

ARTICLES

WINNING THE CHILDREN

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“Verily I say unto you, Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3). With these words the Lord Jesus Christ began His teaching about the winning of children; in clear, concise terms He revealed the Father’s will concerning the “little ones.” Hence from this revelation are derived the principles which must guide in the winning of children to Him.

The Nature of the Child

The first principle to be considered is the nature of the child. Christ recognized in the child a special quality of life, for he taught that the child exemplifies those qualities which characterize the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14). What these qualities are we are not specifically told, but from the observation of children plus Christ’s teachings about his kingdom, certain conclusions may be reached regarding the child’s nature.

Innocence

Early childhood is characterized by innocence. Because the young child is not acquainted with evil, he is not yet tarnished by life about him. He does not willfully transgress the law of God. He is not dead unto sin (Eph. 2:1; Rom. 7:9).

Thus, when Christ set the young child in the midst of his disputing disciples and warned them that only those individuals who would become as little children could have a place in His kingdom (Matt. 18:1-6), He revealed the relationship of children to the heavenly Father. Children *are* children of the kingdom; of such *is* the kingdom of heaven.

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Because of Christ's grace wrought by the atonement, God protects children in their innocence. Little children are among the justified and may be received in Jesus' name; moreover, those who receive them, receive Him. ". . . and whosoever shall receive me, receiveth not me, but him that sent me" (Mark 9:37). "Take heed that ye despise not one of these little ones; for I say unto you, That in heaven their angels do always behold the face of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 18:10). Indeed, this aspect of God's redeeming love is a glorious truth, and is basic to one's understanding of the winning of children.

Natural Faith

Childhood is characterized also by natural faith. Dependent from birth upon others for all his needs, the child develops a natural trust in those who care for him. As the child looks to his elders for food, shelter, clothing, and for those special treats that brighten childhood years, he becomes confident that all will be provided for him. The child is even dependent upon others for his knowledge and easily believes all he is taught. The whole of his life is based on faith in those who are responsible for his welfare.

Because the child possesses this quality of natural dependence it is easy for him to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. This fact which is one which should be considered carefully, was accepted by Christ, for the warning is severe. "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones *which believe in me*, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and *that* he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt. 18:6).

Teachability

Another quality which characterizes childhood is teachability. In the parable of the sower (Matt. 13:1-23), Christ pictured the hard and stony ground which prevents the seed from taking root. He described also the thorny ground which chokes the seed after it has taken root. This condition is a picture of the heart of most adults; it is not the picture of a child.

The child possessing a tender heart and mind responds readily in teaching situations. Because he is easily molded by what he learns, he soon becomes submissive to that which best satisfies his innate curiosity and insatiable yearning for knowledge. This fact about the child's nature is a vital principle in working with children and in winning them to Christ.

The Age of Accountability

These truths concerning the nature of the child must not be heeded, however, to the exclusion of other truths. As the child grows and develops he soon loses these precious qualities of innocence, trust and teachableness. In a short time he outgrows the natural faith and dependency which he once had. Attitudes of hostility and independence become evident. Although this natural tendency toward change of attitude is accelerated and usually more pronounced when the child grows up in an unwholesome environment it is certain to develop in every child as he becomes aware of his own importance as a unique personality.

Because no two children ever develop in any aspect at the same rate, the age at which the child is capable of deliberately transgressing against God varies. Some children evidently reach this age and become conscious of sin very early—perhaps at three or four years of age or younger; for others it is later, depending upon the basic religious instruction they receive.

Evidently the Lord knew this fact about the growth and development of the child for He said, “Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish (Matt. 18:14). Here is a clue that at some point in the child’s development he becomes aware of his hostile attitudes and is no longer innocent in his relationship to the Father. At this unknown point we say that he reaches the age of accountability. Guilty of sin, he stands before the Father in need of redemption. At this point a child must receive the Lord Jesus Christ as his own personal Savior.

Winning the Child

“And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children. . .” (Deut. 6:6). The Bible is full of exhortation to the people of God to teach children about God and his workings. In Ephesians 6:4, fathers are exhorted to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. In John 21:15, there is the commandment to feed the lambs. Likewise, in Matt. 18:12-13, Christ relates the parable of the lost sheep to urge all believers to seek that one which has gone astray.

The most natural setting for winning children is in the home. What better place to learn the love and faithfulness of God? What better place to learn that “God has a plan for me?” Finally, what better place to learn that in God’s plan there are boundaries and

that if one steps out of those boundaries there is discipline?

