

# Leading Your Child Toward Authentic Faith



By **Steve Wright**



**Family Discipleship**

connecting church and home



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**A** father asked me if I would meet with him about his son's interest in becoming a Christian. This dad shared with me that his son wanted to become a Christian so he could take communion with their family on Sunday mornings. During our meeting, I asked the dad if there were any other indicators that led him to believe that his son was prepared to make this decision. The dad said no, this request was the first and only one. His son mentioned it to him last week because he didn't think it was fair that his sisters were permitted to take communion while he was not. I asked the dad about any evidences of conviction of sin, repentance and lordship and if any of these had been considered. The dad responded that these topics, including heaven and hell, had been purposely avoided because he didn't want his son feeling frightened or guilty. I shared that I did not feel his son was ready but that he and his wife should consider the practice of regularly living out the Gospel for each of their children to see. At the end of our meeting, the dad had one more question that saddened me greatly, "Pastor, do you think it would be okay if my son could take communion now, since we have spoken?"

Two years ago, I was attending a conference for student pastors and one of the younger pastors shared a story of how hundreds of teens had been saved and baptized at his church over the past year. I was excited to hear more. My wife Tina and I asked him and his wife to dinner that night, so we could hear what God was doing at his church. That night he shared that 75 % of the student salvations and baptisms happened at his church's summer youth camp. Interested, I asked more questions concerning how long this camp had been an annual event and what brought the students to this decision to accept Christ and be baptized. My heart sank when I heard his response: "We came to this decision because we realized if we didn't baptize them at camp, we would never be able to, because most of these kids we will never see again."

Surely saving faith is more than a wafer and grape juice and more than getting a child wet at camp. What about genuine repentance? What about a lasting "life change"? What about treasuring Christ above all else? As parents, we need to rediscover what saving faith is. This resource will consider the parents' role, salvation and what Jesus Himself taught concerning children.

## **A Biblical Understanding for Parents**

Unfortunately, many parents feel anxious or unqualified to lead their children to Christ. Somewhere between praying for our unborn child's salvation and answering questions about eternity from the little one lying

beside us at night, it hits us: *This is a very serious matter and I really do not want to mess this up.* Christian parents wonder if their child can truly believe, and if so, at what age. Adding to the uncertainty of being too eager or too pushy is the fear of holding a child back. Parents ask themselves serious questions, but they are either afraid or embarrassed to ask others for answers.<sup>1</sup> As Cos Davis Jr. points out, “Christian parents seem to have conflicting philosophies when dealing with the salvation of their children. Some seemingly manipulate or coerce children into ‘praying the prayer,’ while others take a completely hands off position.”<sup>2</sup>

Most parents today are asking, “What does my child need to know and do to be truly saved?” Fortunately, the answer to this question is not found in the opinions of man or in the ever-shifting tide of cultural trends. The answer is found in Scripture. In fact, from the first word of Scripture to the last, the entire message of the Bible proclaims the story of God rescuing and redeeming man unto Himself. Christian parents can rest in the promise of the Gospel: Christ has rescued them from darkness to light, and this promise is also available to their children. In Acts 2:39, Luke records this great news: “For the promise is for *you* and for *your children* and for *all who are far off*, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself”(emphasis mine).

A better understanding of salvation and knowing what the Bible teaches concerning your children and your role as a parent will give you biblically-centered confidence. Paul portrays this confidence when he writes to young Timothy: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well” (2 Timothy 1:5). In his first letter to Timothy, Paul referred to him as his “son in the faith” and expressed confidence that Timothy had a strong faith

that dwelled within him (1 Timothy 1:2). In the midst of personal doubt, fear and confusion, parents can have the same confidence as Paul.

## Salvation

A proud mom brought in her 3-year-old daughter to meet with one of our pastors. The mom prompted the girl to share her big news from the day before. Puzzled, the youngster offered, “I went potty.” “No, not

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1 Eugene Chamberlain, *When Can a Child Believe?* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 10.

2 Cos H. Davis Jr., *Children and the Christian Faith*, Rev. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1990), 19.

that one,” the mom replied, “The other big thing,” hoping to elicit the testimony of her daughter’s salvation experience. Truly understanding salvation can be confusing for both children and their parents.

