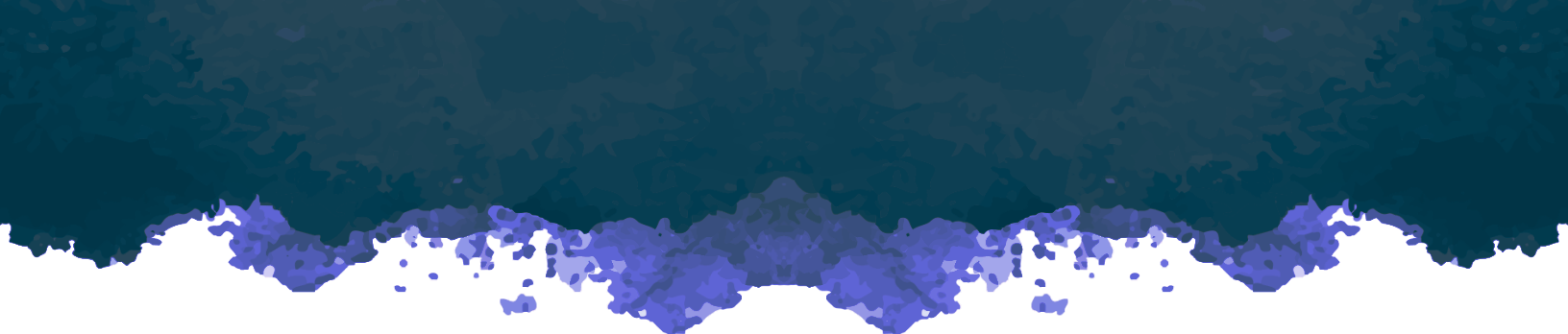




The Art of Spiritual Conversations with Kids

By Sam Luce



I've worked as a pastor in the same church for over 22 years, giving me a different perspective than many who serve in kids and student ministry. I've seen kids who were in our preschool program get married (which makes you feel really old). I have seen the results of different parenting styles and theories. And I have seen the fruit of different trends in ministry and education.

One of the more sobering realities for me, though, is seeing kids who I poured my heart and life into walk away from their faith—kids I still think about and pray for to this day. I graduated from a Christian school and out of 30 kids in my senior class, to my knowledge, only five are still serving God today.

For years, I have wondered and asked God why this happens. Turns out I am not alone. There are now books and conferences dedicated to this epidemic that is affecting generations of kids: abandoning the Christian faith. What is the answer we are all looking for? Why do so many leave the faith? Through my time in ministry (along with 15 years of parenting four children of my own), I have become convinced of one thing: those who abandon the Christian faith do so because they have never understood the gospel. Many were in a church for years without ever hearing the gospel. Others may have heard some semblance of the gospel, but never experienced the gospel lived out. They are not hostile to the gospel; they are ignorant of the gospel.

So, what is the answer? I am convinced that we need a revolution—a gospel revolution that shows how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus are transformative. Where kids are engaged in spiritual conversations—gospel conversations—and the gospel is lived out authentically before them.

And I believe such a revolution needs to start in the home.

Parents already want to have these conversations with their kids, but many don't know where to start or feel ill-equipped. They feel like there is, or should be, an exact formula to it—that spiritual conversations are a science. But spiritual conversations are more of an art than a science. There is no simple three-step process for talking with your kids about the gospel (I wish it were that simple). Even so, there are guidelines to help a parent develop in this art form:

- Focus on what is true
- Distill, rather than over-simplify, the truth
- Answer difficult questions honestly
- Seize the opportunities God provides

I've found these guidelines quite effective in navigating spiritual conversations. And as we explore what each means, I pray that they will equip parents to explain and demonstrate the gospel to their kids in a way that empowers: empowers those kids to understand, trust in, and live out the gospel from an early age.



Focus on What is True

When I first started as a children’s pastor, parents would plead with me to warn their kids against different books and TV shows that they thought would draw their kids away from the Lord. It was overwhelming—and exhausting. Not that I didn’t want to protect children—we should want to help them avoid unnecessary harm, and to protect them from the evil that exists in the world. Rather, it was overwhelming because I was focused on the wrong things.

