

APPENDIX 1

PREACHING THE GOSPEL TO CHILDREN

Introduction

Scripture identifies children as good gifts from the Lord (Ps 127:3-5; Prov 17:6). By his own handiwork, the Lord wisely knits them together in mothers' wombs and fantastically brings them into the world through childbirth (Pss 71:6; 139:13). As persons made in the image of God, they are to be incredibly valued and diligently taught to bear God's image well (Pss 10:14; 68:5; Deut 6:7; Eph 6:1-4). Scripture also teaches that apart from grace, all children enter the world with a corrupt, sinful nature inherited from Adam (Rom 5:12-19; Eph 2:1-10). In Adam, their rebellion against God and guilt before God warrants condemnation by God. Therefore, all children need the great salvation wrought by God the Father in his Son, Jesus Christ, and applied by the Holy Spirit.

The *gospel* is Scripture's all-embracing message that promises this great salvation to sinners through the person and work of Jesus Christ, yet threatens judgment upon those who spurn him. Faith in the truth of this gospel message unites children to Jesus Christ and all of the saving benefits secured for God's elect. However, that faith will not come apart from a right hearing of the preached word of Christ as articulated in the gospel (Mark 4:1-20; Rom 10:14-17). We pray *DIG Children's Ministry* provides numerous contexts and countless opportunities for each of us to herald and live according to the very message by which our children must be saved.

Because of much confusion in the church over the gospel as well as its ongoing fragmentation observed in much literature targeted at children, we intend to clarify what "the gospel" is and how it functions in the lives of children by providing more holistic answers to at least three major questions. (1) What are the essential contents of the gospel message? (2) How should we rightly present them to children? (3) What kinds of discernment should we use when they respond to the gospel? The presentation and comments below may serve as a useful tool in

answering these questions as you lovingly lead children out of darkness and into Jesus' marvelous light.

1. Gospel Essentials: The Content of Our Message

We may use four general headings to summarize the essential contents of the gospel of Jesus Christ: God, sin, Christ, faith-and-repentance.¹ These four headings may serve as helpful categories for adults and children to memorize the main contents of the gospel message, and grow in an understanding of the gospel's sweeping implications for all of life. We hope you find them useful not only for preaching in order to *convert* children, but also for preaching in order to *transform* them daily as ongoing disciples of Jesus.

1.1. God: Creator, King, and Judge

The gospel begins with God. Scripture assumes and teaches that he is the starting point. Even within the first three chapters of Genesis, we learn that God is the beautiful creator and mighty sustainer of everything, the sovereign ruler of the universe, and the gracious initiator of his saving purposes (Gen 1-3). If our children are to lay hold of the wonder in the gospel, we must, from the Scriptures, introduce them to God, persistently set his character and worth before them, and constantly bear witness to his mighty deeds. Without knowing God, the rest of the gospel message will remain irrelevant to them. Therefore, as we unfold Scripture's story for children, we must teach and equip them to know who God is and what he is like.

We must help them see that *God is the sovereign creator of all things.* Nothing and nobody existed before God (Gen 1:1-3; John 1:1-4). By his powerful word, he made the world and everything in it (Gen 1-2; Ps 33:6-9). He has total control over his creation, and he rules over it with absolute authority (Job 40:1-5; Pss 33:11; 135:6-7). His purposes always



prevail (Job 42:2; Prov 21:30; Isa 46:10). God owns and sustains everything and everybody, from the smallest atom to the greatest king and heavenly power (Job 1:6-12; Prov 16:33; 21:1). This means that all creation is utterly dependent on God, and he has absolute claim on every person's life. Therefore, all creation must answer to God.

Furthermore, *God is holy and righteous*. He personally relates to his creation as the highest king and most majestic person in the universe (Isa 6:1-4). There is no one like God. He is the most unique person of all and radically different from us (Exod 15:11; 1 Sam 2:2). He is the only person worthy of all our praise and adoration (Rev 4:11). He is totally pure, separate from sin, and perfect in every way all the time (Jam 1:13-15; 1 John 1:5). God is unswervingly committed to seeking his honor (Num 14:21; Isa 48:9-11; Hab 2:14). He always does what is right, because he always acts according to his holy character and perfect will. He is the final standard of what is right and the true judge of what is wrong. Therefore, everybody must worship and obey God.



God also created everything in the world for his own glory (Gen 1:26-27; Isa 43:7). That means people exist to bring glory to God (1 Cor 10:31). They were uniquely made in his image to reflect his glory, showing how great and special he is in all the earth and among all people. He created their minds to know God, their affections to love and enjoy God, and their wills to obey God. Altogether, God designed people—even the youngest of children—to delight in making much of his person and worth, to be glad in showing how valuable he is in the world, and to enjoy heeding his holy and precious word.

Our prayer is that the more we acquaint children with God, the more they will grow amazed and enthralled by his glorious person, and the more they will learn to take him seriously. Growing in this knowledge of God will also help them comprehend who they are before him. We pray they will see that God created them, owns them, and rules over them. He even designed them all to love, worship, and obey him alone. Moreover, we want them to see that if their God-given energies were spent for him, then they will gladly participate in the sweetest fellowship the universe knows, that stemming from the Triune God himself. Knowing God in this way, however, will also teach them what prevents this fellowship from happening and that the results of their rebellion against his word are real and severe.

