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Phonics, Whole Language, and Biblical Hermeneutics



by Pam Adams

During the last few years, the issue of how reading should be taught in our nation's schools has been a controversial one. Many of us have seen segments on television dealing with the California "reading wars," have read articles in national magazines where prominent writers take a stand for or against whole language, or have heard phonics vs. whole language heatedly debated on the radio by reading professionals, parents, and politicians. One radio segment, aired last fall on NPR's Morning Edition, was particularly interesting because it iden-

tified the teaching of reading via phonics as a potent issue among conservatives in Texas, and especially with conservative Christians. During his campaign to be re-elected, Governor George W. Bush supported a reading initiative that clearly spelled out the importance of phonics. Many conservative groups including the Texas Republican Party, the Christian Coalition, the American Family Association, and the Eagle Forum supported this initiative. Cathy Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum, supported the initiative because she believes that literacy is an important issue for Christians who care deeply about being able to read the Bible, and she believes that reading programs that include intensive instruction in phonics are the most effective.

Support from conservative Christians for teaching phonics comes as no surprise because several Christian organizations and publishers have supported the teaching of phonics for a number of years. Phyllis Schlafly started writing about this issue long before whole language became a popular reading approach. In the September 1985 issue of *The Phyllis Schlafly Report*, Schlafly criticized the look-say (whole word) method as being associated with progressive education while phonics was lauded as being associated with traditional educational methods (Schlafly, 1985). Schlafly clearly favors phonics because she believes it is a more effective way to teach reading, but she also rejects other methods such as the look-say (whole word) method, using contextual cues, and guessing at words because she associates them with liberal philosophical trends. Similarly, Christian publishers such as A Beka and Bob Jones Press have long supported a

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phonics approach to reading. In a pamphlet published by A Beka, James Chapman (1987), professor at Pensacola Christian University, indicates why:

Individual words may not be important to "progressive" educators. . . but **the emphasis upon individual words has always been of paramount importance to Christian educators, who believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and in quality education** [emphasis in the original]. Orthodox Christians believe that God gave every word of Scripture, not just the thoughts.

Christians therefore who are training young people to respond to Jesus' command to "live by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God" should reject a system of reading that trains students to guess at words and to be content with approximate meanings. (pp. 13-14)

Here Chapman goes one step further than Schlafly by linking the issue to biblical hermeneutics. Chapman worries that whole language strategies that put less stress on word level accuracy will affect biblical interpretation and ultimately undermine biblical authority.

The central issue I will explore in this paper is the tie between teaching reading and biblical hermeneutics. If Christian teachers are indeed concerned about biblical literacy, I believe they will select reading methodologies that are consistent with their view of the Bible. For example, if a teacher takes a literalist view of biblical interpretation, then methodologies that have a word-level focus and include intensive phonics, attention to accurate oral reading, and literal comprehension will be appropriate. On the other hand, if a teacher embraces a non-literalist hermeneutic, then whole language methodologies that focus on global meaning, context, and multiple interpretations, while paying less attention to oral reading accuracy, will be appropriate. This paper will examine if there is indeed a consistency between belief and practice for Christian teachers of reading.

Phonics and Whole Language: Terminology, Research, and Practice

Before taking up their relationship to hermeneutics, we need to describe intensive phonics and whole language and briefly explore their differences.

Phonics refers to the letter-sound clues one uses to read or pronounce a word. This process is often

called decoding. In order to become a fluent reader, one must be able to automatically and effortlessly recognize letters, spelling patterns, and whole words. Eye movement studies on beginning readers show that they look at and process practically every letter in a word (M. Adams, 1990). Most teachers would agree that teaching phonics is very important for beginning readers because they first need to overcome the hurdle of understanding the alphabetic nature of our language (Juel, 1991). As children mature they are more able to successfully use context, picture, and syntactic cues, and with increased exposure to print, they can develop a vast store of automatically recognized words. More mature readers are also better able to use known words to decode unknown words, for example using the word *rain* to figure out the new word *train* (Moustafa, 1993). Adherents to the phonics school of thought believe that children go through stages in their reading development and that, for beginning readers, attention needs to be placed on letters and sounds (Biemiller, 1970).

