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## The Common Pitfalls of Evangelizing Children

**Matthew 7:21-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to Me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and cast out demons in Your name, and do many mighty works in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”**

One of the first courses that I took in seminary was Basic Evangelism. Part of the curriculum was for us to participate in different types of evangelistic activities; my favorite was street evangelism. One thing I quickly learned as I did this was that many people (at least in Kansas City Missouri) had at one time or another prayed “the sinners prayer,” asked Jesus into their heart, and made some sort of profession of faith. Most people that we talked to had at some point in their lives been baptized and had joined a church. But despite all of that most of those same people whom we talked to were completely lost. In fact I remember one man in particular who a classmate and myself shared with telling us that he had been baptized when he was very young, had grown up in the church, but his life since then had consisted of a string of marriages and a downward spiral of sin. He was only one man but this was the story, or a version thereof, that we heard over and over again.

This began the process by which I became very concerned that many people who call themselves Christians are in fact not Christians. Those days on the streets of Kansas City and later on as I worked in the church the Holy Spirit began the seed by which I now have a deep burden for the lost in the church. So the question has been for me: How is this possible? I believe the answer to some extent lies with how we evangelize our children. We have been looking at some of the common pitfalls in evangelizing children. The first one we looked at was the oversimplification of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We learned that children like adults must be able to understand the gospel clearly before they can be saved. The truth must be understood in order for salvation to occur.

Another common pitfall is that of coercing a profession of faith. Whether we as parents present the gospel in an oversimplified or thorough matter, many solicit some kind of active response to that message. This could simply be a showing of hands in a group setting, a repetition of “the sinner’s prayer,” or almost anything that would fall under the category of a positive response. Children will always respond in whatever way parents ask – not all guaranteeing real acts of faith in Christ.

Rather than getting our children to pray “the sinner’s prayer” or enticing them into some superficial response, we must faithfully, patiently, and thoroughly teach them the gospel and diligently pray for their salvation, always keeping in mind that God is the One who saves. Friends there is no need to pressure or coerce a confession from the mouth of a child, because

genuine repentance will bring forth its own confession as the Lord opens the heart in response to the gospel. As time goes by, it is *never* right to reinforce to a child that a childhood prayer is evidence of salvation.

The next pitfall in the evangelization of children is the assumption we make of the reality of regeneration. We assume that this positive response to the gospel is somehow a full-fledged saving faith. The temptation here is to think regeneration has occurred and is a settled matter based upon some outward indication that the child believes. One cannot and must not assume that every profession of faith reflects a genuine and true work of God in that child's heart and mind. Matthew 7:21-23 makes this truth very clear.

In addition, the Bible indicates that children tend to be immature. 1 Corinthians 13:11 says, **“When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I gave up childish ways.”** Proverbs 1:4 says that youth are in need of **“discretion”** because they tend to be a bit naïve. Proverbs 22:15 says, **“Folly is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him.”** Children can be unstable and easily deceived. Ephesians 4:14 says, **“so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”**

Children often think that they have understood the nature and ramifications of a 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 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 the circumstances of life as he or she matures do parents begin to learn more conclusively his or her spiritual perception and thus their spiritual direction. While it is true that many people make a genuine commitment to Christ when they are 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 with a level of caution in affirming a child's profession of faith and not be too quick to take any show of commitment as decisive proof of conversion.

Next we will take a look at the last two pitfalls of evangelizing children: assuring a child of salvation and rushing into the ordinance of baptism.