1.2. Sin: Rebellion against God

Instead of delighting in the Lord and worshipping him only, children by nature delight in the lusts of their flesh and worship what the broken world offers (Rom 1:21-23). Apart from grace, their hearts do not love God or the things of God from birth; they love sin and desire to sin (John 8:34; Rom 8:5-8). Since the Fall, every human being enters the world with this corrupt bondage inherited from Adam (Rom 5:12-19). That they cannot meet the requirements of God's holy law proves their grave bondage to sin and exposes their defiant hearts (Rom 7:7-24; Gal 3:10-14). Their godless thoughts, deeds, actions, and motives, are personally offensive to God and evidence that they disdain his holiness, righteousness, and worth (Rom 1:18-23). Therefore, children not only do bad things; their very natures are bad (Rom 3:9-20). They are sinners and unable to reflect God's glory as they were created to enjoy doing. The Scriptures teach that their sinfulness, and the rebellion stemming from it, separate them from fellowship with God and make them objects of his just wrath and displeasure (Eph 2:1-3).

By setting this truth before children, we will help them see that when they sin, they have not merely made a mistake, whereby after making note of it, they attempt to "do better next time." Instead, we hope they will grasp foremost that their sin is a theological problem rooted in a wicked heart. Their sin stems from their darkened heart and is never anything less than rebellion against God and a rejection of his word. God is, therefore, right to judge them and sentence them to hell, a real place where people will forever suffer the full brunt of his wrath. God is right to respond this way to sinners who have spurned his authority and kindness.



Children need salvation from this bondage that keeps them under God's wrath, and they need to know they need salvation from it. Otherwise, they will continue in darkness and walk blindly in the world (1 Cor 4:3-6). We have the opportunity to tell them. We must confront each child with humanity's sinfulness as a whole as well as their *own* sinfulness and rebellion before God. Modern psychologists and teaching philosophies will tell us to steer away from this kind of confrontation, because it may harm the child's "self-esteem." However, the Bible's assessment of human beings is not that they need to be affirmed in what is good in themselves, but saved from all that is bad in

themselves. We are not interested in building up self-esteem, so that they think more of themselves, but helping their God-esteem, so that they think more of God. To direct them otherwise would be to deceive them. Only by tenderly confronting them with Scripture's hard truth, will the gospel rightly expose and prepare their hearts to see and savor the person and work of Jesus Christ.

1.3. Christ: God's Perfect Savior-King

For children, a simple way to review the message concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ is by giving attention to five summarizing sentences—though we would err if we reduced the prophets and apostles' teaching to merely these five. First, *God the Father has revealed himself perfectly in God the Son*. Forever, the Son has existed with the Father as God. Though distinct in person from the Father, the Son has always been equal in divinity to the Father (John 1:1-4, 18; Col 1:16-17). He is one with the Father (John 10:30). The Son has always been fully God and will always be fully God (John 17:1-4).

This Son, his only Son, God the Father sent into the world as a man, a real human being named Jesus (John 1:14; 3:16; 1 John 4:9). Having humbled himself, the eternal Son of God entered the world, being conceived by the Holy Spirit, and born as a Jew of the virgin named Mary (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:18-23; Gal 3:16). As a man, Jesus bears the image of the invisible God and is the exact imprint of his nature (2 Cor 4:6; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). In submission to the Father's will and fulfillment of his purpose, the Son became a human being because those he came to save were human beings (Heb 2:14-18). By being made like his brothers in every respect, yet also divine, only Jesus could and did accomplish all the saving work planned by the Father for his fallen people and broken created order. In this way, he fulfills all the biblical expectations wrapped up in Israel's messiah, and is the only one fit to be considered the Savior of the world.

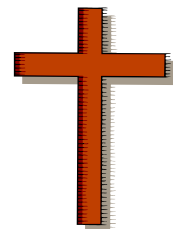
Second, *Jesus Christ, the son of God, was crucified for sinners*. God the Father determined the death of his Son (Luke 22:42; Acts 4:28). The Father's intention in

sending the Son to earth was that he would suffer death on a cross for his own glory and the good of his people (Isa 53:10; John 10:18; 12:28; 17:1). He was killed at the hands of sinful human beings (Isa 53:3; Matt 26:45; Acts 2:23, 36). This suffering and death was unique, because Jesus' death alone achieved total salvation for sinners. Indeed, Christ did not merely die, but died *for our sins* (1 Cor 15:3).

Jesus' death brought salvation for sinners in that his death served as a substitutionary atonement. Though sinners deserved ongoing subjection to God's just wrath in hell, Jesus bore the entirety of that curse for them when he died (Gal 3). In his death, Jesus satisfied God's wrath against sinners (Rom 3:25-26), brought about the forgiveness of their sins (Isa 53:5; Matt 26:28; Heb 9:22), imputed to them his own righteousness (2 Cor 5:21; Phil 3:9), and reconciled God to them and them to God (Rom 5:1; 2 Cor 5:18-19). His death also disarmed the powers of darkness and conquered the swaying power of sin and guilt (Rom 6:14; Col 2:13-15). Furthermore, in dying *for our sins* Jesus ensured faith and perseverance unto salvation for every person the Father chooses to give the Son (John 3:16; 6:37-40; 10:11-18; Rev 5:9-10).

