

A RESPONSE TO EXPLAINING
THE GOSPEL TO KIDS

Lenaz Lecture

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Paula Stringer

Introduction

Some people were bringing little children to Him so He might touch them. But the disciples rebuked them. When Jesus saw it, He was indignant and said to them, "Let the little children come to Me, don't stop them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I assure you: Whoever does not welcome the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." After taking them in His arms, He laid His hands on them and blessed them. (Mark 10:12-16 Holman Christian Standard Bible)

In the fall of 1991, I had occasion to teach my Children and the Christian Faith class for the first time in my tenure at NOBTS. Among the students in that class was a young woman who had three children. Luke, the oldest was about 11 years old, Bill was 9, and Liz was 6. Two of the children were victims of Fragile X Syndrome; Luke's Fragile X presented in moderate mental retardation; Liz was bright, but her Fragile X took the form of learning disabilities. During that term Liz was struggling with the issue of personal salvation. She brought many questions to her mother; her mother in turn brought those questions to us, and we followed her journey through this process. Just prior to the last class of that term Liz made a personal commitment of her life to Jesus. As she reported this to our class, her mother noted that immediately following her prayer of commitment Liz asked the question, "How do we tell Luke about this?"

When people ask me whether or not a child can believe, I often begin by telling them the story of Liz. I believe that an immediate response of how can I share this with someone else is a strong indication that a person has indeed experienced a transformational event, whether that person is 6, 26, or 106. It

seemed to me that Jesus' words in the Mark 13 passage imply that the question is not whether a child *can* believe, but rather, whether or not an adult *will* believe.

The essence of the struggle in this arena, it seems, is that the issue is extremely abstract and our people group is very concrete. How then do we share this in a way that is culturally and developmentally appropriate? My esteemed colleague has done an excellent job of explaining the gospel message in such a way that children can understand. My task as I see it is to spend my few moments with you emphasizing the significance of what he has presented from both developmental and cultural perspectives.

Children are a tremendous people group. Worldwide over 1.8 billion people, more than one-third of the world's population, are under the age of 15. In 2003 the Census Bureau reported that there were 31 million children residing in this country in the five- to twelve-year-old age range. That particular age group is significant to us today because research suggests that most American adults who profess to be Christians today indicate that they made a decision for Christ during these years.

Research conducted by the Barna Research Group and reported in *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* indicated that there was a 32% probability that individuals between the ages of 5 and 12 would make a decision for Christ. In the 13- to 18-year-old age range the probability was 4%. For people 19 and older, the probability increased slightly to 6%. Further research reported in *Transforming Children into Spiritual Champions* indicated that children have

developed a worldview before they reach junior high school. Alarming only 3% of 13-year-olds in the United States have a biblical worldview. Even more alarming is the fact that there seems to be a very slim chance that, once formed, a person's worldview will ever change significantly.

Given the percentage of the population that can be identified as children and the probability of decisions for Christ made during that time frame, it would seem that if God's people are serious about reaching the world for Christ they must get serious about reaching children for Christ. A significant step in effectively reaching children would be the ability to communicate the gospel in a way that is meaningful to them.

Concrete vs. Abstract

Presenting the gospel message meaningfully to children necessitates recognizing the tension that exists between a concrete thinker and an abstract message. However, it must be noted that concrete and abstract are intellectual terms and an individual's encounter with Christ is primarily a spiritual, not an intellectual experience. While it should be noted that there are certainly intellectual components that cannot be denied, they are not the primary focus of this experience.

Giving children a concrete beginning place from which to move to an abstract concept is essential if they are to achieve understanding. For instance, understanding eternal separation from God is very challenging for many adults

and virtually impossible for a concrete child who can only think in the here and now; however, he does understand time-out or grounding, and while the analogy is certainly not perfect it gives the evangelist a foundation. From that foundation he can then help the child move to understanding.

In Southern Baptist childhood circles the term “zionese” has traditionally been used to indicate those words or phrases we use regularly within the context of church that hold meaning for the adult church population as a whole but are a total enigma to children. Such phrases as “ask Jesus to come into your heart” and “give your heart to Jesus” are classic examples of zionese. For such phrases the evangelist must learn new words or phrases that translate into a child’s experience. Other elements of zionese such as the term “sin” must be explained in such a way that children can understand. Without an explanation such as the one Dr. Quarles gave in the section of the presentation involving sin, it is very likely that the child is operating from a very different paradigm than is the evangelist. Careful explanation and clear illustration are necessary to enable our children to grasp the vocabulary needed to understand our faith.

Open-Ended Questions

Presenting the gospel message meaningfully necessitates that the evangelist understand the perspective of the child. Asking questions that demand more than a “yes” or “no” answer is often the most effective way to gain

that understanding. Some examples of open-ended questions can be found in Dr. Quarles' introduction. Other examples include:

- Why do you think you need to be a Christian?
- What do you think it means to be a Christian?
- How long have you been thinking about this?
- When do you think about this?
- How do you think God feels about you?

Whatever the question, the goal is to elicit information that will help the evangelist understand the child's thought processes. This information becomes foundational to how the evangelist proceeds in sharing the gospel message.

Accountability

A discussion of children and salvation would be incomplete without addressing the issue of accountability. There exists a very definite tension in this area between the practical and the theoretical. The point should be made that the issue is accountability and not age. Children mature at differing rates. The question is not whether 7 is too young, but whether this child is able to grasp and respond to the gospel message. Another issue that must not be lost in this discussion is that the Holy Spirit works with the individual in the area of conversion. There is a very definite need at this time for serious dialogue to occur among pastors, evangelists, children's workers, and theologians about the "age of accountability" or the "age of discretion."

Process vs. Moment of Decision

The question: Is salvation a process or is it a moment of decision?

The answer: Yes.

For children, salvation is a process that arrives at a moment of decision. For the child, that decision point is not an ending but rather a beginning of the next section of the process.

Doubts in Adolescence

Dr. Quarles has outlined a presentation of the gospel that addressed the needs of children developmentally, as well as the needs of auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. Regardless, however, of the quality of this presentation, without appropriate foundations and adequate discipleship following the decision, an eventual crisis of faith is almost inevitable. It should be noted that it is a developmental task of adolescence to question everything they believe. A child who began with an adequate foundation and who has been discipled appropriately is much more likely to emerge from this crisis of faith with a positive resolution.

Many adolescents and young adults, questioning the validity of childhood decisions, make a second profession of faith in Christ. The possibility that their initial decision was not genuine certainly exists. It is also possible that their initial decision was genuine, but, because of inadequate foundations or discipleship, they did not experience growth in their Christian walk and, as a

result, doubt the validity of their decision. To be most effective the gospel presentation must be preceded by an appropriate foundation and followed by appropriate discipleship.

Parental Involvement

When the Bible speaks of teaching, training, or telling the children, the imperative is almost always directed to the parent. In addressing the presentation of the gospel message to children it would be negligent not to address equipping parents in this area. The child is entrusted by God to the parent; with that trust comes the responsibility to “raise them with the training and teaching of the Lord.” (Ephesians 6:4b, NCV) While all ministers should certainly be prepared to share the gospel message with a child at any time, they should also be proactive in equipping parents to effectively share the gospel message with their children.

This paper has addressed a few of the myriad of issues that are inherent in sharing the gospel message with children. The author’s background and ministry experience led her to address these issues that are more of a practical nature. Thoughtful consideration should be given to these and other issues by individuals who are seeking to impact the spiritual formation of children. The responsibility to present the gospel to children in a meaningful way should be taken by parents, children’s leaders, pastors, theologians, and other church leaders.

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