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# 1

## Biblical Foundations

### THE IMPORTANCE OF DOCTRINE

Doctrine must provide the foundation for all of our service for Christ. That is specifically true when a ministry involves both Bible teaching and the delicate, sensitive touching of lives. There will be no attempt to exhaust doctrine here but rather to introduce areas of further personal study for those serious about leading children to the Savior.

### THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

Any who desire a ministry with children should be careful to establish convictions from Scripture. First, we must establish the need for children to be saved. In essence that means we must recognize that children are sinners and need salvation.

1. *All children are born with a sin nature.* John 3:6-7 says, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.'" David acknowledged that fact when he wrote, "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me" (Psalm 51:5). Sin nature is transmitted from one generation to another. Scripture teaches that Adam's sin was imputed to all individuals (Romans 5:12).

2. *Early voluntary actions reflect a sinful nature.* You do not have to teach a child to rage, be selfish, deceive and lie, or be stubborn. An apple tree bears apples because it is by nature an apple tree. The bearing of apples in the fourth or fifth year is tangible evidence of the nature of the

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tree. The psalmist observed that fact when he said that the wicked go astray from birth (Psalm 58:3).

It is difficult for those who live in a humanistic society to acknowledge these facts. Yet the Bible clearly testifies to them, and no generation has more completely verified the truth of these biblical statements than ours. Failing to recognize the true need of children will certainly lead to problems in our ministry with them.

3. *Children are in danger of a lost eternity.* Establishing the above matters doctrinally is necessary for all who take Scripture at face value. Consider the Lord Jesus' message in Matthew 18. In verse 11 He uses the word *lost*, and in verse 12 He uses the word *straying*. Later we will consider other teachings from this text, but at this point note that the Lord Jesus recognized that children were lost and in danger of eternal judgment. Our ministry to children will not be its best if we ignore or deny this fact.

4. *Scripture views children as sensitive to biblical truth, yet in danger of hardening.* Ecclesiastes 12:1 warns against the hardening of age and appeals to the reader to consider the Person and truth of the Creator at an early age.

5. *Children can be saved.* Scripture indicates that salvation is a matter of a responding to the gospel in childlike faith. The Lord teaches in Matthew 18:3: "Truly I say to you, unless you are converted and become like children, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven." The mature faith of the theologian does not save; it is genuine childlike faith that brings salvation. A child does not need to become an adult to be saved; rather an adult needs to come in childlike faith to be saved.

6. *The Lord Jesus specifically invites children to come to Him.* Matthew 19:14 says, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me." He saw the children's need, realized He could meet their need, and invited them to Himself for eternal salvation.

### SAVED THE SAME WAY AS ADULTS

The fact that children are saved the same way adults are saved should be evident to any who have studied Scripture. The Bible presents only one way of salvation: "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). It is not uncommon, however, to find Sunday school material that teaches preschool children to "love Jesus."

The same material for primary age children tells them that they must trust in Christ for salvation. The implication is that although it is enough for little children to love Jesus, at a later point they must trust Him as Savior. This is doctrinally misleading. Children are saved the same way as adults. No one is saved by loving Jesus, and such material does not adequately present the gospel.

Some argue that young children are not able to understand the issues of faith and grace. I realize that children mature at different rates, and the ability to discern spiritual issues comes at a different point for different individuals. However, many have understood salvation by grace through faith at a very early age. We should present a consistent gospel message even to young children.

#### SAVED TO THE SAME DEGREE AS ADULTS

The Bible does not distinguish two different classes or categories of believers. The Bible also does not present stages or degrees of salvation. Receiving Christ as Savior results in salvation in its fullest sense. It is both complete and eternal. It is interesting to note that sometimes those who are most eager to present the gospel to children are the most suspicious when a child professes salvation. We make children wait years before we lead them on in the next steps of Christian growth, including baptism and church fellowship. This is a tacit denial of the genuineness of the salvation of the individual and lacks scriptural authority.

The concern of this book is to teach thoroughness and biblical accuracy in leading children to Christ. No doubt many boys and girls are unwisely urged into a false profession. But spiritually minded adults who know the Word of God and love children can discern genuine confessions by careful communication with children. There is no more biblical basis for doubting the genuine, intelligent, and uncoerced confession of faith from a child than there is from an adult.

#### UNDERSTANDING THE GOSPEL CLEARLY

“Salvation is from the Lord” (Jonah 2:9).

It takes a thorough understanding of the gospel and biblical terms to present the message at a child's level. We may unintentionally hide behind misunderstood terminology.