Third, *God the Father raised Jesus from the dead*. After enduring the cross and suffering death, Jesus rose bodily from the dead on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, proving God's faithfulness to his word (Ps 16:9-11; Isa 53:10-11; Luke 24:25-27, 44-48; Acts 2:23-36; 1 Cor 15:3). He appeared to his chosen

apostles and commissioned them to bear witness to his glorious resurrection and God's saving purposes associated with it (Acts 1:22; 2:32; 10:40-41; 1 Cor 15:5-8). In raising Jesus from the dead, God gave Christ preeminence in everything (Col 1:18), put all his enemies under his feet (Heb 9-10), and granted him all authority in heaven and on earth to build his church (Matt 28:18-20). God also revealed his power over death and rendered its sting ineffective against his children (Acts 2:24; Rom 6:9; 1 Cor 15:54-57). Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection wins justification for sinners (Rom 4:25),



God's Work in Christ

1. God the Father has revealed himself perfectly in God the Son.
2. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was crucified for sinners.
3. God the Father raised Jesus from the dead.
4. Jesus Christ sent God the Holy Spirit.
5. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is coming again.

empowers them to walk in newness of life by freeing them from sin's dominion (Rom 6:4-7), and ensures for his disciples a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Heb 12:28). As developed elsewhere in the New Testament, then, Jesus' resurrection guaranteed and sealed salvation for his people upon God raising him from the dead (cf. John 5:21, 25-29; 6:39-40, 44, 54; 10:11-18). In this Easter event, we find God's victory over sin, death, and the devil. Every redeeming grace made effective by Jesus' cross and resurrection, however, does not come to sinners without the application of them by the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

Fourth, *Jesus Christ sent God the Holy Spirit* (John 15:26-27; 16:7). Part of the intention in raising Jesus from the dead was so that the Holy Spirit might come upon the church and bear witness to the risen, glorified Christ (John 7:39). Jesus even declared that it is better that he ascend back to the Father for this reason (John 16:7). It is only in the coming of the Spirit that God's saving work through the church takes place. The Spirit brought to the apostles remembrance of all that Jesus taught them, especially those things regarding himself from the Old Testament (Luke 24:44-49; John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13). The Spirit reveals the truth of God through their writings concerning Christ, thus convicting people of sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8-11; Acts 7:51; 1 Thess 1:5). He regenerates human hearts (John 3:1-8; 1 John 5:1-2), gives new spiritual life to sinners (John 6:63; 2 Thess 2:13), seals believers for the day of redemption (Eph 1:13-14), and empowers them to do the ongoing work of the ministry (Eph 2:22; 1 Cor 12:1-11). For all he saves and brings into the church, the Spirit will also be an abiding helper, granting the perseverance needed until the day of redemption.

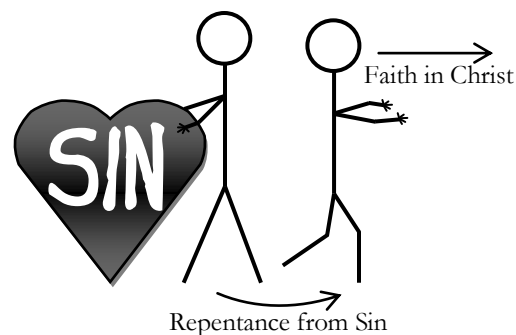
Fifth, *Jesus Christ, the son of God, is coming again*. There will be a personal, bodily, and visible return of Jesus Christ. He will come to consummate the age and establish his kingdom in its fullness on planet earth (Ps 22:27-31; Isa 9:1-7; Mark 8:38; Acts 1:11; 1 Cor 15:24; Rev 2:26-27; 21:1-2). He will sit on the throne of David, judge the world in righteousness, rule the world in truth, bring peace and plenty to all lands, and shepherd his people with utmost care, forever (Isa 11:1-10; 65:17; Mic 4:1-4; Hab 2:14; Matt 24:1-51; 25:31). Upon doing so, he will raise all his elect from the dead and gather them to himself for their final salvation and joy's eternal increase (Matt 24:31; Phil 3:20-21; 1 Thess 1:10; 4:13-18). Forever, God will make his dwelling among his children through the Son

by the Holy Spirit (Rev 21-22). The Lord will reign in perfect felicity with his people, and they will never cease or be hindered from enjoying making much of him, forever. Those who spurned the person and work of Christ will also be raised from the dead, but for the suffering of eternal conscious torment in hell and separation from Christ's glory (2 Thess 1:7-9; Mark 13:1-37; Acts 17:30-31; 2 Pet 3:8-14; Rev 19:11-16).

Rather forthrightly, then, what these matters concerning God, sin, and Christ reveal is that the gospel is a matter of eternal consequence and has a transforming claim upon our life.² The gospel, then, also includes and demands a personal response.

