Evangelizing Children
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A GRACE COMMUNITY CHURCH DISTINCTIVE

For many believers, fulfilling Christ's command to make disciples of all nations begins at home—with their children. In fact, few experiences bring greater joy to Christian parents than seeing their children come to faith in Christ.

The process of evangelizing one's children, however, can be a daunting task. For many parents, the questions are as practical as they are disconcerting: How should I present the gospel to my children? What's the best approach to take? How do I know if I'm doing it right? Pitfalls, both real and imagined, intimidate virtually every parent who contemplates this responsibility. On one hand, there's the danger of leading children to think they are saved when they are not. On the other, there's the risk of discouraging children who express a genuine desire to follow Christ.

How, then, should we evangelize our children? The answer to this question is not an easy one, but it begins with recognizing and avoiding some of the common pitfalls in child evangelism.

Common Pitfalls in Evangelizing Children

Oversimplifying the Gospel of Christ

Because a child's comprehension is less developed than an adult's, the temptation for many parents is to oversimplify the message of the gospel when they evangelize their children. Sometimes this stems from canned or programmed approaches to child evangelism, which often abbreviate the gospel, downplay the demands of the gospel, or leave out key aspects of the gospel altogether.

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Like adults, children must be able to understand the gospel clearly before they can be saved. This involves grasping concepts such as good and evil, sin and punishment, repentance and faith, God's holiness and wrath against sin, the deity of Christ and His atonement for sin, and the resurrection and lordship of Christ. Certainly parents need to use terminology children can comprehend and be clear in communicating the message, but when Scripture talks about teaching children spiritual truth, the emphasis is on thoroughness (Deuteronomy 6:6–7). Oversimplification is a greater danger than giving too much detail. It is the truth—found in God's Word—that saves, but that truth must be understood.

Coercing a Profession of Faith

Whether parents present the gospel in an oversimplified or thorough manner, many solicit some kind of active response to that message. It could be a show of hands in a group setting, a rote repetition of "the sinner's prayer," or almost anything that may be counted as a positive response. Children will almost always respond in whatever way parents ask—not at all guaranteeing real acts of faith in Christ.

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Rather than getting their children to pray "the sinner's prayer" or enticing them into a superficial response, parents must faithfully, patiently, and thoroughly teach them the gospel and diligently pray for their salvation, always bearing in mind that God is the One who saves. There is no need to pressure or coerce a confession from the mouth of a child, for genuine repentance will bring forth its own confession as the Lord opens the heart in response to the gospel. And as time goes by, it is never right to reinforce to the child that a childhood prayer is evidence of salvation.

Assuming the Reality of Regeneration

The next pitfall is assuming with certainty that a child's positive response to the gospel is full-fledged saving faith. The temptation here is to regard regeneration as a settled matter because of an outward indication that the child has believed. One cannot assume, however, that every profession of faith reflects a genuine work of God in the heart (Matt. 7:21–23), and this is particularly true of children.

Children often respond positively to the gospel for a host of reasons, many of which are unrelated to any awareness of sin or real understanding of spiritual truth. Many children, for example, profess faith because of peer pressure at church or a desire to please their parents.

In addition, Scripture indicates that children tend to be immature (1 Cor. 13:11; 14:20), naive (Prov. 1:4), foolish (Prov. 22:15), capricious (Isaiah 3:4), inconsistent and fickle (Matt. 11:16–17), and unstable and easily deceived (Eph. 4:14). Children often think they have understood the ramifications of a given commitment when they have not. Their judgment is shallow and their ability to see the implications of their decisions is very weak. Despite the best of intentions, they seldom have the ability to think far beyond today, nor do they perceive the extent to which their choices will affect tomorrow. This makes children more vulnerable to self-deception, and it makes it more difficult for a parent to discern God's saving work in their hearts.

For this reason, only when a child's stated convictions and beliefs are tested by circumstances in life as he matures do parents begin to learn more conclusively his spiritual direction. While many people do make a genuine commitment to Christ when young, many others—perhaps most—don't come to an adequate understanding of the gospel until their teenage years. Others who profess Christ in childhood turn away. It is only appropriate, then, that parents move cautiously in affirming a child's profession of faith and not be quick to take any show of commitment as decisive proof of conversion.

Assuring the Child of Salvation

After becoming convinced their child is saved, many parents seek to give that child verbal assurance of his salvation. As a consequence, the church is filled with teenagers and adults whose hearts are devoid of real love for Christ, but who think they are genuine Christians because of something they did as children.

It is the role of the Holy Spirit—not the parent—to give assurance of salvation (Rom. 8:15–16). Too many people whose hearts are utterly cold to the things of the Lord believe they are going to heaven simply because they responded positively as children to an evangelistic invitation. Having "asked Jesus to come into their hearts," they were then given a false assurance and taught never to examine themselves and never to entertain any doubt about their salvation. Parents should commend and rejoice in the evidence of real salvation in the lives of their children only when they know the child understands the gospel, believes it, and manifests the genuine evidence of true salvation—devotion to Christ, obedience to the Word, and love for others.

Rushing the Ordinance of Baptism

A final pitfall for many parents is having the child baptized immediately after he professes faith. Although Scripture commands that believers be baptized (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38), it is best not to rush into the ordinance in the case of a child. As previously stated, it is extremely difficult to recognize genuine salvation in children. Rather than rushing them into baptism after an initial profession, then, it is wiser to take the ongoing opportunity to interact with them and wait for more significant evidence of lasting commitment. Even if a child can say enough in a testimony to make it reasonably clear that he understands and embraces the gospel, baptism should wait until he manifests evidence of regeneration that is independent of parental control.