The evidences of salvation can seem overwhelming to Christian parents. Some parents might find it easier to simply take their child to see a pastor as an easy remedy, but this option shouldn’t be the default. The questions parents have revolve around the fundamentals of saving faith. So what is necessary for salvation? Is it repentance, faith, belief, acceptance, confession, grace, baptism, asking Jesus into one’s heart, praying the prayer, or the simple assertion of belief in God? Questions like these when coupled with the eternal significance of their child’s salvation add to the overwhelming anxiety that Christian parents have.

One reassuring fact for parents to remember is that salvation is 100% the work of the Holy Spirit (John 3:5; 6:44, 63; 16:8-11). Christian author Art Murphy says to parents, “Remember, God wants your child in His kingdom more than you do.”<sup>3</sup> The Holy Spirit convicts a hardened heart of sin, draws sinners to Himself, forgives sin, creates a new person and alone brings regeneration (someone whose life bears the genuine evidence of salvation). Author Ro Eugene Chamberlain says, “Whatever portion of the Bible one is studying [or teaching], it is important to remember that the person and saving work of Jesus Christ is the ultimate focus of God’s revelation.”<sup>4</sup> More important than everything we think we might do or comprehend is faith in Christ’s work on our behalf.

Clearly the Bible states there is only one way for anyone to be reconciled to a right relationship with God (John 14:6). “The call for salvation for children and adults is a call to discipleship, to follow Jesus is a complete reorientation toward life, to learn to live for Christ in the world,” challenges author Daniel Aleshire.<sup>5</sup> In God’s eyes, children and adults are both objects of God’s wrath, and we are dead in our trespasses before salvation (Ephesians 2:3-5): “We must never forget that the Bible does not offer one way of salvation for children and another way for adults.”<sup>6</sup> Yet salvation is available to all who call upon His name (Romans 10:13). It is a free gift of God, not based on our good deeds or works (Ephesians 2:8-9). The hope of salvation that Christian parents

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3 Art Murphy, *The Faith of a Child* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 37.

4 Ro Eugene Chamberlain, *When Can a Child Believe, 40 Questions about Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2010), 151.

5 Daniel O. Aleshire, *Faith Care: Ministering to All God’s People Through the Ages of Life* (Philadelphia: West Minister Press, 1988), 15.

6 Eugene Chamberlain, *When Can a Child Believe?* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1973), 33.

desire for their children is strongly anchored in the work of the Holy Spirit who convicts, draws, transforms and sanctifies. This biblical hope moves parenting beyond behavior modification to the promise of eternity that God has written on the hearts of our children (Ecclesiastes 3:11).

## Implications of Salvation

Christian parents should be looking for the work of the Holy Spirit in their children's lives. Is there conviction of sin? Does your child understand that his sin is against God (Genesis 39:9, Psalm 51:4)? Scripture never mentions salvation along with "praying the prayer" or knowing certain Bible facts: "Knowing and believing the facts does not bring about salvation. While the facts are essential, salvation requires faith."<sup>7</sup> No greater biblical example has been given concerning the act of salvation not being determined in the eloquence of one's prayer than that of the thief on the cross. Scripture does not record his prayer, or if there was even a prayer that he prayed, or if he knew how to pray. Writer Justin Taylor says, "Grace broke through for this one thief and he saw that God should be feared in holiness, that he was justly condemned for his sin, that Jesus was innocent, that Jesus was the king, ruling His kingdom from the cross, that his only recourse was to appeal to Jesus and His mercy to be remembered in the kingdom."<sup>8</sup> In childlike faith, he confessed Christ as Lord. Jesus said to him, "Today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

Anyone in this thief's desperate situation would have most certainly done the same. Yet the other thief ridiculed Jesus and only saw Christ as an escape from his present affliction, and therefore he did not repent: "If you are the Christ, save yourself and us" (Matthew 27:38-44, Mark 15:27-32, Luke 23:32-43, John 19:18). Christian parents should pray that the eyes of their children would be opened to these same truths the first thief confessed. Yet many of us do not see our own children as these two thieves, guilty of sin against God and in need of the same pardon of sin.

Christian parents should be cautious about giving their children false assurances of salvation, especially when they are based on ideas nowhere mentioned in the pages of Scripture. While a child may want to take communion, be baptized like the other kids or even has a desire to not

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7 William L. Hendricks, *A Theology for Children* (Nashville: Baptist Sunday School Board, June 1980), 245.