It is in the daily happenings of life that these concepts can become a part of the child's experience. As he relates to parents and other family members who love him, provide for him, and at times discipline him, foundations are laid which lead directly into teaching the concepts concerning the facts of sin and salvation. Through the teaching of Bible stories and verses the child comes to know God's Word as the true Word. In this atmosphere of love and assurance he learns to pray to God as Savior, Helper, and Friend.

The church also shares in the task of winning the children and through its supportive ministry serves to reinforce the teachings of the home. Thus, it is the responsibility of all believers to give the gospel to children.

Child evangelism is the most natural form of soul-winning if undertaken with a proper understanding of how children are won to Christ. Basic to bringing the gospel to children is an understanding of how they develop and learn and how they perceive spiritual truths. Because a child's ability to grasp theological concepts changes with age, those who work with children should be aware of these differences and minister accordingly.

Pre-School Age

The pre-school child is limited in his understanding of spiritual truths; his religion is "caught rather than taught." Young children do not wait for formal teaching situations before they learn. From the moment of birth, they begin to learn from the actions and attitudes of those around them. Little ones gain knowledge through their senses; they need to see, touch, smell, hear, and taste in order to learn.

One of the greatest opportunities to win a young child is to capitalize on this learning potential. As the child has opportunities to experience through the senses, proper attitudes can be established about God and the church. Statements such as "God made this pretty leaf," or "God gave us these good cookies" are accepted as real statements.

An interest in God and the church can be built through short simple stories and conversations and with the use of pictures which depict scenes familiar to the child—parents, friends, relatives, families, church, nature, animals—all that God made. Repetition of stories, poems, songs, and finger plays reinforces ideas and concepts of an awareness of God and His love for the child.

As the child's language develops and he becomes able to understand and retain what is spoken to him, Bible thoughts such as, God cares about you (I Pet. 5:7), or God made everything (Ecc. 3:11) may be used in conversation with the child. When the child hears an adult pray even before the child talks, he learns that this is an important part of life and something in which he will wish to participate.

The young child is an imitator; he is perceptive; he learns quickly. How important it is to win the child at this early age.

Primary Age

The ability of the primary child to comprehend the gospel still rests largely upon experience, but theological truth is more clearly defined. For example, love takes on the idea of trusting a person, which brings faith more into focus. Sin is seen as anything which displeases God. Salvation now involves deliverance from judgment and punishment. The child's growing sense of right and wrong makes the gospel more relevant and also deepens his sense of personal responsibility to receive Christ.

For the primary child the message should be presented in colorful, moving ways. Object lessons and visual aids have a special fascination. With motivation, Bible memorization and study projects are appealing. Later as the gospel is spelled out in more specific terms, the primary child can grasp clearly *why* Jesus died in man's place on the cross. The resurrection stands out to him as God's triumph over death. The alternatives of heaven and hell make sense.

The primary child learns by doing. He wants to do things for himself. He is eager to learn. Those who work with the primary child should be aware of this concept and provide the child with many opportunities to become actively involved. Such activities as reading the Bible and acting out the stories reinforce spiritual concepts and ideas.

Junior Age

By the time the child reaches this age-group, he generally understands the biblical concepts of the gospel. He recognizes faith in Christ as active love and obedience. On the other hand, he regards sin in terms of going against the will of God. The ideas of redemption and reconciliation take on personal significance. This age is known as the "age of conversion" or the "golden years" of child evangelism.

The junior child is a "doer" and learns best by talking, questioning, and discussing. Because he is mentally alert, he needs opportunities to think and ask questions. He needs guidance in establishing habits of daily Bible study, prayer, and in setting standards for his life.

The junior is a creative person. Opportunities to express his ideas and feelings should be provided through poetry, songs, drama, stories, drawing and painting. Because he responds to visual stimuli, a variety of visual aids which present the Bible in moving, dynamic action appeal to the junior-age child.

Socially, he has a great sense of loyalty. To whom will he give his loyalty? He is a hero worshiper. Whom will he imitate? No other age-group presents such a challenge. The junior child needs to meet the heroes of the Bible; he needs to give his loyalty to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Leading the Child to Christ

Leading the child to Christ is ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. It is He who convicts the child of sin. It is He who illuminates and regenerates the child. Likewise, he is the one who must guide in counseling the child who seeks to receive the Lord into his life.

