

— ETHICS AND PASTORALIA —

**Theology for Kids:
Recommending Some Recent Books for Younger Children**

The evangelical market is glutted with books for children, but many of them are about as biblically faithful and theologically reliable as VeggieTales. In fact, one of the first children's books to be published in 2009 is *The VeggieTales Bible*. At this rate *The Winnie the Pooh – Thomas Kinkade Study Bible* or *Star Wars Bible* may be next!

Many people have an opportunity to teach children about God, including parents, grandparents, older siblings, babysitters, and Sunday school teachers. Teaching theology to children is a joyful yet sober responsibility that many seem to take lightly. It is not as easy as one may suspect. It is challenging to communicate truth about God and his creation to children in an accurate and easily understandable way.

1. Communicating accurately requires a grasp of the Bible's storyline and how all the little stories contribute to the one big story. It requires a sound biblical hermeneutic that does not promote the trivial, extrapolate illegitimately, read between the lines, miss important nuances, or focus on people rather than God. (John H. Walton explains these five hermeneutical errors in "Hermeneutics and Children's Curriculum," *koinōnia* [August 6, 2008], available at <http://zondervan.typepad.com/koinonia/2008/08/hermeneutics-an.html>.)

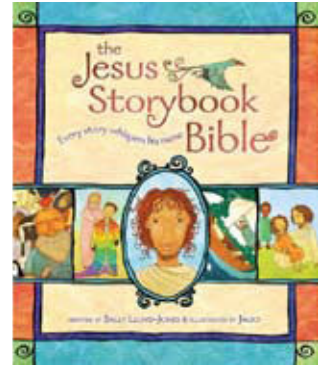
2. Communicating in an easily understandable way requires clarity, conciseness, imagination, creativity, excitement, and appropriateness (e.g., in word choices, length of teaching, level of detail, and means of conveying spiritual truth).

This is hard work. Thankfully, some fine theology books for children are available. (And they are edifying for adults, too!) Without pretending to be experts on theological children's literature, we have sorted through recent theology books for younger children and compiled a short list of outstanding books. Other books are undoubtedly worthy of mention, but these are our favorites. What follows organizes them in three categories and ranks the books in order, beginning with our top recommendations.

Bible Story Books

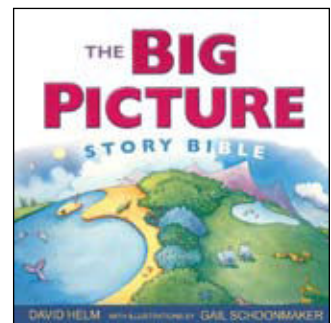
Sally Lloyd-Jones. *The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name*. Illustrated by Jago. Grand Rapids: ZonderKidz, 2007. 352 pp. \$16.99.

This is the most well written children’s book we have read. It brilliantly summarizes the Bible storyline from creation to the consummation, and it emphasizes Jesus and the gospel as the key to understanding the Bible’s storyline. The subtitle captures exactly what the book does: at the end of each story, Lloyd-Jones points ahead to the story’s fulfillment in Christ (though the pointing-ahead theme seems slightly stretched for some of the stories). Lloyd-Jones acknowledges that she has “liberally borrowed” from her pastor, Tim Keller, “whose teaching informs every story” (p. 7). She skillfully crafts words that are captivating, making it hard to stop reading. Some readers may become so entrenched in the story that they will find themselves wishing that it is true (perhaps forgetting that this well written story is not a fairy tale) and then rejoicing that it is! The illustrations are simple, creative, and almost fanciful.



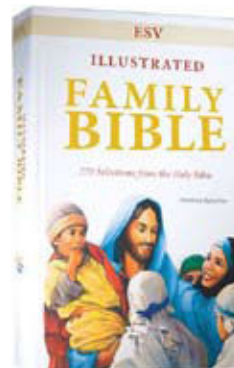
David Helm. *The Big Picture Story Bible*. Illustrated by Gail Schoonmaker. Wheaton: Crossway, 2004. 456 pp. \$22.99.

Helm follows Graeme Goldsworthy’s biblical theological approach: “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule.” The Bible’s storyline from creation to the consummation emphasizes “God’s forever King” and his work to establish his kingdom (though some of the stories seem to stretch to include this theme). The storytelling is creative and uses simple language to explain theological concepts. For example, “This stone temple wasn’t God’s place anymore. Jesus was God’s special place. His body was God’s holy temple. His blood would pay for sins” (p. 304). The illustrations are excellent and clear, keeping the story flowing and piquing interest. (Jenni used this book when she taught four-year-olds at a Christian school, and the children loved the stories and frequently asked to at least see the pictures for the story they would hear the next day!) The overview of the Bible’s storyline is excellent, though it surprisingly excludes many stories. For example, the story skips almost instantly from the great commission to Pentecost to John writing Revelation, completely omitting the life of Paul. *The Big Picture Story Bible* is simpler and less thorough than *The Jesus Storybook Bible*.