8 Justin Taylor, "When Was the Thief on the Cross Converted?" *Between Two Worlds*. April 1, 2010, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2010/04/01/when-was-the-thief-on-the-cross-converted/>

go to hell when he dies, these thoughts may only be the beginning of important faith conversations. These faith conversations allow parents to point their children to the truths found in Scripture. In the book, *Helping Children Understand the Gospel*, the authors emphasize, “It is easy to confuse childhood curiosity with conviction. Spiritual interest is a good thing and we should rejoice when we see it, but we need to acknowledge that it is not always saving faith.”<sup>9</sup> Keeping the Gospel truths before our children daily is critically essential for parents. A child’s response to the Gospel should be to turn to Jesus as Savior and Lord of his life in repentance and faith by declaring that Jesus is indeed Lord of all. In other words, “We shouldn’t call our children to faith without calling them to repentance. Repentance is not something that comes at some later time once we put our trust in Jesus.”<sup>10</sup> It is the Gospel that leads to salvation.

## Parents

God has set eternity into the heart of man (Ecclesiastes 3:11). This eternal truth constantly emphasizes, empowers and validates our privilege as parents. Eternity is written into the heart of our children as well. This is why Jesus said, “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3). Why are parents commanded to talk to their children about spiritual truths? The message of the Bible is eternal, and God gave parents a great role to play in speaking that message into their children’s lives.

John Angell James, a pastor from the mid-1800s, said, “Recollect what a solemn thing it is to be a parent, and what a weighty responsibility attaches to those who have the immortal souls of their children committed to their care!”<sup>11</sup> Both Old and New Testaments proclaim the incredible role that God has entrusted to parents (Deuteronomy 6, Psalm 78:4-7, Ephesians 6:4). Author Delia Halverson says, “To share your faith with your child is an opportunity that cannot be equaled elsewhere. The home is the most important influence in the child’s life.”<sup>12</sup> Before there were churches, Sunday School classes, children ministries and youth groups, God entrusted parents with the privilege to teach their children.

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9 Sally Michael, Jill Nelson and Bud Burk, *Helping Children Understand the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Children Desiring God, 2009), 9.

10 Marty Machowski, *Leading Children Towards Gospel Repentance and Faith* (Glen Mills: Covenant Fellowship Church, 2007), 7.

11 John Angell James, “Religious Education of Children, *A New Year’s Address to Parents and Ministers*,” inserted in the *Evangelical Magazine*, January 1846.

12 Delia Touchton Halverson, *Helping Your Child Discover Faith* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1982), 11.

As parents we realize that only the Gospel can restore our children into a right relationship with their Creator, only the Gospel can pardon sin and bring forgiveness to our children, and only the Gospel can rescue the souls of our children for eternity. Every Christian parent understands that only Jesus holds the keys to eternity: “I give them eternal life” (John 10:28). Tina and I both felt the weight of this responsibility at the birth of our three children. We knew at that instance we held immortality in our hands, and without God’s grace and guidance, we were in big trouble. We are not alone with our feelings of inadequacy. Our hopes do not lie within our own desire that our children are saved or in our own strength. Our hope is in the promise of the Gospel: “For the promise is for *you* and for *your children* and for *all who are far off*, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to Himself”(emphasis mine). Parents are the first missionaries that their children will ever see, and for many children perhaps the only living example of the Gospel they can visibly observe every day.

## **Implications for Parents**

Little eyes are watching their parents. What do they see us treasuring and setting our affection on? Every day our children see us get on the “treadmill of life.” What do they see us running after? There is a temptation to think that our spiritual role is to take our children to church so that the “professionals” can take care of the spiritual stuff. This line of thinking is faulty and simply will not work in building faith that will last in our children. More importantly, this spiritual drop-off philosophy isn’t biblical. We see from the Shema passage and many others that God intended parents to live out the Gospel every day in front of their children (Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Psalm 78:3-7, Colossians 3:20-21, 2 Timothy 1:5).

