
LEADING A CHILD TO CHRIST:

Helpful Thoughts for Those Who Share God's Greatest Message with His Most Precious Creation

by Jonathan Nazigian | ALLTHINGSINTEGRATED.ORG®



"But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it." (Luke 18:16-17)

"...there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10)

"I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth." (3 John 1:4)

I think the only thing more precious than seeing someone understand the Gospel and trust in Jesus for salvation is when that someone is a child, knowing that by accepting God's gift so early in life, he or she now has an entire lifetime to serve their Savior and will now have the Holy Spirit's inner presence to avoid so many of the sinful heartaches that those saved later in life regret. Someone once asked the great evangelist, D. L. Moody, how many people came to Christ through one of his outreaches. He gave a number but then added, "and one-half." Someone remarked, "I guess the one-half was a child." "Oh, no," Moody replied. "The one-half was an adult. The rest were children. Children have their entire lives to live for Christ. The adult's life is half over."

For those of us who have children, work with children, or know anything at all about children, we know that while the truth of the Gospel never changes, we must be very careful to communicate that message in an age-appropriate way so as to avoid two, unfortunately-common errors. On the one hand, there are some who err by assuming that children are unable to comprehend the Gospel message, and therefore never present it in a complete way or wait far too long to provide them with an opportunity to respond. I've found that the error on the other extreme is more prevalent. This is where well-meaning adults, eager to see their children or students embrace Christ, fail to discern whether they themselves have presented the Gospel clearly or whether the child had understood it sufficiently.

So, let's take a look at some ways to avoid these common errors and "correctly handle the word of truth." (2 Timothy 2:15)

God's Sovereignty and our Obedience.

First, we need to remember who it is that does the entire work of salvation. God alone. Ephesians 1 and so many other passages (Psalm 53:3, Romans 3:10-18, John 6:44), remind us that only God can convict of sin and draw a sinner to Himself. Sometimes we pressure ourselves to "get decisions" from people whom God has not adequately prepared. We need to realize that our role is one of simple obedience. We tell. God saves. The Apostle Paul clarifies this concept as he settles some other issues in the Corinthian church: "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor." (1 Corinthians 3:6-8). Paul makes it clear that God will hold each of us responsible for how faithful and diligent we were in offering God's gift, not in how many there were who accepted it.

As we study Scripture, it is very interesting that we never see Jesus or the apostles begging, pleading, pressuring, or hurrying people to accept salvation. They simply tell God's truth and allow the Holy Spirit to bring the harvest in His perfect time. Many a fervent evangelist has exhorted his listeners to avoid putting off salvation by quoting Paul's warning to the Corinthians (2 Corinthians 6:2), but when Paul says "Now is the day of salvation," he is saying (to the adults at Corinth) that now is the right time to be saved, not that now is the time when all will be saved. Some children are truly not ready, and we do them (and good doctrine) a disservice if we forget that.

Pray for Four Things

To help us remember God's role and ours in child evangelization, we need to pray continually throughout the process. In Colossians 4:2-4, as Paul shares his "prayer requests" to the church, he gives us a great model for evangelistic prayer. He prays for:

- Opportunity ("that God may open a door for our message,")

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- Clarity in presentation (“Pray that I may proclaim it clearly, as I should.”)
- Boldness when the opportunities come (“Make the most of every opportunity.”)
- Discernment in handling questions (“So that you may know how to answer everyone.”)

Keep it simple.

The Gospel is a mystery so profound, even the New Testament writers could not comprehend the miracle of a holy God rescuing sinful man from deserved hell and giving him eternal heaven. Yet the Gospel is so simple a child can understand it. In fact, Jesus said, that unless we have the faith of a child, we could not receive it (Luke 18:17).

