



basic training: session one

teaching the gospel to children

At Sojourn, we believe that children, just like adults, need Jesus' saving love (Romans 3:23; 6:23). They need the truth of God's gospel applied to their hearts.

As a SojournKids servant and teacher, you should boldly teach the gospel message. The facts of the gospel are simple. One simple way to think about the gospel is to see it as the power of God for salvation:¹

The gospel is God's Power for salvation.

(God—Humanity—Jesus—By Faith, Not Works)

1. **God** is our holy and good Creator, and he demands that we be faithful in our relationship with him. This means knowing him, obeying him, and loving him (Deuteronomy 6:4-7).

Human beings are created to be dazzled. We are all worshipers at heart. Our desire as Christians is to raise a generation of children that are dazzled by God. We tell the next generation about God's great rescue plan for humanity because His greatness cannot be measured, and he is the only true source of salvation and joy (Psalm 145:3-7).²

2. **Humanity** is in rebellion against God. We have chosen to be dazzled by our own greed and self-interest rather than be dazzled by God. Children, just like adults, are sinful and in need of a Savior. This is one purpose of the Bible's teaching. As it shows us the holiness and goodness of God, it also shows us our rebellion and our sin (Galatians 3:10; Romans 3:20, 23).

When we teach children about God's plan to save humanity, it is necessary to teach them their personal need for the Savior. We do not flatter or deceive children by teaching them that their nature is good. Rather, we tenderly teach a child about his or her own failures—pointing out the specific sins to which children are prone (greed, pride in performance, lying, disobedience to parents, etc.). Our goal is to be tender but true. We pray that the Holy Spirit will use the truth to bring conviction to the child's heart and conscience, and ultimately to give the gift of faith.³

¹ Adapted from Jeff Vanderstelt and Soma Communities in Tacoma, WA.

² Adapted from Tedd Tripp, "Session 14: Helping kids see God's glory," in *Case for Kids* DVD (Shepherd Press/CCEF, 2006).

³ Adapted from Charles Spurgeon, *Come Ye Children*. Available at *The Spurgeon Archive*, www.spurgeon.org

3. **Jesus** took the punishment for our sin by bearing the punishment we deserve to the cross (Galatians 3:13). He makes us right with God because he lives to speak to the Father on our behalf (Romans 4:25; 1 John 2:1)

Jesus says, “Let the children come to me. Don’t stop them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to those who are like these children” (Matthew 19:14 NLT). Jesus’ words encourage us to simply and clearly teach about his person and work:

First, we must show Jesus to children in simple language. It is necessary to avoid complicated theological jargon and simply teach the message of Jesus’ death and resurrection. As Martin Luther has said:

When I preach I don’t look to the doctors and [government officials] of whom there are about forty in this church. I have an eye to the many young people, children and servants of whom there are more than two thousand. I preach to these, addressing myself to their needs. If other people don’t want to listen to this approach then they can always walk out! An upright, godly and true preacher should direct his preaching to the poor, simple sort of people.⁴

When teaching Sojourn’s children, you should avoid using church clichés and technical terminology (election, justification, sanctification, etc.) unless the terms are carefully defined. Use the catechism found in Sojourn’s *Family Worship Guide* as a way to define terms.

Second, we must teach children about Jesus—not merely give them moral lessons. Many children’s ministry curriculums use Bible stories (David and Goliath, Daniel and the Lion’s Den, etc.) to teach moral lessons such as “Be courageous!” These materials may accurately summarize the facts of a Bible story, but they draw a lesson from the story that the biblical author did not intend. The tendency is to draw moral lessons (“do this” or “don’t do that”) rather than seeing God’s actions in history to save humanity:

It is possible to miss the main point or purpose of a particular Scripture [passage] because there are so many details given. The details are important because they support the main point... However, we can become lost in the details in such a way that we do not focus on the chief purpose of the passage.

The story about John the Baptist is a good example. God’s purpose in sending John is very clear—he was to prepare the way for Jesus and get the people ready for Jesus. But for some people, the details are all they really know or remember, such as John’s camel hair clothes, the leather belt around his waist, his food of locusts and wild honey, his preaching in the desert, and his addressing those who came as ‘You [bunch of snakes]!’ All of these are important details in the Scripture passage, but the main point here or in telling any bible story is the ‘show them Jesus.’ That’s what John did; that is our calling as well. John the Baptist never lost his focus. He kept making the point

⁴ Martin Luther, *Table Talk* (H.G. Bohn, 1857), 427; quoted in Tim Chester and Steve Timmis, *Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community*, (RE:Lit/Crossway, 2008), 185.

over and over again: ‘This is he who was spoken [about] through the prophet Isaiah;’ Prepare the way for the Lord...;’ ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’

Don’t overlook or forget the details—just keep them in proper perspective. Reflect on the marvelous way God worked out all the details of accomplishing redemption for his people through his Son.”⁵

At Sojourn, we believe that the stories of the Bible are not moralistic fables about the adventures of certain individuals who lived long ago. The Bible reveals God’s plan to save the universe and humanity from sin through Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Third, we must give priority to the work of Jesus’ death and resurrection as facts of history. When speaking about the gospel to children, our temptation is to focus on the child’s inner condition—their personal struggles with sin and obedience. Even the language we use can tempt children to see the gospel “more as what God is doing in me now, rather than what God did for me then.”⁶ As a SojournKids teacher or servant, you must put your emphasis on the gospel as an historical fact. Phrases such as “Would you like to ask Jesus into your heart?” should always be avoided. While it is a Biblical truth that Christ is present with the Christian by his Spirit (Colossians 1:27; Ephesians 3:17), the work in our hearts is secondary.⁷ If we teach children *only* about the personal change that God does in hearts then we may inadvertently confuse or discourage them. When these children become aware of their sins, they may become introspective and worry, “How can Jesus live in my heart when I still get so angry?” Children must be taught to look outside of themselves to the love and forgiveness that comes because of Christ’s death and resurrection in history (Galatians 2:20). “One simple believing [look at] Christ will produce more light and peace and joy than a lifetime of looking within ourselves for evidences and signs of grace.”⁸