We must be able to present the great truths of the gospel, includ-

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ing redemption, reconciliation, and propitiation—terms that present the finished work of Christ—at the child's level. We must also be prepared to convey the glorious realities of justification, forgiveness, regeneration, and sanctification. If adults do not understand the doctrines of salvation sufficiently to present them so children can understand, then their tendency is either to use poorly chosen terminology or to burden the child with terminology that they themselves do not adequately understand. It is generally thought that just about anybody can work with children. However, to do an excellent job with boys and girls we may need an even more thorough knowledge of Scripture than would be needed in some ministries with young people or adults.

### TERMINOLOGY

In light of the above discussion, we need to be careful with our terminology. Biblical terms such as *believe* and *faith* should be clearly understood, and the adult must be able to define and to describe these concepts. We should be flexible with our terminology and able to use other biblical terms such as *trust* and *receive*. Lacking the flexibility that comes from a thorough knowledge of Scripture and biblical terms makes us prone to resort to other terminology that is not biblical and often questionable, such as “accept Christ” or “let Jesus come into your heart.”

### NECESSITIES

A careful study of the New Testament yields basic ingredients that ought to be included in an adequate presentation of the gospel. Many who have written on the subject of personal evangelism have grappled with summarizing the gospel and reducing it to its most basic and necessary elements. This is particularly necessary in child evangelism because adding ingredients that are not essential biblical truths for salvation could unnecessarily complicate and delay the response of children to the gospel.

I realize that it may seem presumptuous for anyone to authoritatively conclude which elements of biblical truth constitute the total and essential elements of the gospel. But I suggest that the message certainly include the following:

1. *The nature of sin and the need of the individual.* In every gospel passage the need of the sinner is fundamental. The apostle Paul in Romans insists that “the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (1:18). Although adults could unnecessarily frighten and disturb children by an undue emphasis upon this biblical truth, proper gospel presentation includes the need of the sinner and the fact of eternal judgment. What other reason would make one seek salvation?

Many point out that in a desire to avoid offense, some stumble into the pitfall of “easy believism.” Many of the shallow and questionable conversions that now plague the church may well be the result of an inadequate presentation of man’s lost condition. You do not need to shake children fearfully over the flames of hell. But the gospel message is not complete without a clear statement of the fact and nature of sin and the need of the individual for salvation through Christ.

2. *The Person and work of Christ.* All believers agree that the gospel necessarily has at its heart the Person of our Lord Jesus. In fact, He is our salvation. Salvation is not so much a state or an act as it is a Person. That is why John could say, “He who has the Son has the life” (1 John 5:12). If we are to be biblically correct, we must present Christ as the central Person and theme of the good news. Some understanding of both who He is and what He did in His death and resurrection are necessary in the gospel presentation. There is no finer preparation for evangelism than a thorough study of the Person and work of Christ.

3. *God’s requirement for salvation.* God has taken the initiative in extending salvation and has given us the condition on which His salvation is offered and received. In essence that means that grace is God’s part and faith is man’s part. Neither of these realities should be complicated, diminished, or added to. To add to either grace or faith is to destroy their essential nature (Galatians 1:6-7). Any thought of salvation by human merit is strongly condemned in Scripture. An addition of a system of works—even in part—destroys the true nature of the gospel. God stated one condition for humans to meet: faith that finds its object in Jesus Christ. Any adequate presentation of the gospel includes a clear understanding of that one condition.

4. *Results.* Any adequate presentation of the gospel should include the biblical promise of that which God will give freely to the believer.

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Children should have an answer to the question, "If I receive Christ as Savior, what will be the result in my life?" The ingredients of salvation, including forgiveness and cleansing, a right standing with God, placement in the family of God, and assurance of heaven should be included in the message.

The glorious dimensions of salvation are beyond comprehension. Even in eternity, we will learn more and more about all that God has provided for those who love Him and belong to Him. Yet it is unthinkable that we would present the salvation message to children without stating some of the results of trusting Christ.

Children sometimes believe that they will immediately become adults after receiving Christ. Others expect that they will suddenly become "A" students or never have any trouble getting along with their sisters, brothers, or friends. One of the best ways to avoid wrong expectations is to teach what Scripture teaches about faith in Christ.

### CAUTION

Before we leave the issue of doctrinal matters, a word of caution: the adult's role can be wrongly seen, and the place of the evangelist overemphasized. Humans are instruments through which God works in presenting His truth. This is both a privilege and a responsibility of believers, and we rejoice in the fact that God uses humans to accomplish His work. Presumably He could send angels to do a more consistent and eloquent job of presenting the message. But it is to redeemed humans that He commits the ministry of reconciliation.

God reminds us, however, that although one human may plant the seed and another water the seed, it is God who gives the increase (1 Corinthians 3:7-9). From beginning to end, salvation is of the Lord.

We must honestly face Jesus' warning in Matthew 18: causing a little one to stumble is a serious offense (v. 6). No thinking Christian would want to come under the Lord's condemnation for doing a shoddy or careless job. Pushing a child into a false profession or failing to meet the opportunities to minister to a child can be considered as acts of stumbling.