As human agents, those who work with children have a great responsibility in aiding the child as he comes to Christ. It is especially important that the worker be aware of the Holy Spirit's moving in the life of the child. They must watch for *evidence* that the Holy Spirit *is* at work. Prayerfully and tenderly they must lead the child into a saving relationship with Christ. Whether he seeks salvation during a public invitation or whether he indicates his need privately, the child must be led to Christ on a personal, individual basis. When the child makes any kind of response it is necessary, first, to discover his need and then to lead him step by step through the gospel truths to an acceptance of Christ, or an affirmation that he has truly received Him at an earlier time.

Often times when a public invitation is given, children will respond because others have done so. Should the counselor discover that the child does not know why he has responded the worker would do well to review the gospel message and give the child an opportunity to receive Christ.

The child should never be led to Christ apart from the Word of God. The Bible should be opened and the verses read, not quoted. Or, if the child is able to read, he should be encouraged to read the verses aloud, substituting his name wherever the words "his," "he," "whosoever," and "as many" appear in the verse.

Using only one or two scripture verses for each point, the message of the gospel should be presented in a clear, simple manner with only the single issue of receiving Christ kept in focus. Three

things are necessary: 1) To see himself as a sinner (Rom. 3:23), 2) to believe that Christ died on the cross to pay for all the child's sins and wrong doing; that Christ took the punishment for him (I Cor. 15:3, 4), 3) to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as his own Savior (Jn. 1:12; 3:16; Rev. 3:20). A suggested message outline is as follows:

1. God is love. God loves *me*. God loves (John, Mary).
Begin with the love of God and teach about the glories of heaven (Rev. 21:4, 21, 27; Jn. 3:16; Jn. 14:6).
2. All have sinned. *I* have sinned.
Develop the fact of sin, keeping truths simple and personal under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 3:23).
3. Christ is God's Son. Christ died for *me*. Using I. Cor. 15:34 as a basic text, present the glorious news of the gospel. Tell the child who the Lord Jesus is: He is the Son of God. The child needs to know *why* Christ died—that Christ was the *only* Son of God, that He was the only perfect one, and man's sin deserves death (Heb. 9:22). The child needs the message of the cross. Remind him that the blood of Christ was poured out for him (Isa. 53:6) and that Christ died, was buried, came back to life again, and is now interceding for him.
4. *I* receive him.
The child needs to see that the Lord Jesus is a gift (Jn. 3:16; Rom. 6:23). The child can understand the idea of gifts and presents. Help him to see that a gift has to be received or accepted. He now needs to be given an opportunity to receive this gift (Rev. 3:20; Jn. 1:12).
5. *I* live. *I* am saved. *I* belong to Christ.
Finally, the child needs to be assured that God has done exactly what He said He would do. After the child has the assurance of his salvation, he should be encouraged to live for his Lord, to read the Bible, to pray, and to tell others about the Lord Jesus Christ daily. Also, he should be encouraged to confess to God any sin which he may commit at a later time.

In summary, the steps in leading the child to Christ are these:

1. The child must be shown his *need* of salvation (Rom. 3:23; Jn. 3:3; Isaiah 53:6).
2. He must be shown the *way* of salvation (Rom. 6:23; Jn. 14:6; Eph. 2:8, 9).
3. He must be shown that *salvation is a gift* from God and must

be accepted as a gift or present (Rom. 10:13; Jn. 1:12; Acts 16:30, 31).

4. Once the child receives the Lord he must be *assured of his salvation* (Rom. 10:9, 10; Jn. 5:24; I Jn. 5:11-13).
5. Finally, he must be shown that once he is saved he needs to *grow* in the Lord (Rom. 12:1-2; Jn. 20:31; I Pet. 2:2).

If the task of winning the children is to be really effective there are several factors which must be taken into consideration. The first of these has to do with the understanding of terminology in dealing with children. Children do not think in abstract terms, but rather, in literal terms. Since this is true, one must be careful to say what the child will understand and to interpret correctly that the child might not receive the wrong impression. Also, one must be careful to employ only those words and phrases which convey the message of the scriptures.

For example, sometimes one will unthinkingly use a phrase such as "Jesus will clean a dirty heart," when what is meant is "He forgives our sin" or "Would you like to give Jesus your heart?" Since the concept is not literal and the terminology is confusing, it is better to say, "Would you like to receive him?" Another example of this type of error is, "Ask Jesus to come into *our* hearts" when it should be "my heart" or "your heart," thus keeping the invitation on a personal basis.