It’s not uncommon for this to happen in Christian communities. We tend to focus on rules—dos and don’ts. What not to listen to, read, watch, or play. But our primary focus shouldn’t be on what not to do. Focusing on the dos and don’ts of the faith trains our kids to believe that they are accepted, loved, and cared for because of what they do, not as a result of what Jesus has done. When we show our kids in our actions and through our words the reach of the cross, the purpose of Christ’s substitutionary act of love, the only response is a life submitted to a holy God. Seeing God as holy and ourselves as sinners only makes His act of love more unbelievable and our need for Him more undeniable.

How we live is determined by who or what we love. We pursue living holy lives because the God we serve is not just holy, but He is “holy, holy, holy” (Isaiah 6:3). We want our kids to develop a love for Jesus, a love for the Bible, and a love for the truth. So how do we do this?

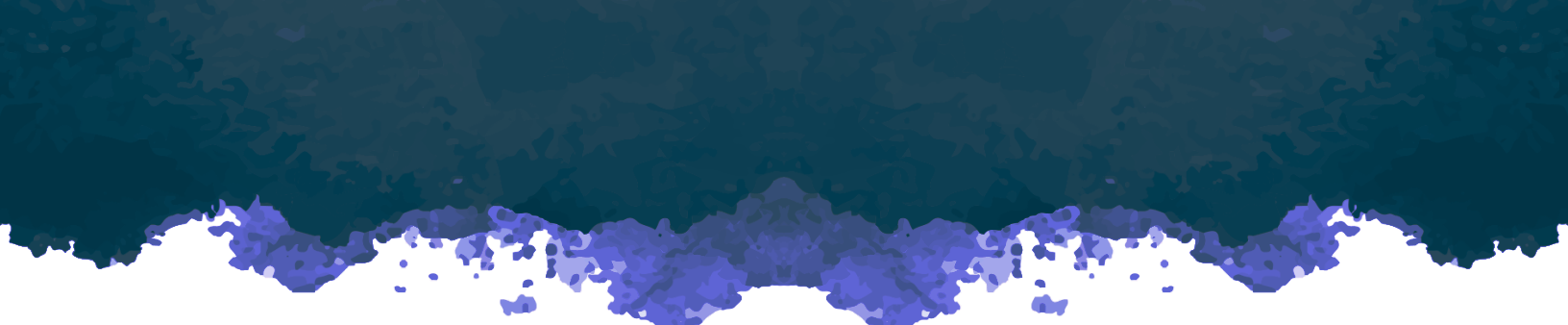
1. Read the Bible ourselves. This may seem obvious, but it is most important. We cannot give our children what we do not have ourselves. If the Word isn’t present and doesn’t matter in our lives, why would it be present and matter in our kids’ lives?

2. Read the Bible together. It’s not enough to tell our children to read the Bible; we need to show them *how*. The best way to do this is to read it together—even just a couple of verses a day—and discuss what we’re reading. Here are three good questions to ask:

- a. What is this passage about?
- b. What does this passage teach about God and myself?
- c. How does this passage point to Jesus?

3. Ask questions. Ask questions about what we’re reading in the Bible, but also all of life, especially about what our kids are watching and reading apart from the Bible. Encourage them to be active critics, not just passive consumers, of cartoons, books, television shows, movies, and games. Here are three good questions they can ask:

- a. What does it say is true about people?
- b. What does it say is true and important in life?
- c. How is what it says similar and/or different from what the Bible says is true?



We surely want to do all we can to protect our kids from unnecessary harm. But fear of what is wrong is not the best starting point for spiritual conversations. Rather, it is better that we start with helping our kids develop a love for the truth and a love for the Word. How we act and what we do is dominated by the reality that we are what we love. The Bible is not just a book of facts about God, it is God's self-revelation of Himself to us. It is filled with commands we are to obey, rules that are for our good and His glory; however, the basis of our reading and understanding of God needs to be grounded in His love for us that provides the basis of our love for Him (John 4:19). Our conversations with our kids need to be based in the truth of His self-revealing Word as a God who is completely holy and totally loving.



