

How to Share the Gospel with Children

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One of the church's greatest privileges and responsibilities is ministering to children. Whether the context is children's church, Sunday school, AWANA, VBS, or something else-and whether it's evangelism or discipleship-our greatest priority is teaching the gospel. Responding to Christ's work in repentance and faith is how children begin and mature in the Christian life.

Sharing the gospel with children, however, is not simply presenting a flannel graph lesson and asking for a show of hands. In fact, statistics indicate that most children raised in the church abandon the faith after high school. This raises a question: Did these kids really understand and respond to the gospel, or were they merely inoculated against genuine Christianity?

Three Concerns

I have three concerns about how we share the gospel with children:

1. That we not replace the true gospel with false or distorted versions
2. That we not confuse the gospel with a child's response
3. That we not equate a true, inward, spiritual response with an outward physical or emotional response

True or False?

In Galatians 1, Paul sternly warned of those who distorted Christ's gospel, saying: "If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:9). We cannot and must not modify, amend, or distort the saving message of the cross. But there are many false or distorted versions that masquerade as the truth.

We also must not confuse the gospel with a call to moral obedience. This means that it is insufficient to teach children to live by the Sermon on the Mount, practice the Golden Rule, obey the Ten Commandments, or simply love God and others.

Of course, we want children to obey Scripture, but if this is all we say, we are giving the law, not the gospel. As Tim Keller has pointed out, "The gospel is good news, not good advice."

Even worse is a message that focuses on self-esteem, self-help, or health, wealth, and prosperity. You don't have to be a TV evangelist with big hair and a luxuriant set to fall into this. If we just present Jesus as affirming our selves or solving our difficulties, without talking of sin, judgment, and the cross, then we're portraying Jesus as a spiritual genie, not a saving Lord.

Neither should we think we've shared the gospel when we have said, "If you ask Jesus into your heart [accept or receive Jesus], you will go to heaven when you die." While it's true that those

who receive and believe are God's children (John 1:12), it is false that "asking Jesus into your heart" brings salvation. For one thing, that statement includes nothing about:

- Christ's death, burial, and resurrection
- Jesus' identity as Messiah, Lord, and God manifested in the flesh
- Sin, the nature of salvation, and the need for repentance

So the problem with equating "asking Jesus into your heart" with the gospel is that it shifts the focus *away from* Jesus Christ's atoning work *onto* the child's subjective work or experience.

What is the gospel, then? Paul defines it in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." Very simply, the gospel is that Jesus came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15) through His death, burial, and resurrection.

Responding to the Gospel

My other two concerns are that we not confuse the gospel with a response and that we not equate a true, inward, spiritual response with an outward physical or emotional response.

A true response involves both repentance and faith (Acts 20:21). Repentance is *turning* from sin, self-righteousness (Phil. 3:1-10), and idolatry (1 Thess. 1:10) to serve the true and living God. Faith is *trusting* in the crucified and risen Christ to save us.

When sharing the gospel with children, we need to emphasize faith and repentance. But we must always remember that these are responses to the gospel; they are not the gospel itself. Ask for a response, but only after making the message clear.

But don't confuse repentance and faith with a response to an invitation, such as:

- Raise your hand if you want to go to heaven.
- Pray the sinner's prayer.
- You need to be baptized.
- Make a decision about Jesus today!

These methods have, no doubt, resulted in genuine conversions, but there are dangers. It's easy to raise your hand or say a prayer without truly turning from sin and trusting in Jesus as Savior *and* Lord. On the other hand, it is possible to have repentance and faith without any physical or noticeable demonstration at that time.

Making It Practical

We all share a passion to make sure our children understand the gospel and turn to Christ in genuine salvation. Following are some points of emphasis to keep in mind as you guide young people to understand spiritual truth:

- Talk a lot about who Jesus is (God-Man, Savior, Lord, King) and what He has done (died for our sins on the cross, rose from the dead).
- Make it clear that all people need their sins forgiven and will be judged for their sins if they are not saved.
- Urge children to turn from their sins and trust in what Jesus has done.
- Invite children to talk to you further about their relationship with God.
- Motivate parents to pursue further discussions with their children.
- Think long-term about how you can continually disciple children, vs. how many "decisions" you can record.
- Pray for the children, and expect God in His grace to use the gospel to bring them to true, saving faith in Christ.

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