1.4. Faith-and-Repentance: Right Submission to God's Perfect Savior-King

Faith and repentance are two terms that summarize this personal response and the final contents of the gospel message. Though Scripture may present these two actions together (e.g. Acts 20:21) or in separate places, they are two sides of the same coin. The gospel always demands both of its hearers (Acts 10:43; 17:30; John 3:16; 6:29; 1 John 3:23). Will Metzger states it aptly: "Repentance without faith will lead to sorrow and mere legalistic resolutions...Faith without repentance is unfounded optimism, leading to self-deception."³



Faith is a gift granted by God to those his word has humbled (John 10:14-18; Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29; Col 1:3-4). It is the absolute dependence and casting of the whole person upon Jesus Christ. Faith includes a persevering trust and an enduring confidence that God fulfills and provides his saving promises through Jesus Christ alone (1 Tim 1:4, 14). While grace is God's sovereign unmerited favor by which someone is saved, faith is the enabling dependence provided for that someone to be saved; and both are wrought in the cross of Jesus. Faith, then, is the only means by which God justifies and sanctifies sinners in uniting them to

Jesus (Rom 3:21-26; Eph 2:8-10; 2 Thess 2:13). Children must understand that faith is not a mere mental assent to the *facts* of the gospel. The facts of the gospel are essential to understanding Jesus' person and work, but it is ultimately Jesus who saves. Children must be exhorted to entrust themselves to the *person* of Jesus, who helps them abide by his word and submit to his lordship. Jesus himself should always remain the object of their faith.

Accompanied by faith, repentance describes the transformation of the whole person when it submits to the lordship of Jesus Christ. Repentance includes not only the person's genuine sorrow for sin and their despising of it, but also their total forsaking of it for the purpose of ongoing obedience to Jesus (Luke 3:8; Acts 8:22; 20:21; 26:20; 2 Cor 7:10; Heb 6:1). After quoting Luke 14:26 and 33, J. I. Packer describes repentance as "the settled refusal to set any limit to the claims which [Christ] may make on [our] lives."⁴ Children must see that when Christ calls them to faith in himself, he also calls them to forsake all that prevents them from wholly following him day by day.

Christian discipleship, then, is costly for the true convert, but rewarding. For, by forsaking the old life without Christ, it costs him. However, it is in the forsaking of the old that he also gains the new life in Christ, his reward (Matt 13:44). This again recalls how Scripture treats repentance and faith as two aspects of one action in coming to Christ and submitting to his lordship. To trust in Christ for salvation is not only to see him as the most valuable treasure (faith), but also to forsake whatever prevents one from gaining him as *their* greatest treasure (repentance). Such faith and repentance does not cease upon conversion. Both actions characterize the daily lives of Christ's disciples, whose hearts he has conquered and made his own (Matt 6:12; Acts 26:20; Gal 2:20; Heb 12:2-3; 1 Pet 1:5-9).

1.5. Conclusion

What the outline above attempted to do was cover the essential contents of the gospel message we preach to our children during the Discipleship Hour on Sunday and upon each occasion the Lord designs for our interaction with them. This is the message we must preach and they must believe. We would be gravely mistaken, however, if we only thought this content was for them. This good news is not only for them, but also for us. As adults, we too *need* the gospel of Jesus Christ. Laying hold of Jesus through the gospel is also *our* only hope for salvation. Moreover, until

Jesus becomes the treasure we possess and the Lord who rules our lives, we will not be ready, empowered, or glad to declare God's good news to children. However, if Christ has made us his own, then everything in us will desire to labor hard so that others might know him. With children, this means laboring to find ways that would be most fitting for communicating the contents and clarifying the implications of the gospel. To this we now turn.

2. Presenting the Gospel to Children

Presenting the gospel to children is not limited to a one-time presentation of the essentials mentioned above. The Scriptures teach us to present the gospel to each other often, with words that reveal the unchanging truths of the gospel and with actions that reflect the ongoing, visible effects of the gospel. The gospel informs how we speak to and live before the children God entrusts to us. Whether at home, in Sunday School, at Care Group, or during weekly activities, presenting the gospel to children speaks to more than *what we do*. This ongoing and repeated presentation remains characteristic of *who we are* as Christ's body, a redeemed people attentive to God's word, passionate about his worth, and ready to spread his fame through Jesus Christ.

2.1. What does Presenting the Gospel Look Like?

How, then, do we present the gospel to children? A single answer to this question escapes us, especially since the gospel ought to permeate all our interactions with children. Times that are more formal may come, when we may present the gospel in an organized fashion with well-prepared and probing questions; however, this is not the norm. The norm is when little Johnny interrupts your nicely prepared lesson with words like, "I don't care!" or "We got a new puppy!" The norm looks more like the young Sarah who refuses to listen to God's word during childcare at Care Group, like Billy who asks you why Daddy is so angry at home, or like Anne who wants you to explain the purpose of mosquitoes. The gospel must come to bear on all of life *when* life happens. The gospel must be so familiar to and treasured by us that biblical wisdom, overflowing from our prayerful hearts, leaps from our tongues during such divine moments. What might this look like? Perhaps a few examples will help convey *how* we might present the gospel to children.