Distill, Rather than Oversimplify, the Truth

It is easy to oversimplify the truth. But it is much more powerful to distill it. Imagine your child asking you, “What is faith?” You might be tempted to answer with something like, “Faith is when you believe something is true.” Does that answer the question? Kind of. But believing something isn’t the same as faith. So a distilled answer might be to say that faith is about trust—about trusting Jesus, the Son of God, no matter what happens in life because of who He is and what He has done for us.

So how do we become distillers of truth? To distill truth for our kids, we need to:

- 1. Ask God for wisdom.** The Bible tells us that if we lack wisdom we are to ask God “who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly—and it will be given to him.” (James 1:5 CSB). He will give us all we need to be able to effectively distill the truth.
- 2. Be prepared ahead of time.** You don’t need to be an academic or a biblical scholar to have spiritual conversations. Kids want to know the answers to some basic questions about God and the gospel . . . and maybe about the eternal state of their favorite pet. What this means is having the sort of familiarity with the Bible that comes from reading it on a consistent basis, and to understand the gospel enough to be able to point kids to Christ.
- 3. Write down your answers to big questions.** Writing, whether in a journal or a blog, does two things: it helps you clarify your thinking, and it gives you something you can point your kids to or share with other parents.
- 4. Ask a friend who knows more than you think you do.** We all have people in our lives that know more than we do. Call them and leverage their wisdom to help you distill truth for your kids.

Oversimplifying truth is easier to do, but it is far less powerful. When we distill truth, we are helping our kids see how amazing Jesus truly is. And that’s the goal, isn’t it? Distilled truth helps them to marvel at the greatness of our Creator, and to want Jesus to be the hero in every moment, in every story, and in every day.



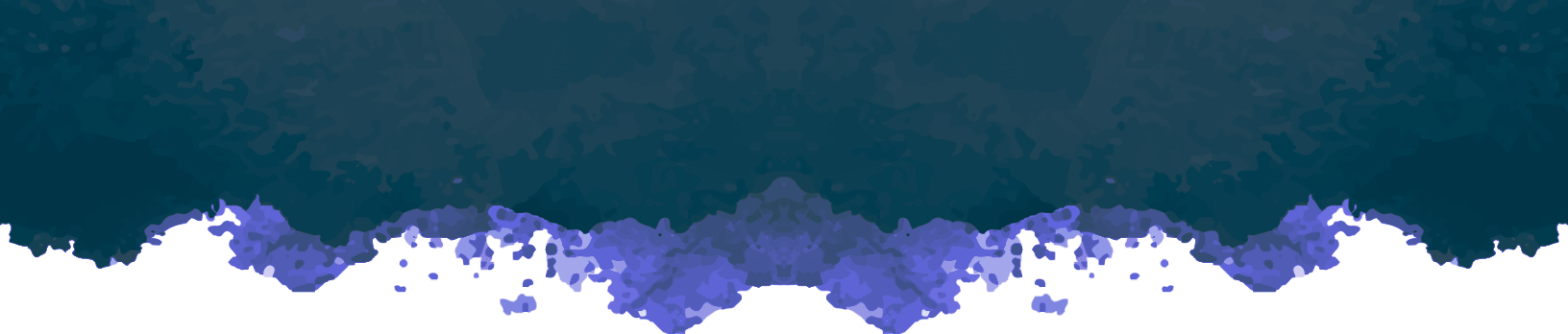
Answer Difficult Questions Honestly

Kids are naturally curious, which means they often ask really deep questions. That can be intimidating for us as parents because if we haven't worked out the answers of those questions ourselves, we aren't always sure how to answer. And in those moments, it can be tempting to deflect, or offer our kids an oversimplified answer that winds up being half-true (which means we can unintentionally lie to them). Sometimes this is motivated by a desire to protect our kids from potential harm. But does this approach help us to point them to Jesus? Unfortunately it does the opposite for many kids, especially the more inquisitive ones, who will seek out answers for themselves—which usually means turning to the Internet (hardly a dependable source of gospel truth). So what should we do? Rather than deflecting or inadequately answering questions, we should strive to answer their big questions as honestly as we can, and in an age-appropriate way:

Honestly. It might seem like a given, but we should never lie to our kids (which would include presenting half-truths as the whole truth). We might offer half-truths in an attempt to protect our kids, but all they do is cause them to doubt us. Most parents don't want to lie to their kids, but many appease their kids or pacify them because they are either tired or their child's question has made them feel uncomfortable. Honesty means telling them the truth in such a way that you have answered their question and a little bit more to also satisfy their curiosity. Parents used to be the Siri to which children turned to for truth. With the advent of the information age, I have seen kids as small as three years old ask Siri questions. This should scare us and embolden us to train our kids to come to us with their questions before they make asking Siri a habit. Honesty also means that if you don't know the answer to their question, you can admit it and say, "I don't know, but let's find out together," or encourage speaking to someone who may know the answer together (like your pastor after church on Sunday).

Age-appropriately. We should never compromise the truth, but we should also aim to explain it in a way our kids can understand. How we explain the gospel to a 3-year-old is going to be different than how we share it with a 13-year-old. But both are going to communicate the same truth: that Jesus died so our sins can be forgiven and we can enjoy life with Him forever. How do we do this?

- Know your child. Each kid is different, and some are much more mature than others.
- Know your child's learning style. How you communicate truth will depend on how your child learns and assimilates truth.
- Read books. Check the backs of books for age recommendations and borrow ideas and language from those books to help you communicate in an age-appropriate way.

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- Talk to friends who have kids your children's age or kids who are just a few years older than yours.
 - Talk to professionals. Often, kids pastors, teachers, or counselors deal with kids all the time and can help you understand how kids think and how to communicate in a way they can understand and comprehend.

Ultimately, as a parent, you have to make the call about what issues to talk about and when. While there are many subjects we can speak about openly in age-appropriate ways, there are times that you will have to tell them that a topic or issue is not appropriate for them at their current age level. Tell them you will talk about it in the future, but for now they need to trust that you know best. But if you are honest with your kids, they will trust you when you tell them they need to wait. And regardless of the subject, every big question gives us the opportunity to point our kids to Jesus, and to show them the ways in which the gospel shapes how we see the world and changes what we love.



Seize the Opportunities God Gives

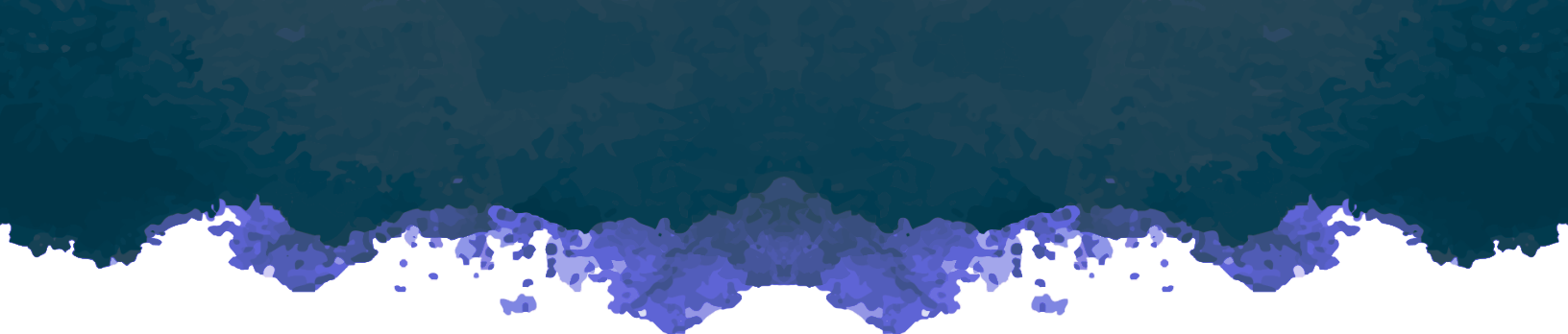
One of the most difficult things about spiritual conversations is that they are conversations. This means they don't happen at a scheduled time and place of our convenience. They sometimes come out of nowhere which means we need to be ready, "in season and out of season" as Paul wrote (2 Tim. 4:2). While we may miss many of these opportunities, fortunately, God gives plenty of others to take advantage of.

