



Engaging Children with the Gospel

VBS Training 2020

July 31, 2020

Welcome to the *Gospel Presentation Workshop*. I am grateful to Haleigh and Kathy for asking me to contribute what I have learned about reaching people for Christ, specifically children. Many of you are teachers and have far more knowledge than I do regarding their mental and physical development. I will share what I have learned primarily from my seminary training as well as in life as a Christian father.

Children are naturally curious about spiritual things by first and second grade. They are curious about God, death, heaven, and church at an early age. Jonathan Edwards, an 18th C preacher/theologian in New England, was privileged by God to be a part of the first *Great Awakening*. He witnessed an incredible move of the Holy Spirit upon the people in his church, then watched revival spread throughout his town in Massachusetts. One convert was a little girl, age 4, named Phoebe. Edwards wrote:

She was born in March, 1731. About the latter end of April, 1735, she was greatly affected by the talk of her brother, who had been hopefully converted a little before at about the age of eleven. He talked to her about the great things of religion. Her parents noticed that Phoebe very constantly, several times a day, to her closet for prayer. She was soon praying in her closet up to five or six times a day. It was on a Thursday when her mother heard her praying. This time Phoebe was praying out loud. She was praying out of distress of her soul. *Give me salvation Lord, I beg you. Forgive me Lord of all my sins.* When she finished, she came out and sat down by her mother and cried. She told her mother she greatly feared going to hell and prayed every day for God to save her. The crying continued for several days until finally, she stopped and began to smile. She told her mother that the Kingdom of heaven had come to her. She appeared all that afternoon exceedingly cheerful and joyful. Her mother reported that from that day forward Phoebe had a great concern for her siblings' salvation and a great love for God's church.

Now all of us wish we could witness a Phoebe in our own homes and Sunday School classes, right? However, most children are simply not able to comprehend spiritual things like Phoebe. (Young children like Phoebe *with older siblings* seem to catch on a little faster). Let me share some *helpful distinctives* about first and second graders, third and fourth graders, and fifth and sixth graders.

First and Second Grade

In preschool years everything is about the present, the here and the now. Camden, my grandson, is three and able to recite a short Bible verse back to me. But a first and second grader is able to think in terms of the past. As a matter of fact, they love to talk about it! They are able to assume greater responsibilities and enjoy choosing their activities. They are concerned about right and wrong and understand best in simple, black and white terminology. Some may show an interest in salvation, but at this age I recommend focusing on building or laying a Gospel foundation. Teach them the facts about Jesus, short and to the point. *However, watch for conviction!* Watch for sadness and visible guilty feelings. Do not immediately encourage them to get over it or forget about it. Help them see, with a smile on your face, that God is at work in their person. (“*Heart*” language is literal to these children. So be wise not to say “We ask Jesus into our heart”).

Third and Fourth Grade

Norma Hedin, professor of Education at SWBTS, reminds us that children at this age are able to grasp *chronology, time and space concepts* and are more and more interested in *Bible characters*. They memorize easily. Socially they are especially sensitive to criticism and ridicule. Be wise not to embarrass them in front of others. They need adult role models because they are becoming aware of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Spiritually they believe God can and will answer their prayers. They believe God can hear them when they pray. They understand the concept of sin and that Jesus died on their behalf to forgive their sins. Feel free to engage this age with the Gospel *and invite them to become a Christian*. Pray with them when you sense conviction. Then celebrate their decision with the pastor and their parents. Again, conviction of sin is what you are looking for in those you are engaging with the Gospel.

Fifth and Sixth Grade

Rapid physical growth and an increased appetite mark this age group. They are able to think logically and responsibly. They understand reason and often think about the future. Just imagine what they must be thinking about the COVID-19 virus and how it is leaving its mark on society, and perhaps even their own family. We are now 30 years into the internet and 20 years into social media. They have seen more violence than most of us did in all of our years growing up. Spiritually this group senses a greater attachment to church activities. They have good feelings of belonging to peer groups, so church membership is important. This may be the angle you use to talk to them about salvation. Church membership and salvation are two very different

things. The children marked in my Bible since 2018 are Ashtin Tullos, **age 11** March 24, 2019, Bryson Bailey, **age 10** May 19, 2019, and Noah Youngblood, **age 10** June 30, 2020.