ESV Illustrated Family Bible: 270 Selections from the Holy Bible. Illustrated by Abigniew Freus. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008. 424 pp. \$24.99.

The publisher selects 270 stories from Gen 1 to Rev 22. It uses the actual text of Scripture (English Standard Version) to recount the Bible’s storyline. It does not include every chapter, but includes almost every story. Compared to other children’s books, its language is not as smooth and elementary for young children, nor does it make whole-Bible Christological connections since it includes no commentary.



Other Story Books

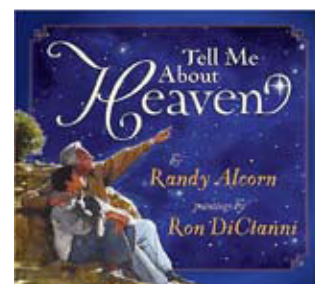
Starr Meade. **Keeping Holiday.** Illustrated by Justin Gerard. Wheaton: Crossway, 2008. 192 pp. \$14.99.

This fanciful allegory is like a combination of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* and C. S. Lewis’s *The Chronicles of Narnia*. The storyline is simple: two cousins go on a trip to find the “real” town of Holiday and its founder. Its main refrain is God-centered: “You don’t find the Founder; he finds you. He’s not just the Founder; he’s the Finder, too.” The enchanting story makes one love and long to meet this Founder. Each chapter illustrates a spiritual truth (e.g., one’s spiritual inability to save oneself, God’s provision, temptation). A few of the characters are rather over-imaginative and unrealistic (e.g., talking mistletoe, poinsettia flowers, and bells).



Randy Alcorn. **Tell Me About Heaven.** Illustrated by Ron DiCianni. Wheaton: Crossway, 2007. 64 pp. \$19.99.

After a boy’s grandmother dies, he visits his grandfather and learns about heaven. Alcorn, author of a 560-page book entitled *Heaven* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 2004), uses this strikingly illustrated story to discuss death and heaven honestly, simply, and calmly. The grandfather consistently points his grandson to Scripture and then explains it. Alcorn makes heaven sound wonderful, but he rightly emphasizes what makes heaven wonderful: God! God is glorious, and heaven is wonderful because it is the place where we will be with him. The last page in the book is a “Certificate of Commitment” that is cheesy at best and may be profoundly misleading (especially at the end of a book on heaven): “This document serves as record that _____ (name) has entrusted his/her life to Christ on _____ (date)” (followed by a quotation of 1 John 5:13).



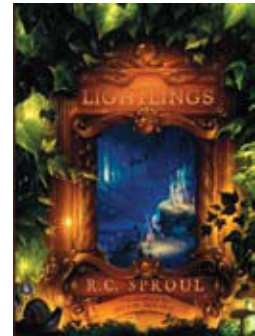
R. C. Sproul. *The Prince's Poison Cup*. Illustrated by Justin Gerard. Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2008. 35 pp. \$18.00.

This fantasy story illustrates redemption and atonement in a way that children can readily grasp: a prince drinks a cup of poison to save the people of the city. The parallel is that Jesus took on the curse of sin to save his people from their sins. The illustrations are beautiful, and the book ends with four pages of suggested questions for parents to pose to children.



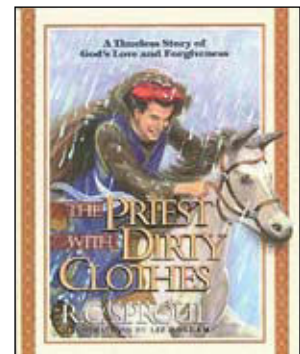
R. C. Sproul. *The Lightlings*. Illustrated by Justin Gerard. Orlando: Reformation Trust, 2006. 40 pp. \$18.00.

This beautifully illustrated fantasy story is about the “King of Light” who made a people of light. These people rejected him and became afraid of the light, but one day a baby is born who returns the light to the people. This illustrates our sin and need for redemption and helps children (and adults!) understand the gospel. It ends with three pages of suggested questions for parents to pose to children.



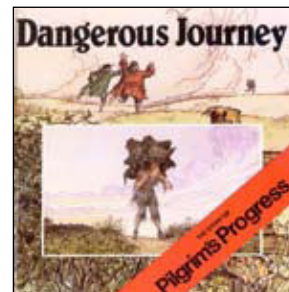
R. C. Sproul. *The Priest with Dirty Clothes: A Timeless Story of God's Love and Forgiveness*. Illustrated by Liz Bonham. Nashville: Nelson, 1997. Reprint, Orlando: [Reformation Trust](#), 2008. 48 pp. \$15.00.

Sproul frequently identifies this book as one of the most important books he has written because his audience is both children and parents reading to their children. This story illustrates imputation in an easy-to-understand way by using the metaphor of exchanging clothes. Very young children (e.g., ages 4–5) may take the story's application too literally and think that their physical heart is literally dirty and needs clean clothes, so parents will want to be careful to communicate this concept as clearly as possible. Bruce Hoffmire, the pastor of children's ministries at our church, calls this his all-time favorite children's book.