The teacher who adopts this intensive phonics approach typically uses textbooks and closely follows the lesson plans outlined in the teacher's guide. Various phonics skills are taught to the whole class or in small groups with the students writing words on worksheets or small chalkboards under the close supervision of the teacher. If our teacher is creative, then songs, rhymes, and games are used to make the practice enjoyable. Skill knowledge is assessed by means of worksheets and re-teaching is often done in small groups for those needing the help. The books used for reading are chosen to fit the average reading level of the class and are most often basal readers, anthologies published specifically for teaching reading. When the children read, it is usually done orally, and accurate oral reading is the goal. When children don't know a word, they are encouraged to sound it out. The teacher then follows up the oral reading with a time to discuss the story. This discussion often takes the form of the teacher asking questions from the teacher's manual, many of which focus on literal details found in the story.

The controversy is not so much about whether beginning readers should be taught phonics, but how the phonics should be taught and how much time should be spent on its teaching. In an intensive phonics program, children are taught the letters and

sounds before attempting any connected reading. There is also a tendency to teach these letters and sounds in a prescribed sequence. Often children memorize rules such as "when two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking," do numerous work sheets, and read short pieces that help them to practice the skills taught. One potential problem with this approach is that children are often taught more than they really need to know. The tie between the sounds of letters and their actual pronunciation in words is approximate and there are many exceptions to "phonics rules." Many phonics programs, if followed rigorously, can cause a teacher to miss a teachable moment and to spend too much time on this part of the curriculum, taking time away from the enjoyment of good books.

In contrast, the whole language approach tries to ease children into reading by making use of what children already know. The whole language approach to reading regards the decoding aspect as just one part of this process. Reading, according to Frank Smith (1988), is a psycholinguistic guessing game in which the reader relies upon prior knowledge, the natural redundancy of language, and visual and graphophonic cues. The controversy revolves around whether readers can indeed use all these cues when they are just beginning to read. With whole language, rather than starting with letters and sounds, children are given simple, predictable texts. They are taught to use context cues, picture cues, and to guess at words using minimal letter cues. Once children understand and enjoy what reading is about, phonetic elements are introduced when the need for them arises. Rather than starting with the parts, the whole language approach starts with the whole. For example a Kindergarten teacher might print the words to the familiar rhyming poem *Ten Little Monkeys Jumping on the Bed* on a large piece of chart paper. First the teacher reads this rhyming, predictable, and repetitive poem to the class. Children are encouraged to join in when they can. Soon the whole class has the poem memorized. At this point the teacher might concentrate on certain words or letter sounds. Finally the poem is read again. The teacher then will tie in what was learned with reading the text so that the students will see how the knowledge of letters and words will help them in reading.

In a classroom where the teacher is a whole language advocate, instruction in reading typically involves reading self-selected trade books rather than textbooks. Children read silently by themselves or orally with a partner. The teacher circulates and has informal conferences with the children. During conferences the teacher might ask students about the types of books they like and whether the books they are reading are good ones for them. In addition, children may be asked to read a page or two, and the teacher will note what skills each child needs help with. Since the emphasis is on meaning rather than words, the teacher ignores most miscues if children

Christian teachers should select reading methods that are consistent with their view of the Bible.

are getting meaning from the text. When giving help to a child who doesn't know a word, the teacher encourages the child to "think it out" rather than "sound it out." The child is encouraged to use context, background knowledge, syntax, and other clues along with visual and phonic cues. When children discuss books, they often do this in student-led groups. Students are encouraged to personally interact with the book and relate it to their own life experiences. When written responses are asked for, they are more often in the form of journal responses than in answers to teacher generated questions. Skills are taught but on a needs basis. For example the teacher in this class may notice that Kinsley, Jesse, and Luke need help with r-controlled vowels while Micah and Joshua need help with using context cues. The teacher will call temporary groups to work with these children.