It is equally unwise to tell a child he has a "black" heart when dealing with the problem of sin. Instead, one should illustrate sin, explaining that wrongdoing is the result of sin (I Jn. 1:9). Children easily understand fighting, cheating, lying, disobeying, and even unbelief. Losing one's temper fits nearly all age-groups. The use of Scripture will show what God says in his Word concerning sins.

Another factor which must be considered is the matter of public invitations. Certainly, invitations to receive Christ are in order, but there are some guidelines which should be followed.

1. The invitation should be brief and clear.
2. The invitation should be personal. "Do *you* know *you* need the Lord Jesus today?"
3. The invitation should be voluntary. Children are led, not driven to Christ. To induce decisions through highly charged emotional appeals and pressure tactics is unwise.
4. The invitation should be definite. When possible it is best to separate the children from the group. The inquirers should be instructed as to what they are to do. For example,

“Those who want to receive Christ may stand and look at me.” Other ideas include: “Raise your hand,” “Open your eyes and look at me,” or “Come stand by me if you really mean it.” To help those children with special needs, one might instruct in the following way: “If you have a problem, you may come,” or “If you don’t know for sure you are saved you may come.” In all of these ways the invitation can be made definite and can serve to remove the child from the group in order to give personal help in counseling.

The last factor which must be considered concerns the child after he has received the Lord. Children need a shepherd, someone who can lead them into a closer and deeper walk with Christ. Since children learn by precept and example they need a guide who knows the way.

Once a child has indicated an acceptance of the Lord as Saviour he should be encouraged in the Lord. His response should be *accepted as fact* and built on from that moment. The following principles can help in this task of guiding children.

1. *Take time with them.* To win their affection show an interest in their concerns; listen to their chatter; laugh with them; sing with them; talk with them; play with them. Blessed is the person who can interrupt his business to visit with little children.
2. *Temper discipline with patience.* Children need to learn obedience in association with their peers. Expect it of them. Consistency and firmness will be necessary along with a double portion of patience. A child can be exasperating as every parent and teacher knows, but control of the situation must be maintained. Sometimes a chuckle is as effective as a spanking in meeting the challenge.
3. *Teach the children habits of devotion.* As they learn to read they can be taught greater love and respect for the Bible. They can attend the worship services of the church at an early age. These are habits that should become second nature. As they grow older they will need help to understand and to participate in these devotional disciplines more fully.
4. *Encourage their questions.* Children by nature are very curious. Usually they reveal what they are thinking by the questions they ask. Respect their desire for information and always seek to answer their questions as they arise. Someday, when they feel at ease they will likely ask questions

about the meaning of Christian faith and experience.

5. *Go as far in the explanation as the child seems interested.* This means that answers given to children should be applied to immediate concerns. For example, a child may see a funeral procession and ask what it is. This presents an opportunity to discuss death. If the child wants to pursue the subject, the occasion offers an appropriate time to explain one consequence of sin.
6. *Be alert to expression of spiritual need.* Seize the opportunity to speak about the things of God when the heart is hungry for help. Such a time might come during almost any conversation or activity. You might recognize it through a question asked, a request for prayer, a tear in the eye, or by just the way the child looks. Be observing, and when the moment comes, make it count for eternity.
7. *At opportune times, inquire about a child's relationship to Jesus.* This does not have to cause embarrassment or undue pressure. A simple question: "Johnny, would you like to tell me how you and Jesus are getting along?" will suffice. Where a warm feeling of love exists between you, a child may be eager to share his experience. One seminary student made it a point to talk with his children about their faith in Christ, arranging a time to speak with each one privately. Before he got to his youngest child the little boy had heard what his dad was doing, and thinking that he might be left out, he asked his father when his turn would come, for he wanted to talk about Jesus, too.
8. *Continue to clarify what faith in Christ means.* As has been noted, a child may make a sincere decision without knowing what it involves. The Christian leader is not surprised when later many things turn up in the child's behaviour which reflect superficiality in Christian experience. Probably the early decisions of childhood will be faced again and again as conditions change and the problems of the world become more personal. Keep interpreting the meaning of Christian faith in the child's growing context of life. Especially emphasize practical ways that a child may experience faith, such as obeying what is right, telling friends about Jesus, reading the Bible, and praying every day. Simply because children are immature in their experience does not mean that they are irresponsible or unsaved. It does mean, however, that

follow-up is essential to child evangelism.

Children can be won to the Lord and built up in the faith as God's people obey His commission. It is only as Christians yield themselves and allow the Holy Spirit to work in and through them that they will see children who are of the kingdom kept for the kingdom.