4. Christians respond to God **By Faith and Not By Works** (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Children, just like adult sinners, are easily deceived and manipulated (Ephesians 4:14). Just like adults, they may be tempted to find assurance in their own good works or religious practices rather than in the redemptive work of Jesus Christ. SojournKids servants and teachers should speak freely and often about the need to repent from sin and to trust in Christ. Encourage children to confess their sins and ask for mercy.

Do NOT offer false assurances. Do NOT assure them that a prayer for mercy (a “sinner’s prayer”) guarantees their eternal destiny. It does not. Human hearts long to find assurance in things that we can manipulate – our own knowledge, emotional experiences, prayers, or our works. We must discourage children from seeking

⁵ *Show Me Jesus!* Toddler, Winter lesson 7.

⁶ Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics* (IVP, 2006), 176-77.

⁷ The phrase “ask Jesus into your heart” is neither commanded in the Scriptures nor found as a description of conversion.

⁸ Octavius Winslow, *Soul-Depths and Soul-Heights*, (Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 4.

assurance in such things. Many children have prayed a “sinner’s prayer” or “asked Jesus into their heart” without fully understanding and “owning” the gospel’s demands for repentance and faith. These are not true conversions, and “the last state is worse than the first if the ‘convert’ becomes disillusioned and hardened against the real gospel.”⁹

Do NOT pressure children for commitments. Rather, trust that God is already at work in their hearts! Your responsibility is to faithfully tell the gospel to them and leave the results to the Lord. Salvation is a work of God. We must teach children that assurance is found in Jesus Christ and his work alone. Trust that God the Holy Spirit will assure those who are truly changed (Rom 8:16). Trust that he will bring conviction or assurance as he sees fit. Trust God to work in the hearts of his children to bring them to himself through faith, in his time and in his ways.

Next Steps¹⁰

With this gospel perspective in mind, our prayer is that SojournKids teachers and servants will have conversations with children about the gospel often.

So, as a SojournKids teacher or servant, what do I do to encourage a child who expresses faith in Christ without overstepping or pressuring the child?

- As stated above, stress the facts of the gospel. Teach children God’s laws and commands, which the Holy Spirit uses to bring conviction of sin (Deuteronomy 6). Then, teach them God’s promises and plainly speak about their need to repent from sin and trust Christ (Acts 2:38-39).
- Encourage un-churched children to come to SojournKids’ regular gatherings. God saves sinners through exposure to His preached and taught word. Pray that the ministry of SojournKids will influence every child and parent that walks through our doors with the gospel of Christ.
- Remember, as stated above, that children are easily deceived and manipulated, and, just like adults, they are tempted to trust in their own works rather than Christ. Moreover, signs of true faith are sometimes harder to recognize in children than they are in adults. It can be difficult to tell the difference between natural maturing and a Holy Spirit-wrought change of heart—this is especially true since children naturally want to please adults. Do NOT use abstract language (‘Jesus in my heart’), offer false assurances, or pressure children for commitments.
- Do not be skeptical about a child’s sincerity. Although we want to be careful not to give a child a false sense of security, neither do we want to unwittingly discourage children from believing that God can grant them saving faith as a child.
- Trust God to work in the hearts of his children to bring them to himself through

⁹ Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, 177.

¹⁰ Adapted from Clifton Baptist Church, Louisville, KY

faith, in his time and in his ways. Your responsibility is to faithfully tell the gospel to them and leave the results to the Lord. We can trust that the Holy Spirit will assure those who are truly changed (Romans 8:16).

What if a child—on her own initiative—says she is trusting in Christ?

- Express joy, but use discernment about validating that expression as one of saving faith. Offer encouragement to her to continue placing her trust in Christ throughout her life.
- If a child from a believing family speaks with you about the gospel, let her parents know the questions their child is asking. Parents are called to be the primary shepherds of their children, and they should be closely involved when their children are asking these questions. Encourage parents, with the support of Sojourn's pastoral leadership, to discern their child's heart carefully.
- If a child from an un-churched family speaks with you about the gospel, let the SojournKids leadership know so we can explain the gospel clearly to the child's parents, let them know about the questions their child is asking, encourage them to continue bringing their child to church gatherings, and build a relationship with them.
- Offer the parent a copy of Sojourn's *Childhood Baptism and Church Membership* policy, which is located at the check-in station.

Discussion Questions:

1. How often have you spoken about the gospel with the children in your classroom? Has the gospel been central in all of your Bible lessons in the past? If yes, share a testimony about how this has influenced the way you read the Bible yourself. If no, how can you make a change for the future?
2. Do you believe that children can understand the gospel? Can you give evidence of children believing from the Scriptures? Has unbelief kept you from teaching the gospel to children in your home or classroom?
3. Have you ever been tempted to assure a child that he or she is going to heaven simply because they have prayed for mercy or have become aware of their sin? Why is this dangerous?
4. When you talk about the gospel, do you put more emphasis on the objective work that Jesus did in history or on the work he has done in your life? Why is it important to put a strong emphasis on what Christ has done?