One potential danger of this approach is that the teacher may overlook teaching important skills because the teaching is driven by the particular texts read. Evidence also suggests that some children need multiple opportunities to learn a new skill and that decontextualized exercises can give these children the practice they need. While there is much conflicting research about the values of the two ways of teaching reading, some evidence supports a whole language approach in Kindergarten with a

move to a more directive phonics approach, not necessarily an intensive phonics approach, in first grade (Stahl & Miller, 1989).

The differences between the two classrooms include the following: (1) lack of both teacher-directed instruction and a set time-line or sequence for teaching skills in the whole language class, (2) a more careful monitoring of skills in the phonics-intensive classroom, (3) less emphasis on accurate oral reading in the whole language classroom, and (4) greater attention to phonics during skill lessons and oral reading with the phonics-intensive program. I believe that these differences are not driven simply by the teacher's belief about what works; rather, these differences are consistent with the differing reading philosophies.

Historical Overview

One should also remember that ways of teaching reading have varied over the decades. Biblical literacy was the driving force behind the establishment of schools in the United States during the colonial period. Over the decades, the key issues driving education have shifted with the times. To some degree, the pendulum swings in educational methodologies reflect the social and political concerns of the era.

During colonial times, phonics was the method emphasized. Reading was taught with a hornbook and a limited number of texts. This emphasis extended into the nineteenth century with our schools still including Bible reading, prayer, and the direct teaching of morals. The *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* included biblical stories that did not leave any question about what was right or wrong (Alongi, 1984; LaHaye, 1980; Westerhoff, 1978). For some teachers, this period of education is golden and the pedagogy of the time has become sanctified. Because phonics drills, memorization, and teacher-directed discussions were common in the past, some educators believe they are superior methods. However, these methodologies reflect both the uses of literacy during this period of time and the materials available. Because few texts were written for children, texts were read and reread to the point of memorization. Often, colonial families would gather around the stove at night to listen to one family member read aloud. Oral reading fluency and accuracy were highly regarded in this milieu.

Comprehension was not taught in schools but assumed because the materials used were so well known (Monaghan, 1989).

Using the argument that phonics must have worked because people back then knew how to read while children today struggle does not take into account the evidence that children today are learning how to read and read very well in the primary grades (Routman, 1996). During colonial times, people were considered to be literate if they could simply sign their name, and at other times the proof involved the oral reading of a well-known text (Monaghan, 1989). Today the demands are much greater (Graves, Juel, & Graves, 1998). The popular belief that children can't read actually applies more to children in the middle grades and up. It is at the higher levels of reading that children fail. They have difficulties with critical thinking skills such as making inferences or drawing conclusions, but not with decoding (Routman, 1996).

The use of the *McGuffey Eclectic Readers* continued into the twentieth century, with a change in methodology becoming apparent after the First World War. The move away from the highly structured approach of phonics was consistent with the progressive educational philosophies of the day (Alongi, 1984). Colonel Francis Parker believed that drudgery and drill should be replaced with freedom. He saw the "word method" as being natural and in keeping with this new emphasis on making learning fun (Kliebard, 1987). Readers of this article who learned to read with Dick, Jane, Spot and Puff probably had less phonics instruction than today's children have. In the 1950s and well into the 60s, the look-say (whole word) method was popular. However, the whole word method should not be confused with whole language. The whole word method emphasizes the development of a large stock of sight words. With the whole word method, the teacher introduces a few new words with each story. With each successive story, these words are reviewed and new words added. The stories, famous for their unnatural language, were carefully constructed to build on each other. These texts are often referred to as vocabulary controlled texts. The following is the entire text of the story "I.ook" taken from the New Basic Reader titled *The New We Look and See*, originally published in 1951:

LOOK

Look, look.