Example One. After a Bible lesson about Jesus' authority and power to forgive sinners, several five-year old boys gather around a table for small group

time, a time meant for reinforcing and applying the lesson's truth. Upon asking a question about Jesus' power, one of the boys blurts out some news to the others that he has received the latest toy Transformer. Within milliseconds the boys' attention shifted from the all-powerful Jesus to a robot named "Bumblebee." How would you respond? Should you respond with agitation over his rude interruption? Should you belittle their excitement over the toy? Should you just give up, since their interests lay elsewhere anyway? Or should you simply kill the whole conversation with some stern words like, "Save it for later, Chris"?



No. None of these answers arrests this excellent opportunity to bring the gospel to bear on their hearts. Far more effective would it be to allow the gospel to inform our engagement with the boys. The gospel teaches us that from the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. Turning to the boy who made the announcement, we might say, "The Lord is good, Chris, to provide us with such good gifts, and I bet Transformers are really strong too; but 'Bumblebee' is nothing compared to Jesus. Bumblebee isn't a real person and he doesn't have the power to forgive sins." Then, taking the attention off of Chris and looking at the whole table of boys, we could add, "Should we be more excited about Transformers, or Jesus Christ?" They will probably answer correctly. At this point is when you show them what their hearts truly adore: "All of you got excited over Chris's new toy while we were talking about the power of Jesus. To be more excited about toys than Jesus shows that your hearts are sinful, just like mine. This is what makes the power of Jesus so exciting! He has the power to forgive our sins and help us love him as we should."

Example Two. Sarah just turned eight years old. Upon reviewing the announcements your church publishes weekly, you realize that this was her first birthday without her mother present to celebrate. This is because Sarah's mother died two weeks earlier due to cancer. This week will be your first time to interact with her personally since the funeral. What would you say to her? How would you speak comforting words to her and show appropriate affections for her during this difficult situation? How would the gospel inform your response, so that your ongoing care may become a healing balm to Sarah's broken heart?

The gospel instructs us in approaching this situation in numerous ways. We mention a few here. First, the gospel gives us new affections. The mercy of

God toward us in Christ teaches us to weep with those who weep (Rom 12:1, 15) and liberates us to bear one another's burdens (Gal 6:2). By identifying with Sarah's situation and feeling the weight of her loss, we prepare ourselves to minister Christ's love to her with a gospel-informed demeanor.

Second, the gospel provides a hope-giving context to Sarah's circumstances. It underscores the horrific effects of the Fall, supplies meaning to Sarah's grief, focuses attention on Christ who defeated death itself, and promises final healing and restoration in the age to come (Acts 2:24; Rom 8:18-25; Rev 21:4). This context helps us to show Sarah that her circumstances are not unfamiliar to God, but only confirm what he says to us in his word. At the appropriate time, we might say to Sarah, "I heard about your mother, Sarah, and I am very sorry to hear this news. I know that you are sad, and I want you to know that those feelings are okay. God designed them to teach you about himself. He wants you to know how bad sin is and even more how great Christ is. Jesus came, died, and rose from the dead for sinners, so that even though they die, yet they shall live. Set your hope in Christ, my child. Firmly plant your feet on the rock of God's promises. He spreads his protection over those who take refuge in him. May I pray with you?"

Third, the gospel helps Sarah to consider how this event in her life might serve God's good purposes. For example, as Sarah heals, we might eventually teach her that God allowed her to experience her mother's cancer and death, so that she might serve others as a comforter when they experience similar affliction. 1 Corinthians 1:4 says that God is the God of all comfort "who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God." In this way, we would help Sarah see how God used her circumstances to prepare her to live as a vessel of his mercy toward others and so teach them about Christ (1 Cor 1:5).

Example Three. After the worship service one Sunday, John's parents ask you to watch over him for about fifteen minutes while they meet with the elders. You agree and hear them give John instructions not to run in the worship center. As soon as his parents leave the building, John darts after some other boys, running up and down the aisles. How might you seize



this opportunity to teach John the gospel? What would you say that would bring the gospel to bear upon his heart? Does the gospel provide John with a context to think about his actions against his parents?

The answer to this last question is “Yes” and serves as the starting point for preaching the gospel to young John upon this occasion. From Ephesians we learn that God has created a new humanity through the redeeming work of Christ and the indwelling work of the Spirit (Eph 1:3-3:21). Based on this gracious work, Paul then informs the new humanity (the church) how they are to live together on earth (4:1-6:20). Part of this includes instructions given to household members, *including children* (5:21-6:9). Scripture expects children to reflect the good news of Christ’s work by obeying their parents (6:1-3).

Now, how might we preach these things to John? For starters, we must not grow lazy and ignore his actions, but consider them an opportunity to proclaim good news. We must also move beyond merely stopping him from running, and beyond reminding him of his parents’ instructions. We must move him to see that his disobedient actions prove he has a rebellious heart that opposes the gospel. You might say to him, “John, God made you to show how special is to others. One of the ways you can show how special he is, and how great his work is in Christ, is to obey your parents. Jesus died and rose again to build a new family that lives under his rule. By running around in the worship center when your parents told you not to, you show that you do not care about Christ’s rule over your life. Now, you have a great opportunity to show how great Jesus is by obeying your parents during the remainder of their meeting. Let’s pray together and ask God to forgive our sins and to grant us help from his Spirit in living as part of his family.”