John Bunyan. *Dangerous Journey: The Story of Pilgrim's Progress*. Edited by Oliver Hunkin. Illustrated by Alan Parry. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985. 126 pp. \$24.00.

This is an abridged account of John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a Christian classic that deserves to be part of every child's theological upbringing. This abridgment vividly captures how Christians persevere in their joyful and dangerous lives, and it richly repays repeated readings. (Charles Haddon Spurgeon read *The Pilgrim's Progress* over one hundred times.) The illustrations seem unrefined and sometimes frightening, but no one will confuse who the bad guys are! The language is not always as archaic as the original *The Pilgrim's Progress* (which is similar to the KJV), but it is still noticeably older (e.g., its sentence structure, word order, word choice). Our pastor, Dr. Mike Bullmore, enthusiastically recommends *Dangerous Journey* and adds that all three of his children look back to it as their favorite children's book.



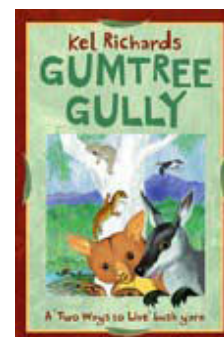
Paul L. Maier. *Martin Luther: A Man Who Changed the World*. Illustrated by Greg Copeland. Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004. 32 pp. \$9.99.

Maier superbly describes Martin Luther's life and clearly and simply explains the controversy between Luther and the Catholic Church that led to the Reformation. This magnificently illustrated biography by a trustworthy historian covers a vast amount of history, and some young children may become lost in the details and need explanations for words like "indulgences" and "theses."



Kel Richards. *Gumtree Gully*. Illustrated by Graham Wade. Kingsford NSW, Australia: Matthias Media, 2005. 63 pp. \$4.99.

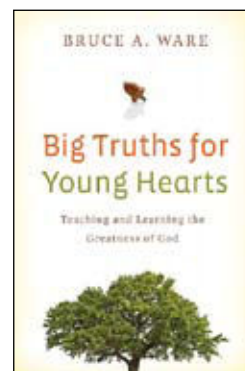
Based on Matthias Media's gospel outline *Two Ways to Live*, this allegorical story illustrates the fall and redemption by using Australian animals that live in a nature preserve. Children will enjoy this fun story about unusual animals. It ends with a section entitled "Things for adults to talk about with kids" (pp. 59–62), which highlights talking points for each chapter: God's creation, our rebellion, God's judgment, God's love, God's power, and our challenge.



Systematic Theology Books

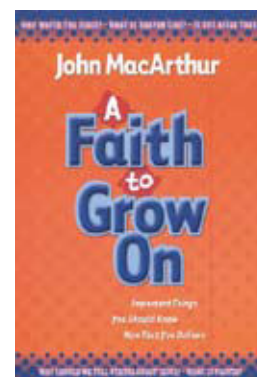
Bruce A. Ware. *Big Truths for Young Hearts: Teaching and Learning the Greatness of God*. Wheaton: Crossway, forthcoming. 224 pp. \$15.99.

This is an excellent resource for teaching Bible doctrine to children in an organized way. Ware, a first-class theologian, serves as professor of Christian theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and was elected in November 2008 as president of the Evangelical Theological Society. He writes in a clear, engaging, gentle manner. *Big Truths for Young Hearts* is not expected to be published until April 30, 2009, and we were able to read only the text, not the final layout with pictures. The draft we read contains ten sections with six chapters each, and the sixty chapters average less than four pages per chapter. The ten sections are as follows: (1) God's Word and God's Own Life as God; (2) God as Three in One; (3) Creator and Ruler of All; (4) Our Human Nature and Our Sin; (5) Who Jesus Is; (6) The Work That Jesus Has Done; (7) The Holy Spirit; (8) Our Great Salvation; (9) The Church of Jesus Christ; and (10) What Will Take Place in the End. It uses the English Standard Version.



John MacArthur. *A Faith to Grow On: Important Things You Should Know Now That You Believe*. Nashville: Tommy Nelson, 2000. 192 pp. \$15.99. Currently out of print.

MacArthur has served as pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church since 1969 and president of The Master's Seminary since its founding in 1986. *A Faith to Grow On* is clearly organized into twelve thematic chapters: (1) God, (2) Creation, (3) Sin, (4) Bible, (5) Jesus, (6) Salvation, (7) Worship, (8) Prayer, (9) Church, (10) Forgiveness, (11) Evangelism, and (12) Heaven. Each chapter is organized by a series of questions and answers, which are clear, sound, and very short. The format on each page is cluttered and distracting, almost like a page from a children's magazine with word scrambles, activity suggestions, glossy pictures, and little text. This is similar to Ware's forthcoming book but not nearly as thorough. It uses the International Children's Bible: New Century Version.



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