have any trouble teaching our children.”

The fact is that such daydreams need not continue entirely unfulfilled. Given the proper foundation, the imagination of any child is capable of providing scenes much like those presented to children in heaven. In order for a child to benefit most fully from the ability of his or her imagination, parents can do much to help to form and clarify these mental images. Pictures that illustrate the stories in the Word are very helpful in this process. They provide a concrete source of images for the child to use as a basis for imaginative elaborations. Such pictures can range from a few simple lines—drawn quickly by a parent to illustrate a detail in a story—to complex and beautifully colored scenes depicting many aspects of a story. Parents can make use of pictures from religion lessons or from Biblical coloring books, illustrated Bibles, or even some books on ancient history. All of these pictures help a child to visualize what is meant by the words, expressions, and events in the Word that are outside his or her realm of experience.

A second way of bringing life to the stories in the Word is to re-explain them by linking any new word or expression with something in the child’s own experience. A little child who has never before heard of Noah’s ark would certainly be able to form some picture of it if told that the ark was a big wooden boat made by Noah. There are many other examples of words found in Old Testament stories that children may never have heard of before, but which they could understand easily after a brief explanation. There are several children’s books of Bible stories that can help parents adapt stories to the comprehension of the young. The measure of a good adaptation or accommodated version of a story from the Word is that it should not expand on the events as they were recorded under the Lord’s guidance, but rather should explain the story so that children can visualize it in their imaginations. Also, a good explanation for one child may not produce any understanding for another child. Individual accommodation involving illustrations and a discussion between parent and child is the most likely method to succeed in producing a clear understanding and imaginative picture of each story.

Accommodating stories to a child’s mind certainly takes some effort. But without this effort there is little possibility of the child experiencing a delight in these stories. Considering the value of having a child be able to really understand and visualize what is meant in the stories of the Word, the effort should have high priority in every child’s instruction.