We could list numerous other examples, but these three are sufficient to show that presenting the gospel to children is not merely an event and not something we limit to a single formula. Presenting the gospel is part of our lifestyle as servants of Christ for both the church and the world. The gospel provides the lens through which we ought to perceive everything. Whatever the circumstances, our hearts must be ready to present the gospel and apply its truth, hoping that Spirit-wrought transformation will take place in every child who hears the word of Christ. We will know



whether this transformation takes place as we observe their responses to the gospel message. Such ongoing observation takes great patience and discernment. Before moving forward to discerning children’s responses to the gospel, perhaps listing some dangers to avoid when presenting the gospel to children will better equip us for this crucial ministry.

Some Dangers along the Way

1. When we present the gospel, we must not speak vaguely of evil without emphasizing the *personal* aspect of sin. Contrary to popular opinion, people are not merely victims of sin and evil, they are perpetrators of sin and evil. We must help children understand that the sin they commit is *their* sin, coming from *their* sinful hearts, and is a *personal* offense against the *person* of God. God reveals his wrath against sinners not because of Satan or any other external evil, but because of their sin and internal sinfulness. This clarification is crucial if the children are to comprehend the good news of Jesus Christ becoming a *man* to suffer the awful curse for *us*.

2. When we present the gospel to children, we must not present a mere “plan of salvation,” but the person who actually saves, Jesus Christ. God does not save a person because he/she followed a five-step plan, but because they laid hold of and entrusted themselves to the person of Jesus himself. A “plan” may serve to communicate some necessary truths about Jesus, but it is *Jesus* himself we want children to meet and embrace, not the plan. In the words of John Murray, we do not want faith to be “the belief that we have been saved but *trust in Christ* in order that we may be saved.”⁵ This clarification will help a child’s assurance to not be grounded in a plan *he/she* once followed, but in the person, whom they know saves.

3. We must not present the gospel in a manner that *only* comforts and affirms, but in a manner that convicts and transforms. To make the severe and sobering truths of the gospel more palatable to children so that they remain comfortable with their sinful state is deception, not evangelism. Far better would it be for them to suffer the temporary pains of conviction of sin, righteousness, and judgment than to suffer the eternal pains of hell.⁶ Allow the *gospel* to cut, wound, and break down where it may. Only then will children truly grasp how the gospel message also mends, heals, and binds up. Only then will they experience genuine change.

4. We must not present a gospel that encourages a mere mental assent to a set of facts. Our proclamation

must engage the whole person and encourage entire submission to Christ as Lord. Mere knowledge of salvation does not equal salvation. We must emphasize the need for a personal relationship with and a special love for Jesus Christ, not a mere knowing about him. Satan knows about Jesus, but does not depend on him for salvation. We want the gospel to produce in children a *total devotion* of the heart, mind, soul, and strength to Christ.

5. The message we present must never promote a man-centered understanding of the cross, but always a God-centered one. The message of the cross does not show how valuable we are to God, but how offensive our sin is to the infinitely valuable God. God sent Jesus to die for sinners not to enable sinners to celebrate how great they are, but to enable sinners to celebrate how great God is. God loved the world by sending his Son, so that sinners would worship God.

6. We must not emphasize salvation at the individual level to the neglect of Christ's work at the corporate level. The cross of Christ affects our relationship with God and our relationships with fellow man. Christ died once for sins in order to bring us to God, and in bringing us to God, Christ also unites us to one another in the Spirit-filled church. By participating in mutual love with other members of Christ's church, the fullness of Christ's saving work will be displayed for all to see. We must remember to teach children that their "vertical" love for God has "horizontal" implications for how they love God's church.

7. When presenting the gospel, we must avoid focusing on the future implications to the neglect of present ones. Our gospel teaching and application must include God's future promises. A key emphasis of the good news is the hope of what the victorious Christ will do in the age to come. However, we must remember that the gospel highlights future promises in order to shape the way we live *now* in this present age. This clarification will help us equip the next generation with a mentality that not only actively waits for, but also fervently hastens the Lord's return.

8. We must not emphasize the need for immediate decision to the neglect of ongoing transformation. We should highlight two things under this warning. First, pressing a child repeatedly to "make a decision" for Christ may show a lack of trust in God's sovereignty over the human heart. Only God regenerates the heart, so that a person genuinely embraces the gospel and follows Christ. We should faithfully speak the truth and trust the Spirit to do his work. Second, when presenting the gospel becomes a decision-making

project, we will teach children to treat the gospel like an immunization—after receiving it, they show no ongoing need for it. In reality, however, we never outgrow our need for the gospel. Daily we need strength from all of God's promises granted us in the gospel message, because daily we struggle against the world, the flesh, and the devil, and because daily we need this message to grow in Christ-likeness.

9. We must not emphasize the subjective grounds of Christian assurance before God apart from the objective grounds. If all we point out for a *believing* child is his/her fruitfulness or fruitlessness, without ever training them to look to the never-changing Christ, then we will drive them into hopeless self-introspection. The subjective grounds of Christian assurance stem from a deep, ongoing love for the objective grounds. In short, gospel transformation takes place *in us* (subjective) as we persistently look *outside us* to Christ and his saving work (objective).