When sharing the Gospel with children (and many times with adults too), we often make it far more complex than it needs to be. Sometimes we assume that lost people have many more objections and skeptical questions than they really do. So we prepare long, complex arguments with proof texts, analogies, multiple illustrations, and cross-references. With younger children, (under age 7 or 8) it is best to stick with a single verse, like John 3:16. Older children and pre-teens can handle multiple references. In all cases, stick to the basic truths:

- God’s love.
- Our sinfulness.
- Sin’s penalty.
- Christ’s sacrifice and resurrection.
- Our decision.

That’s it. (And you didn’t even need your Greek lexicon!)

Ask Open-Ended Questions (Avoiding Mirrors, Parrots, and Squirrels).

When speaking one-on-one with a child regarding the Gospel or their understanding of it, the best way to discern their comprehension is by asking them good, open-ended questions. Young children are much more adept at deciphering our tone and body language than we think, and can often respond to our questions correctly, simply by mirroring back to us the answers we are unknowingly prompting them to give. When we are nodding our heads side-to-side and asking, “You don’t want to make God sad do you?” we shouldn’t be too pleased with ourselves when the child eagerly mirrors back our “no.” Asking a question that requires more than a yes/no answer prevents this.

Similarly, children raised in church or a Christian environment have heard their parents and teachers say a lot of “church words” and so, sometimes, even a random guess yields the right answer. Here, again, we shouldn’t get too excited when we ask, “Who died for our sins?” and we hear, “Jesus” (since it seems that’s the correct answer to about 75% of Sunday School questions!). I’m reminded of the story of the pastor who thought he’d try a little “children’s sermon” one Sunday. So he called the children to the front of the sanctuary and had them gather around the stage as he began his lesson with an attention-getting riddle: “Boys and girls, who can tell me what is small and gray, has a big bushy tale, loves to jump and play in the trees, and stores nuts for the winter?” There was no response. He was puzzled, so he repeated the riddle. Eventually, a small boy raised his hand and said, “Sir, it sounds like you’re describing a squirrel, but we know the answer is supposed to be Jesus.”

Some time ago, two of my sons and I were playing in my bedroom, when my 6-year-old, Christian, found the “Gospel-colors” bandanas I use sometimes to present the Gospel to kids. He eagerly asked me if he could tell the “story” to his 3-year-old brother, Ethan. I said “Of course!” and was instantly curious to see what would happen. Well, Christian went through his presentation just fine and then it got interesting:

Christian: (eagerly) “So, Ethan, do you want to pray to Jesus now? You’ve never done that.”
Ethan: (giggly) “O.K.!”

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Daddy: (cautiously) "Well, Christian, you did a wonderful job telling Ethan about Jesus, but why don't you ask him a few questions first to see how much he understands. He is only three, you know, and that is pretty young.

Christian: "O.K. Ethan, who is Jesus?"

Ethan: "God."

Christian: "Good! See, Dad, he knows it."

Daddy: "Try a few more."

Christian: "Ethan, what did Jesus do for us?"

Ethan: "Sin."

Christian: "No He didn't! He died on the cross! Now, why did He die on the cross?"

Ethan: "God."

Christian: "No! He died for us! Now, Ethan, after Jesus died, where did he go for three days?"

Ethan: "To the birthday party!"

Christian: (sheepishly grinning) "Dad, I don't think he's ready."

Daddy: "That's O.K."

Open-ended questions avoid mirroring; good questions avoid parroting. Here are some great questions to ask:

- What is sin?
- How is our sin forgiven?
- Why did Jesus have to die?
- Tell me about what you prayed today?
- Why did you need to do that?

For older children or preteens, two questions I love to ask are:

- "If you were to die, and God were to ask you why you should go to Heaven, what would you say?"
- "Let's pretend that I'm a friend who lives in your neighborhood, and I ask you how I can be a Christian like you, what would you tell me?"

You may be surprised how many respond with works-based answers—"read the Bible," "pray," "go to church," etc. These give you great launching points for clarification.

Focus on Sin and Christ, not Heaven and Hell.

