

P.S.

MY YOUNG SON was standing by a small stream holding a stick and pretending to fish. His monologue was staccato and contained great pauses, but broadly speaking it went like this: "I'm fishing, Daddy . . . With my rod . . . By the water . . . Like Moses . . . Stood by the sea . . . Saw the burning bush . . . Was very frightened . . . Fireman Sam have to come and put it out".

Anyone who has ever had children or had anything to do with them will no doubt be able to replicate a similarly incongruous but amusing speech. Indeed, it is the bringing together of things that don't match at all which creates the surprise and the humour.

Yet my son's adaptation and amalgamation of stories that are familiar to him is a good example of the associative power of the human mind, the ability to link words and concepts together. His stick-cum-fishing rod by the water had taken him to the rod of Moses outstretched at the Red Sea. The thought of Moses had taken him to the burning bush. The flaming bush had taken him to putting out fires and his favourite fireman of all, Fireman Sam.

The connections are understandable, but they are not appropriate. A fishing rod has very little to do with a walking staff or a shepherd's rod, and Fireman Sam has nothing to do with Moses. The fire that failed to consume the bush was one that no human could quench, and nor was it Moses' intention to seek to quench it. An adult knows all this, and so reins in his capacity to link irrelevantly in this way. My child has yet to learn it. He has yet to learn to control the power of his mind to associate, analogise and juxtapose.

What concerns me—and this is the thought behind this piece—is that sometimes I suspect Christadelphian expositors of the Bible have yet to learn it as thoroughly as they should.

There can be a tendency, for instance, to connect two passages together because they contain some common element such as a word or an image, when there is in fact very little other evidence that the passages should be connected. A common word or idea does not necessarily legitimise a merging of two passages into one single piece of exposition, for the two passages might be about completely different

Fireman Sam

things. Sometimes one hears exposition in which one passage or event is 'forced' to interpret another or is read into another in a deterministic fashion which is quite inappropriate.

It was easy to spot my son's error. No adult reader of the Bible would connect Fireman Sam with Moses because Fireman Sam does not occur in the Bible. But take two passages which contain the word 'fire', and this will for some be justification for some very strained exposition, even 'making' the passages mean the same thing to the point of practically dispensing with the local context of each passage.

This is not to dispute that elaborate interconnections exist in the Scriptures, or that passages and incidents in God's Word can and should be fruitfully juxtaposed. Many of us, myself included, spend a large part of our lives (and certainly one of the most enjoyable parts) searching out just such connections. Scripture does indeed interpret Scripture in instance after instance. But this true notion—and the similarly true principle of "comparing spiritual things with spiritual"—is not a license for dispensing with context, logic or common sense in a way that, sadly, occurs more often than it should.

There has to be an awareness at every step of the way of what one is doing in interpreting the Scriptures and whether it makes sense to do it. It is a very helpful thing, therefore, to be self-conscious about techniques and methodology in Bible study to avoid what we might call the 'Fireman Sam' type of error. One has to be aware of what one has done, and what process of logic has been applied in order to reach (and therefore, it is hoped, validate) the conclusions.

The problem often revolves around the use of words. The fact that two sentences contain a common word does not prove that the two sentences are to be considered of a piece. It might be enormously confusing to bring them together and attempt to read them in the light of each other. A common word of itself proves nothing and should not be used to force an artificial connection. We need to take great care that for all our Scriptural and spiritual 'wisdom' we do not at times show ourselves to be children in the way we handle God's Word.

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