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Here at Grace Community Church, our general practice is to wait until a professing child has reached the age of twelve. Because baptism is seen as something clear and final, our primary concern is that when a younger child is baptized he tends to look to that experience as proof that he was saved. Therefore, in the case of an unregenerate child who is baptized—which is not uncommon in the church at large—baptism actually does him a disservice. It is better to wait until the reality to which baptism testifies can be more easily discerned.

Foundational Keys to Evangelizing Children

It is not enough for parents simply to avoid these common pitfalls—they must also seek to put into practice the following keys to child evangelism.

Setting a Consistent Example of Godliness

Evangelizing children consists not simply of verbalizing the gospel with one's mouth, but also of exemplifying it in one's life. As parents explain the truths of God's Word, children have the unique opportunity to observe their lives up close and to see whether they seriously believe what they are teaching. When parents are faithful not only to proclaim, but also to live out the gospel, the impact is profound.

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Because marriage is a picture of Christ's relationship with the church (Eph. 5:22–33), the relationship between the parents as husband and wife is particularly significant. In fact, aside from the parents' fundamental commitment to Christ, the single most important foundation for successful parenting is a healthy, Christ-centered marriage. Setting a consistent example of godliness is indispensable.

Proclaiming the Complete Gospel of Christ

The heart of evangelism is the gospel, "for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). If a child is to repent and believe in Christ, then, it will be through the proclamation of the message of the cross (1 Cor. 1:18–25; 2 Tim. 3:15; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23–25). Children will not be saved apart from the gospel.

For this reason, parents need to teach their children the law of God, teach them the gospel of divine grace, show them their need for a Savior, and point them to Jesus Christ as the only One who can save them. It is best to start from the beginning—God, creation, the fall, sin, salvation, and Christ in His life, death, and resurrection.

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As they teach their children, parents must resist the temptation to downplay or soften the demands of the gospel and must proclaim the message in its fullness. The need to surrender to the lordship of Christ, for example, is not too difficult for children to understand. Any child who is old enough to understand the basic gospel is also able by God's grace to trust Him completely and respond with the purest, most sincere kind of repentance.

The key is to be clear and thorough. Parents more than anyone have ample time and opportunity to explain and illustrate gospel truths, to correct misunderstandings, and to clarify and review the most difficult aspects of the message. The wise parent will be faithful, patient, and persistent, being careful to look at every moment of the child's life as a teaching opportunity (Deut. 6:6–7).

One such teaching opportunity is found in the parents' responsibility to discipline and correct their children when they are disobedient (Eph. 6:4). Rather than seeking simply to modify behavior, the wise parent will look at discipline as an opportunity to help his children become aware of their failure and inability to obey, and subsequently, their need for forgiveness in Christ. In this way, discipline and

correction are used to bring children to a sober assessment of themselves as sinners and to lead to the cross of Christ where sinners can be forgiven.

As parents explain the gospel and exhort their children to respond to the gospel, it is best to avoid an emphasis on external actions, such as praying “the sinner’s prayer.” There is an urgency inherent in the gospel message itself—and it is right for parents to impress that urgency on the child’s heart—but the focus should be kept on the internal response Scripture calls for from sinners: repentance from sin and faith in Christ. As parents diligently teach the gospel and take opportunities each day to instruct their children in the truth of God’s Word, they can begin to look for signs that their children have indeed repented and believed.

Understanding the Biblical Evidences of Salvation

The evidence that someone has genuinely repented of his sin and believed in Christ is the same in a child as it is in an adult—spiritual transformation. According to Scripture, true believers follow Christ (John 10:27), confess their sins (1 John 1:9), love their brothers (1 John 3:14), obey God’s commandments (1 John 2:3; John 15:14), do the will of God (Matt. 12:50), abide in God’s Word (John 8:31), keep God’s Word (John 17:6), and do good works (Eph. 2:10).

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Parents should look for an increasing measure of this kind of fruit in their children’s lives as they continue to instruct them in the truths of the gospel. In addition, parents should be fervent in their efforts to teach their children about Christ and their need for salvation, but they should also recognize that an essential part of that work is to guard them from thinking they are saved when they are not. Understanding the biblical evidences of salvation—and explaining them to one’s children—is foundational to this work of protection.

Encouraging Possible Signs of Conversion

Because of the immaturity and fickleness of children, it is tempting for some parents to write off childlike expressions of faith as trivial, or even meaningless. In contrast, parents should encourage

every sign of faith in their children and use the opportunity to teach them even more about Christ and the gospel. When a child expresses a desire to learn about Jesus, parents should feed that desire and encourage the child when they see possible signs of conversion.

Even if parents conclude it's too early to regard their child's interest in Christ as mature faith, they must not deride a profession of faith as false, for it may be the seed from which mature faith will later emerge. Instead, the parent should continue to point that child toward Christ, teaching the truth of God's Word with patience and diligence, and always looking to the One who is able to open hearts to respond to the gospel.

Trusting the Absolute Sovereignty of God

The greatest need of children is to be born again. Regeneration, however, is not something that parents can do for them. Parents may pressure their children into a false profession, but genuine faith and repentance can only be granted by God who regenerates the heart. Put simply, the new birth is the work of the Holy Spirit and Him alone (John 3:8).

The salvation of children, then, cannot be produced by the faithfulness or diligence of parents, but only by the sovereign work of God Himself. Such a realization should bring comfort to parents. In addition, it should motivate them to bathe their evangelistic efforts in prayer to the One who does His work where they cannot—in the child's heart.

Parts of this article were adapted from John MacArthur, *What the Bible Says About Parenting* (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2000); John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000); Dennis Gundersen, *Your Child's Profession of Faith* (Amityville, N.Y.: Calvary Press, 1994); and Tedd Tripp, *Shepherding a Child's Heart* (Wapwallopen, Penn.: Shepherd Press, 1995). For a fuller treatment of child evangelism, consult these resources.

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