The reason we need salvation is not just to avoid Hell and get to Heaven. We need salvation because our rebellion has offended the God who made us and loves us, and we need to make that right. Our post-salvation lives become our way of fulfilling the task Jesus left us to do when He went back to Heaven. Yet, all-too-often, what dominates our Gospel presentations is only how good and golden and pearly Heaven is, and how bad and dark and fiery the other place is. (By the way, good luck getting a child to understand how someplace can be full of flames and dark at the same time!)

As a few theologians have joked, "Heaven is important, but it's not the end of the world." The Gospel certainly includes the concept of eternity and we must definitely explain to children the truth of both Heaven and Hell, but it should not dominate the discussion. Jesus Christ is the focus, His sacrifice, and His gift to us. Receiving God's forgiveness and yielding our lives back to our Creator should be our prime motivation, not just escaping flames. I must admit that as I see more and more adults who have been saved for many years, and yet show so little growth or desire to serve God wholeheartedly, I often wonder if the origin of their apathy can be traced back to a presentation of the Gospel that focused so heavily on just praying the prayer and getting out of Hell, that the remaining Christian life seemed an afterthought.

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Don't Leave Jesus in the Grave.

Always remember to present the living Savior, not just the dying sacrifice. If we are not careful, our desire to have children empathize with Jesus' suffering and appreciate His death, may cause us to inadvertently omit the best part of the story: He is risen! He is risen, indeed! As bad as his death was (and please avoid the temptation to dwell too long on the blood and pain with little children; at their age, it is quite distracting to the point we need to make), we must make sure children understand that Jesus conquered death and is alive today! It is not a dead God we are asking to save us.

Other Things to Avoid

Fear: We can scare kids pretty easily. And emotional sermons focusing on how angry God is at our sin, how hot flames are, or how long eternity is without mommy or daddy can sure get the a lot of kids down an aisle. But our goal is not a quick, initial response; our goal is a new, young disciple with a changed heart through the Holy Spirit's illumination of God's truth. As I've said, we must not avoid the truth of Hell or the pain of a life spent separated from God, but the manner in which we share that truth must be age and emotionally appropriate.

Emotional Manipulation: Children are so precious and they want so much to please the adults in their lives. By pulling on their heartstrings, we can do great damage to the Gospel message. Be very careful that children are deciding to accept Christ to please God, not to please you or to make their parents happy, or to get their classmates' applause. Notice the real motivation in the following statements:

- "It would make me so happy to see you accept Jesus today."
- "Your mom and dad would be so proud if you prayed right now."
- "You know, you're the only one of my students who hasn't accepted Jesus, yet."

Materialistic Manipulation: While we would never overtly bribe children with candy or toys for accepting Christ, sometimes our well-intentioned tools can, to a child's thinking, be the "rewards" for raising his hand or walking the aisle. Let me first say that I think it is entirely appropriate to give children who accept Christ mementos to remind them of this most-special day (certificates, decision slips, spiritual "birth certificates," etc.) or tools for their spiritual growth (a new Bible, Quiet Time Diary, new-believer booklet, etc.). However, it is my strong preference that these should only be given privately and only after the child has made a clear decision evidenced by solid discussion with their counselor. To present these things publically or to hold them out as part of the invitation will inevitably yield some children coming only to claim their "free gift" (and it's not the Free Gift we're really talking about!)

Clichés and Distracting Images: Young children are literal thinkers. A good friend of mine tells of the time he said to his wife, "Wow, it's really raining cats and dogs outside!" only to have his five year old son, run out into the rain to look for the animals falling from the sky! As hard as it is to remove some time-honored phrases from our vocabularies, when it comes to sharing the Gospel in the clearest way possible, you'll want to avoid things like:

- "Washed in the blood of Christ" (To a child, why would anyone want that? Gross!)
- "Head knowledge" vs. "Heart knowledge" (I have a Master's Degree and I still don't understand that one!)
- "Jesus, The Lamb of God" (Now they're all thinking of the petting zoo!)