Oh, oh, oh.

Oh, oh.

Oh, look.

(Gray, Artley, Arbuthnot, pp. 3-6)

Younger readers of this article probably were taught to read with phonics. During the 60s, 70s, and 80s, the pendulum swung away from the whole word method. The launching of Sputnik and the supposed superiority of Russian schools made for a climate of dissatisfaction with current methodologies. *Why Johnny Can't Read*, written by Rudolph Flesch and published in 1955, was a popularly read and influential attack on the whole word method (Alongi, 1984; Bosma, 1992). While Flesch targeted the whole word method rather than whole language, the polemical nature of his language parallels some of the modern day debate between phonics and whole language.

Biblical Hermeneutics and Reading Pedagogy

The debate between phonics and whole language also emerged in Christian schools in North America, where it took on special significance because of the centrality of the Bible, God's written word, in these schools. In some Christian schools, decisions about reading pedagogy have been closely related to beliefs about how the Bible should be read and interpreted. Other Christian schools, however, appear not to have given adequate consideration to the connection between these issues.

The phonics-intensive classroom is more typical of what occurs in Christian schools, especially those with fundamentalist leanings. Studies of fundamentalist Christian schools (Ammerman, 1987; Peshkin, 1986; Rose, 1988) indicate that a transmission model of learning is often used and that much attention is given to individual words and to accurate oral reading. Peshkin (1986) and others have tied this to fundamentalists' literal view of Scripture, as does James Chapman (1987). If one believes that each and every word of the Bible is the literal Word of God, then it is not surprising that one would teach reading in such a manner. Fundamentalist schools also appreciate a transmission model of education over a child-centered one because of their belief in the sinfulness of their students. Traditional teaching

strategies more closely match this view of the learner. Child-centered pedagogies, which assume the innate goodness of the child, are viewed as ineffective as well as being rooted in a humanistic view of the learner and the learning process.

While differences in hermeneutics can make for some differences in pedagogy, I would not expect an extreme reader-centered approach, where the reader's interpretation replaces the author's intention, to be acceptable to Christian teachers (Ryken, 1985). As L. Ryken puts it, "[t]he very fact that God revealed the most important truth that we can imagine in written and literary form commits Christians

The debate between phonics and whole language also emerged in Christian schools.

to a belief in the ability of language to communicate truth" (Ryken, 1991, p. 299). Still, more subtle differences might be expected. If one holds to a literal view of hermeneutics then a word-based approach to teaching reading with a heavy dose of phonics seems to follow. Accurate oral reading and literal comprehension would also be important to the literalist. However, a teacher who takes a non-literalist approach for Bible reading would emphasize the global meaning of literary texts and give less attention to individual words and accurate oral reading. This teacher would also be more accepting of variations in interpretation. Following are summaries of four studies that illustrate these views.

Old Order Amish

In *Amish Literacy: What and How It Means*, Andrea Fishman investigated how the beliefs of an Old Order Amish community relate to how reading is taught and how texts are read. The very fabric of this Amish community is built on a belief that there are absolutes and that the ordinary person can know them. A belief that meaning resides in the text is part and parcel of their worldview. The Bible is memorized and recited, but never discussed or taught. One simply accepts what it says. This follows over to their use of lay ministers. The Amish believe the Bible is an open book to all and special training is not necessary to understand it. In their schools the approach to other texts is the same.

Teachers present rather than explain material and the questions asked check the literal level of comprehension. Memorization and accurate oral reading are encouraged. For these Amish, teaching strategies match views of how the Bible should be read (Fishman, 1988).