The Gospel is for you and me, for our children and also for the nations (Acts 2:39, Mark 13:10, Matthew 24:14, Mark 16:15). The simple truth is that we will teach what we know but we will reproduce who we are. Tina and I realized that if we wanted our children to treasure the Gospel, then we needed to be on mission and invite our children to be on mission with us. A family that is on mission understands that there are two things that last for eternity: the souls of men and God’s Word. The Gospel requires a faith that is on mission (Matthew 25:31-46). Neither a believer’s life nor a Christian family should be about accumulating temporal possessions, safety at all costs, or pretending that our child is destined to be professional athlete or the next Einstein (Luke 12:15). One of the greatest and most powerful ways to model the Gospel before our children is to model a radical abandonment of those things that are

fleeting and fading and embrace what is eternal. The point here is simple. Do our children see that we really believe that the souls of men and women will spend eternity either in heaven or hell? If you and I really believe Christ's words, then we will move our families to be on mission.

## Children

Jesus spoke of children five times during His public ministry. Two of these times children were not the primary subject (Matthew 7:11, Luke 11:13). Our discussion will focus on the other three times children are mentioned and what we can learn from Christ's teachings. Jesus made the following declarations about children:

**1. Children possess a faith that Jesus said is a requirement for salvation (Matthew 19:13-15, Mark 10:13-16, Luke 18:15-17).**

Jesus' words are clear: "He was indignant and said unto them, do not hinder the children, and let them come to me. For to such belongs the kingdom of God. Truly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Matthew 19:13-15).

**2. Jesus said we should become like children if we want to be truly great (Matthew 18:1-5, Mark 9:33-37, Luke 9:46-48).**

"Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 18:3). Jesus is ascribing greatness to those who emulate the humility of children.

**3. Children are a gift (Matthew 18:6, Mark 9:42, Luke 17:1-2).**

"And He said to His disciples, 'Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin' (Luke 17:1-2). Jesus' teaching in these passages comes with one of His sternest warnings showing the priority of the soul. Jesus honored children because their souls are of great value.

## Implications for Children

Jesus' teaching concerning children had a central theme. The primary focus was on their faith and their souls, not on their season of life. Because our children's souls last for eternity, then our clear priority should be set on leading our children toward an authentic faith. Jesus taught that children can possess a faith required for salvation.

Our own children began to ask questions concerning faith at an early age. Tina and I didn't feel that we needed to rush the process but rather saw these questions as opportunities to instruct our children. When they asked about baptism, we asked them what they thought it represented. When they asked about the Lord's Supper, we asked what they thought the elements meant. These times became meaningful conversations as we talked about Christ as a substitute for our sins, repentance of sin, faith, forgiveness, eternity and salvation. When each of our three children came to Christ through faith, Tina and I both believed that we were witnessing authentic faith and repentance.

## Conclusion

Salvation isn't a one-time conversation. The human heart desires assurances from things we can see, do or feel. Salvation that leads to regeneration is much more than a simple, repeated prayer. As mentioned earlier, we must be very cautious about providing false assurances to our children on things that aren't directly stated or given in Scripture: "A particular prayer may or may not be an expression of genuine faith. We need to impress on children that the person who is truly trusting in Jesus will continue to trust and turn away from sin."<sup>13</sup> What we should be watching for along the way is repentance (Matthew 3:8), treasuring Christ (Luke 12:21), confessing Jesus as Lord (Romans 10:9-10), and faith in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:9). These aspects of salvation are all mentioned directly on many pages of Scripture. In summary, a child "must realize that he has sinned and be convicted of his sin accompanied by a desire to seek God's forgiveness. Each person regardless of his age must repent (turn away) of sin to become a Christian."<sup>14</sup> This is authentic faith and true repentance and faith.

Thank God that His Word teaches us how to share Christ with our children and thank Him for our children for they are a blessing from the Him (Psalm 127:3).

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13 Sally Michael, Jill Nelson and Bud Burk, *Helping Children Understand the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Children Desiring God, 2009), 9.

14 Art Murphy, *The Faith of a Child* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2000), 105.

# Leading Your Child Toward Authentic Faith

A Providence Parent Resource

*"At what age can my child truly believe?" "What does a child need to know and do to become a Christian?"*

These are just a couple of the many questions about children and saving faith.

The simple truth is God sent His only Son to redeem all people. Christian author Art Murphy says it this way, *"Remember, God wants your child in His kingdom more than you do."* The real issue is how you as a parent direct and lead your child or children to life-giving and life-changing faith in Christ. No person has more influence in a child's life than their parent. Your child looks to you.

This booklet is great place to start.