One phrase that is somewhat debatable is when we speak of asking Jesus "into our heart." While on the one hand, we never see that phrase in Scripture, we do see the Bible often referring to the heart as the center of our thoughts and true intents ("These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me." Matthew 15:8). So while I am not opposed to referring to the heart with older children who can handle abstract thinking, I always avoid it with little ones. To me, it just seems more simple and accurate to ask Jesus to "save me" or "forgive me" or even to come "into my life."

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Have a Plan

As I mentioned, with the very young, it is probably best to stick with a single verse, and John 3:16 is among the best. With older ones, there are many creative and effective ways to present the singular truth of the Gospel. The Romans Road. The Four Spiritual Laws. The Evangecube. All have their strengths and drawbacks with children. Personally, I prefer the “wordless book” or “Gospel colors” since they can be adapted in so many settings. Missionary friends of mine in South Africa find that using that nation’s beautiful flag (which shares the Gospel colors) is a great lead-in to the Gospel. There are many ways to present the Gospel colors, but for several reasons, here is what I prefer:

- **Gold: Good News. God Loves Us.** John 3:16. Gold is happy and bright. Heaven is made of gold and God who created us lives there. He loves us so much.
- **Red: Bad News. We Have Sinned.** Isaiah 1:18. Romans 3:23. Red means a violation. A warning. Something is wrong. That something is our sin. The Bible describes our sin as crimson, like a stain. All of us are guilty.
- **Dark: Even Worse News. Sin Leads to Death** Romans 6:23. Our sin leads to spiritual separation from God and eternal death. Death without Jesus is like darkness. No light or goodness. But there is hope in the gift of God.
- **Light/Clean: Jesus Offers Life.** Romans 5:8. Ephesians 2:8-9. Jesus will forgive our sins, make us clean, and give us eternal life in heaven. No shame or guilt there. We must ask Jesus to save us.
- **Green: New Life and Growth.** John 5:24. Matthew 28:19-20. When we trust in Jesus and are saved, we have a new life and will want to grow like the green grass and trees. Green also means “Go” and we should go and tell others about Jesus!

Whichever tool or method you use, be sure it is the Gospel, and not the tool, that children remember long after you are gone.

Assurance: Did I Really Mean It?

Finally, whether you counsel children or adults, you will always face those who struggle with assurance of their salvation. This is particularly true of those who were saved as children and saw no immediate, lifestyle change (how many five year olds are being saved out of a life of gangs and drugs?). Last summer, Christian and I were sitting on the lawn and we were talking about a lot of different things, when he asked me, “How do I know if I’m really saved?” My first instinct was to do what seemed most natural and ask him, “Don’t you remember the time when you prayed with mommy in the van?” However, that is not the point. Getting a child to remember what they prayed or what they were thinking at some point when they were even younger is not only perplexing, it’s not the point of salvation. 1 John 5:12 makes it clear: “He who **has** the Son **has** life; he who **does not have** the Son of God **does not have** life” (emphasis mine). Note the verbs are all present tense. Assurance is not about trying to recall what you believed at some point in history; it is about what you believe **right now**. Do you have Jesus today? That is not to say that salvation is temporal or that it is not a historical event at the precise moment a person passes from death to life, but when it comes to a person’s personal assurance that they are a child of God, check their beliefs.

So I began to ask my son some questions. “Tell me about God’s love. Are you a sinner? How do you know? What does the Bible say about sin? What can you do to save yourself from your sin? Tell me about Jesus. How does a person get to heaven?” And so on. By the time we were done, Christian didn’t need to have me tell him he was saved. He had assurance based on his beliefs in God’s Word, not on his recollection of what happened in a van. In the future, he may have doubts from time to time, but so long as He goes back to God’s Word for his assurance, what more can a father ask for?

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About the Author

Jonathan Nazigian was introduced to his heavenly father at the age of five by his earthly father. He now gets to pass on the Gospel in various roles and to train others in youth ministry and Christian education. He is the founder and lead communicator of [All Things Integrated®](http://AllThingsIntegrated.org). He is the undeserving husband to a beautiful, godly wife and the proud father of three wonderful sons. He may be contacted at jonathan@allthingsintegrated.org.