Fundamentalists

Mark Thogmartin's "The prevalence of phonics instruction in fundamentalist Christian schools" (1994) is a study of fundamentalism and reading pedagogy. Thogmartin wondered why fundamentalist schools are so pro-phonics and set out to find out what fundamentalist Christian educators believe about reading instruction and what reasons they have for holding these beliefs. What is particularly interesting about this study is that Thogmartin tries to explore the theological and philosophical underpinnings of the educators' beliefs about reading. All twenty of his research informants believe phonics is the correct way to teach reading. The responses they gave during interviews fit the following categories:

1. Phonics works so why try anything else.
2. Phonics is a traditional method used during our nation's beginnings.
3. Whole language is associated with humanism, secularism, and New Age religions.
4. Whole language teaching lacks structure; children learn better when they are disciplined and under the guidance of adults.
5. The only available reading materials with a Christian perspective are intensive phonic programs. [A Beka and Bob Jones are the most popular.]
6. The status quo is hard to change and change is not worth the effort.

Thogmartin's research calls into question whether teachers do work from a theoretical framework. The people in his study seem to accept phonics for superficial reasons. Thogmartin expected whole language to be unacceptable to these teachers because of whole language's belief that the reader brings meaning to print rather than meaning residing in the text.

Fundamentalists and Charismatics

Another relevant ethnographic study, *Keeping Them Out of the Hands of Satan*, compares Covenant School, which has a charismatic orientation, with Lakehaven Baptist Academy, which is fundamentalistic. Lakehaven Baptist Academy is concerned with doctrinal issues and sees itself in a

war against modernism, while Covenant School emphasizes the experiential aspect of religion and is far less concerned with doctrine. While both schools are evangelical, their educational philosophies are quite different. Lakehaven is more doctrinally rigid and concentrates on factual learning, while Covenant is much more child-centered and less authoritarian. Rose credits the differing outlooks to their differing views of the pervasiveness of human depravity as well as their social class. The working class, fundamentalist academy relies on supervision and rules to keep their children away from the evils of the world. The charismatic movement, of which Covenant School is a part, is a modern and largely middle-class variant of Pentecostalism. Covenant Schools' openness to discussion and emphasis on personal interaction reflects their theology and social class. While socioeconomic class was a factor in this study, there is a consistency between worldview and pedagogy in both schools (Rose, 1988).

Reformed Christians

This study, conducted by the author, was done with teachers who teach in schools associated with Christian Schools International and who, for the most part, attend churches in the Reformed tradition. The intent of this study was to ascertain the teachers' beliefs about literary interpretation, beginning reading, and oral reading, as well as to determine whether or not these teachers saw a tie between their view of Scripture and the way they taught reading. In order to see if there was a consistency, I tried to get a sense of what the teachers' view of Scripture was. Questions about how one reads the Bible tried to measure if the teachers took a literal or non-literal view of biblical hermeneutics. Results from the survey data and interviews gave no evidence to support a view that the teachers were literalists. They believe the Bible is infallible in matters of faith and practice, but they are aware of difficulties in correctly interpreting Scripture, and they acknowledge that the various genres in the Bible should be interpreted in different ways (Adams, 1995).

On the average, the CSI teachers in my study take neither an exclusively text-based nor an exclusively reader-based view of literary interpretation. CSI teachers believe that the text does convey meaning and they demand textual support from their students

during literature discussions. However, they tend to stay away from teacher-directed strategies because they don't want to stifle their students' willingness to participate. In terms of where meaning resides in texts, the teachers acknowledge the role of both the text and the reader in the act of interpretation. In general, the CSI teachers in my study take a view of beginning reading that tends toward a word level emphasis. Direct and systematic teaching of phonics appears to be common in CSI schools. However, this attention to words is related to the effectiveness of phonics rather than a literal hermeneutic. For oral reading, the CSI teachers tended to be more concerned with meaning than with accuracy (Adams, 1995).

The relationship between beliefs about the Bible and reading pedagogy was expressed in varying ways by the CSI teachers in my study. The ties teachers made were not with hermeneutics, but were expressed in terms of being "conservative" or "liberal," and as being "open" or "closed minded." While not seeing the relationship in terms of hermeneutics, the teachers did make a connection between reading pedagogy and their worldview. However, a few teachers did not see how their view of the Bible affected how they taught phonics and other reading skills (Adams, 1995).