10. We must guard ourselves from being emotionally indifferent when communicating the gospel. Our demeanor ought to reflect the glories of the message we preach. The gospel is more than black words on a white page. It is a heavenly message spoken by God to people with an immense need for salvation. The gospel is the *only* message by which people must be saved. The weight of this unique message is expressed well in the words of John Piper: "The mantle of preaching is soaked in the blood of Jesus and singed by the fires of hell." By wearing this mantle, may our exultation in the gospel lead to fervent proclamation that arrests children's hearts for Christ's sake and their joy.



3. Discerning Children's Responses to the Gospel

The Scriptures teach that preaching the gospel *always* affects people in one of two ways: It elicits faith (positive response) or confirms unbelief (negative response). We are all born into unbelief. When people respond negatively to the gospel, they remain in their unbelief, seeing Christ crucified only as a stumbling block and foolishness. When God brings them out of unbelief, people respond positively to the message of the cross in belief (or faith), seeing Christ crucified as the wisdom and power of God for salvation (1 Cor 1:18-25).

Such negative and positive responses to the gospel message exist among all people, including children. Upon hearing the message you preach to them, they will respond in faith or unbelief. Our task in this third section is to provide guidance on how to respond to children who appear to love and cherish the gospel and others who find it rather distasteful and boring. We have arranged this third section in a “question and answer” format based on questions we have received over the past few years through the children’s ministry at Redeemer Church.

Before addressing these questions, however, we must make a special note about the role of the parents in discerning children’s responses to the gospel. Remember that God has designed parents with the *primary* responsibility for the spiritual nurture of their children. As we preach the gospel to children on a regular basis and discern responses of belief or unbelief, we should also graciously communicate what we discern to the children’s parents. By informing parents of their child’s negative or positive responses to the gospel, their senses will be sharpened to recognize patterns of unbelief at home and identify particular idols in the child’s heart. In turn, this will better equip them to preach the same gospel to their children at home. By keeping an open line of communication with the parents, we hope to preserve and encourage one of the joys of parenting, namely, preaching the gospel. We now move to the questions.

3.1 What are some signs that a child genuinely trusts in Christ?

Jesus teaches us that a tree is known by its fruit. No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit (Luke 6:43-45). When Jesus transforms the human heart, it will have new and holy desires to submit itself to his lordship, his ways, his commands. As with gospel ministry to adults, we should not give false assurance based on something children have done, but encourage true assurance based on what Jesus has done for and is doing in them. This not only involves pointing children to the objective aspects of their faith that never change (e.g. Christ died for our sins), but also observing the subjective aspects of their faith that lead to change. This observation includes looking for the fruits of genuine salvation in children who express faith in Christ. Signs that a child trusts Christ include:

- The child understands the gospel. We want children to have a zeal for God in accordance

with biblical knowledge (Rom 10:2-4). For example, be sure they can rightly explain sin, grace, the cross, etc.

- The child shows conviction for his sin(s) and his demeanor reveals heartfelt, godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Cor 7:9-10).
- The child begins to forsake self-effort in daily activities and responsibilities and may remember to express such dependence on God in prayer.
- The child shows genuine affections for Jesus.
- The child has a growing love for God’s word and believes what God says in the Bible.
- The child bears the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-24).
- The child has an ongoing growth and interest in godly things.

3.2 What if a child comes on their own initiative and says they have trusted in Christ?

Unlike the Pharisees and scribes who grumbled over the fact that Jesus receives sinners and chooses to eat with them, we ought to rejoice greatly when any sinner of whatever age expresses trust in Christ (see Luke 15:1-32). The comprehensiveness of the gospel should preclude an expression of skepticism toward a child who shows signs of genuine salvation. For the sake of the child and the glory of God in the gospel, we should encourage and validate. When a child says he/she has trusted in Christ, express joy with him/her in the Savior’s kindness to seek and find lost sinners.

At the same time, discern the validity of such an expression as one that comes from and reflects genuine saving faith. As you patiently minister to children like this, encourage them to *continue* placing their trust in Christ throughout their lives. With every opportunity, teach and show them more of what trusting Christ looks like. They must see that trusting Christ is not a onetime event, but characteristic of the Christian *throughout* his/her life. Working side by side with the child’s parents and the elders, look for the ongoing fruits of salvation as mentioned in 3.1 and discern the child’s heart with wisdom. If a child from an un-churched family expresses faith in Christ, make it a point, perhaps along with an elder, to speak with his/her parents about the gospel and their child’s actions.