Apply these teaching methods for all ages: *Storytelling, Discussions, Projects, and Questions*. I have learned some helpful questions and have used them over the years when teachers, parents and grandparents bring students to me. Try a few of these this year as you probe and watch for conviction:

How do we know God exists?

How many Gods are there? (Noah Youngblood said “*I think this is a trick question*”).

Why did God create you?

How is Jesus related to God?

Why did Jesus die?

How then are we supposed to live?

These questions may be used as *barometers* to determine levels of childhood understanding. Other questions are more pointed and should be used when you think the child is ready to humbly receive Christ. Try these:

Who is God?

Why are in such a mess?

What did Christ Jesus do?

How then can we get back to God?

See or hear the difference?

Some Common Objections Among Older Children (William Fay)

- A. *I'm not ready right now* (And we must respect that decision. However, tell your pastor; tell their parents! This is actually encouraging to me because I hear a note of understanding).
- B. *What about my family?*(Allegiance appears to be a concern here).
- C. *Why does God let bad things happen?*
- D. *I am a member of another religion.* (It is okay to probe here. Remember, Paul *persuaded* and *won* people to Christ. Do you better understand the importance of knowing Christian doctrine as a result of hearing this response?)

By way of question, try these *with adults* to jog a conversation over to spiritual things:

Do you have any kind of spiritual beliefs?

To you, who is Jesus Christ?

Do you think there is a heaven or hell?

If you died, where would you go? Heaven? Why?

If what you are believing is not true, would you want to know?

These five questions above are from the book *Share Jesus Without Fear* by William Fay.

Let us all remember that salvation is totally a work of God. "No one seeks God." Rom. 3:11. "No one is able to understand." 1 Co. 2:14. "No one is saved unless the Father draws them." John 6:44. Lost people cannot make these kinds of decisions without some help. God chooses us for salvation, Jn. 15:16. It is by God's will we are saved, Jn. 1:13. We were dead in sins, Eph. 2:1. By His own will He brought us forth, James 1:18. If you sense your child is ready to receive Christ, consider this pithy but meaningful prayer. Prayers do not get us to heaven, Jesus does. So, the prayer must be God and Christ-centered:

Dear God. Thank you for loving me. Thank you for sending your Son Jesus. I believe He is your Son. I believe He is perfect. He died for my sins. He was raised from the dead. He is in heaven with you. I want to go to heaven. Please save me. Amen.

*Tell a parent and a pastor when you pray with a child to receive Christ for the first time with understanding. Baptism and discipleship are vital components of the salvation process. We must not leave the child hanging in the balance wondering "Well, what now?"

Jonathan Edwards, one of the best theologian pastor/preachers of his day, remarked about his salvation experience. While in college in the Spring of 1721, he said something happened deep in his soul:

I was brought to that new sense of things, to an inward sweet delight in God, quite different from anything I have ever experienced before.

For Edwards, salvation begins *with conviction*. This is what we must be after when we present the Gospel to all ages! Conviction is the work of the Spirit; we are merely messengers who have dealt with conviction ourselves in a humble submissive way. *You must learn to look and listen for conviction, for without it there can be no salvation!*

Be sure *you* have had a similar experience with Christ. Peter put it this way, "Be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election." 2 Pe. 1:10. This way you will "always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you." 1 Pe. 3:15.

Finally, consider this precious poem written by Amy Carmichael. She was never a biological mother but was known affectionately as *Amma* to the many children delivered to her orphanage. Carmichael was a Christian missionary to India. She died in 1951. As Tim Challies put it, "*Her prayer reflects the heart of a parent.*"

Father, hear us, we are praying,
Hear the words our hearts are saying,
We are praying for our children.

Keep them from the powers of evil,
From the secret, hidden peril,
From the whirlpool that would suck them,
From the treacherous quicksand pluck them.

From the worldling's hollow gladness,
From the sting of faithless sadness,
Holy Father, save our children.

Through life's troubled waters steer them,
Through life's bitter battle cheer them,
Father, Father, be Thou near them.

Read the language of our longing,
Read the wordless pleadings thronging,
Holy Father, for our children.

And wherever they may bide,
Lead them home at eventide.

Thank you for coming. You are such a blessing! Your Kingdom work is not going unnoticed. I hope this helps you to lead many children and adults to Christ Jesus as you participate as a privileged partner with God to enlarge His Kingdom.

Until He Comes,

Pastor Kelly-

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