A Reformed, Christian Response

A Reformed view of pedagogy assumes that a teacher's philosophy of education influences practice. For me, this means that I reject the extreme whole language position that leads to an individualistic reading of a text. Christians should value community and the insights of others. While we should always be searching for fresh insights, we should also value what tradition tells us. An extreme whole language view of the reading process can also give children the impression that everything is relative and that for every issue there are multiple "right" answers. While not wanting to restrain student interpretations, I believe a teacher would want to ask students for some textual evidence to support their interpretations. As Reformed Christians, we also need to acknowledge the effect of sin on all we do, including interpreting texts. Hard-heartedness can block our understanding of texts and make us see things from a self-centered perspective.

The other extreme, the one often taken by funda-

mentalists, is also one I reject. For these teachers the meaning of a text is plain, and this is the meaning the teacher expects the students to replay in oral recitations and on exams. I don't think this view is correct because it fails to acknowledge the very humanness of the reading process. I believe that each person does bring his or her own experiences to a piece of writing and that as humans our vision is always limited. These ideas are obvious to anyone who read a novel while he or she was a teenager, then read it again as an adult. Life experiences do change how we see things. Teaching with an objectivistic understanding of truth leaves little room for

Reformed Christians need to be wary of both extremes.

personal response and for discussion. Students are given the impression that a disinterested examination of the facts or words will allow us to arrive at the truth. Robert Lundin, professor of English at Wheaton College, says that evangelical Christians are especially susceptible to this inclination towards purely objective interpretations (1985). Contrary to this objectivist assumption, I believe that we need to acknowledge that we read through our worldview lenses.

While we disagree with the whole language romantic view of the learner, as Reformed Christians we would also want to disagree with fundamentalist views. While we need to acknowledge how sin distorts everything we do, our belief in the covenant should cause us to disagree with the more literalist and authoritarian style of fundamentalists' pedagogy. God's covenant of grace is historical, so that the textual story of that covenant is always related to context. And in the light of that covenant of grace, we should see our students as redeemed creatures who can have significant insights that are worth listening to.

Reformed Christians need to be wary of both extremes. A balanced approach is more in keeping with a Reformed view of the child as well as of hermeneutics. Bosma and Blok (1992) explain:

Neither extreme addresses the scope of the complex nature of reading or the nature of the learner. The top-down model can lead to the

mistaken idea that with enough time and exposure to good books and without direct instruction, all children will learn to read. The bottom-up model manipulates both the child and the text by placing the learner in a passive role and feeding the data bite by bite in minute linguistic pieces. The bottom-up model has its basis in behavioristic psychology which fails to account for the rational and creative nature of the child. (pp. 23-24)

A Reformed view of pedagogy should reject both the behaviorist and humanist view of the child. While each child is an image-bearer of God, each is unique in many ways, including how they learn to read and write. Some learn well auditorially, others learn well visually, and still others need the reinforcement of multiple cues. All teachers need to be aware of the diversity of learning strengths and weaknesses and to present lessons that meet the diverse needs of learners. Each child needs to be respected as a seeker of meaning and never taught in a manner that belittles him or her. Instead, our reading pedagogy should be one that is both open to multiple interpretations and aware of the existence of objective truth.

Too often in education what seems to work in the short term becomes the popular method. Educational trends don't arise out of a vacuum, but reflect the worldviews of the originators. In turn, Christian educators need to consider more than what works or what is popular: they need to consider whether their methods are consistent with their professed view of the world and the learner. Just because a certain program has research supporting its utility is not reason enough to use it. If the method treats the learner in a way that is not consistent with our view of children made in the image of God, then we should reject it. The goal of our reading pedagogy should be to create children who enjoy reading and who read with discernment, whether the text be a novel, newspaper, or that most special text of all, the Bible.

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