3.3 If a child expresses genuine faith in Christ, how might I encourage this faith?

There are philosophies of ministry that promote the idea that once a person expresses faith in Christ the real work is complete. This notion is false. When Jesus commands us to make disciples, he does not mean to train up one-time decision makers. He includes in his exhortation that we are to baptize the disciples and teach them *all that Jesus has commanded* (Matt 28:18-20). The genuine disciple's faith grows only in the good soils of ongoing submission to Jesus' lordship. Many aspects of submission to Jesus serve to encourage faith, some of which follow:

- Submission to Jesus results in a love for the centrality of God's word, wherein the disciple finds words leading to salvation, wisdom for life, promises stimulating perseverance, and hope for the future. Encourage the child to exercise the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, meditation, and memorization.
- Submission to Jesus results in a heart for the supremacy of God, which produces abiding joy, lasting comfort, and growth in personal holiness. Teach the child to depend on God in prayer and find sweet communion with God during daily activities.
- Submission to Jesus results in an abiding union with the Spirit who testifies of God's love, empowers for gospel ministry, and gifts to edify the church. Instruct the child about the church and his role in the community of faith. Help him identify his gifting.
- Submission to Jesus results in affections for God's people, with whom the disciple serves, through whom he receives exhortation and encouragement, and among whom God chooses to dwell. Teach the child how to serve his brothers and sisters, how to walk with them in Christian love, and how to receive what God provides through them. Include the child in family and corporate worship gatherings.

We should also add that if a child expresses faith in Christ, we should encourage the parents to work closely with one of the elders in observing the child's growth in faith and walk with the Lord. This will foster greater discernment when considering whether a child is ready to participate in the ordinance of baptism.

3.4 If a child behaves according to the gospel's moral demands, does this necessarily mean he believes the gospel and trusts in Christ?

No. Though it is important to train children to behave outwardly according to what the Bible teaches, we must not do so in a way that makes them think that such behavior is the basis of their position in Christ. Our emphasis must be that true obedience to the gospel stems from a regenerate heart, a heart that Jesus has transformed. Mere outward actions cannot serve as the root of a child's relationship with Jesus. We should teach that outward obedience to the gospel is the *fruit* of truly knowing Christ, not the root. Therefore, be very discerning about how children act and speak with regard to their relationship with Christ.

Some questions to ask yourself or the child might be, "Does this child love Jesus from the heart?" or "Does this child find his boast in Jesus or what he does for Jesus?" or "Does this child have a basic understanding of justification by faith alone?" or "Does this child seek the approval of others or rest in his status before God in Christ?" Some passages that may help with discernment in this area are as follows: Luke 10:25-37; 15:11-32; 18: 9-14; Rom 2:29; 4:1-25; Eph 6:6.

3.5 What if a child does not show any interest in the gospel? What should I do?⁷

In this situation, we pray the Lord would use us in the following ways.

Pray for the child's salvation. Salvation is God's work. Do not be afraid to ask God to give children saving faith (Matt 6:7-11). Pray that the Holy Spirit will use your teaching, correction, and love to show the children God's holiness as well as their own sin and guilt (2 Kgs 22; Rom 7:7-9). Pray that he will make the child's conscience tender and ready to hear the gospel (Gal 4:1-5). Pray these prayers in front of the children.

Talk to the children. Talk to them about the benefits of obeying God and living with wisdom (Prov 1:8-9; 3:13-18; 6:20-23; 7:1-3; 8:12-21; 24:13-14; Exod 20:12; Eph 6:1-3). Lovingly warn the children that failing to trust and obey God results in death and hell (Prov 12:1-2; 13:1; 15:32-33; 19:20, 27-29; 23:12; Luke 12:4-5). Assure the children that Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and joy to those who trust him (Rom 5:8).

Correct the children when they disobey. Remember mercy when correcting them. A truly just punishment destroys, but Christ already has taken the rebukes and beatings our sins deserve. Repent and ask your children for forgiveness when you fail to be merciful

to them (Pss 6:1-2; 38:1; 39:10-11; Prov 13:24; 29:15; 1 Tim 3:16; Eph 6:4; Isa 53:4-5; Rom 5:8). Do not feel you have failed as a teacher or parent because you do not see fruit. Trust that God will work according to his own timetable (Phil 1:6).

Ask for help. God has put us in community together so that we can help one another.

3.6 In sharing the gospel with children, should I pressure them to make an immediate decision?

No. Trust that God is already at work on their hearts in and through the proclamation of the gospel. Your responsibility is to teach the gospel faithfully to them and leave the results to the Lord. Salvation belongs to

the Lord; it is *his* work. We must teach children that assurance is found in the person and work of Jesus Christ alone and not in a mere decision they may make. Trust that God the Holy Spirit will grant this assurance to those who are truly changed by the gospel (Rom 8:16). Trust that he will bring conviction and assurance according to his own pleasure and will. Trust God to work in the hearts of his children to bring them to himself through faith in his time and in his ways. One way to gain wisdom in this area is to read the book of Acts and make notes on the apostles' preaching ministry and the people's responses to them.

¹You can find a similar layout of headings in J. I. Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1961), 57-73.

²This sentence stems from an exhortation given by B. Paul Wolfe in a New Testament Theology class.

³Will Metzger, *Tell the Truth: The Whole Gospel to the Whole Person by Whole People* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), 76.

⁴Packer, *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*, 72.

⁵John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 109, emphasis added.

⁶Jill Nelson, "Presenting the Gospel to Children," in *Helping Children to Understand the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Children Desiring God, 2009), 29-30.

⁷The answer to this question was taken from Scott Holman and Jared Kennedy, *Childhood Baptism and Church Membership: A Position and Policy for Sojourn Community Church* (Louisville: Sojourn, n.d.), 13-14.