Some opportunities come from the world around us. Despite being no fan of winter, I love that it ushers in the arrival of spring which gives me opportunities to start spiritual conversations with my kids. Take the amazing way trees grow new leaves each spring, and how flowers know when it is just the right time to come out and display their beauty, for example. Our world truly is an amazing place—and all of it points to our Creator. So we should point these things out to our children, and help them see how all the world "declares the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1).

Others come from our mistakes. Sometimes we are harsh or jump to conclusions and make mistakes as parents. When we mess up, we need to humble ourselves, and ask our kids for forgiveness. There is nothing more powerful than parents modeling to their kids their need for grace, forgiveness, and redemption. When we demonstrate humility in asking for forgiveness, we show our kids that we always need God's help and in doing that, we form within them the powerful perspective of our world through the lens of the gospel and we create opportunities for amazing spiritual conversations about God's love, grace, and mercy to us.

Others still come at bedtime. I don't know about your kids, but mine hate going to bed. They drag this nightly ritual on and on to suck the marrow that is left of the passing day. They come down the stairs for water, to get toothpaste, to say goodnight . . . You get the picture. I have found that, at night in their beds, free of screens and other distractions, they listen better and open up about what's on their minds. When I read Scripture to them or a devotional, they always ask questions because they are not in a rush to get to the next thing. So, bedtime is a great time to talk about issues that our kids might not be ready to discuss otherwise and to dive into big questions about God and the gospel.

The opportunities God gives us are moments when we can help our kids see how what we believe about God plays out in the rest of the world: When we have the chance to connect the dots between a rainbow in the sky and God's promise of redemption, when we can show our kids that we also sin and need God's forgiveness just like they do, or when we can take a few extra minutes at bedtime to talk about how the love we have for our kids is like the love God has for us in Jesus. Kids who abandon their faith don't do it because they haven't heard it. Most have. The great reality is that many have not seen the gospel at work in the lives of their parents.



They haven't connected the gospel to the good grace gifts we have been given by a good and gracious God. We must preach the gospel, show the gospel, and connect the gospel to the hearts of our kids over and over until they, by God's grace alone, see Jesus as beautiful, as lovely, and as all-satisfying.



Conclusion

I started this saying we needed a revolution—a gospel revolution. A revolution where parents are engaging their kids about the things that really matter, where we are taking the lead in helping them think through how to understand and respond to all that God has done for them through Jesus Christ. And that’s the goal we need to keep before us at all times: the goal of spiritual conversations is not to have spiritual conversations. It is not to give them answers. The goal is for them to encounter and fall deeply in love with God Himself.

This comes from us as parents finding our joy in God himself. A revelation in our kids will not come with more information and new information. This resource is called *The Art of Spiritual Conversations* because conversations with kids are an art, not a science. If you do all four of the things mentioned above, you won’t guarantee that your kids will love Jesus. A revolution in our kids starts with parents who have had a renovation of the heart. Our kids will rarely love what we don’t value. They don’t just need answers to questions. They don’t just need information. They need to see the gospel take on flesh in the lives of their own parents. They need to see what a faith looks like lived out by someone whose life has been rightly ordered by the gospel. They need to see how Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection change everything. The end result of this pursuit of understanding of God applied to our daily lives should always end in doxology, or praise. I love that Paul is moved to praise God as a result of understanding and reflection on the gospel:

This saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance: “Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners”—and I am the worst of them. But I received mercy for this reason, so that in me, the worst of them, Christ Jesus might demonstrate his extraordinary patience as an example to those who would believe in him for eternal life. Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen. (1 Tim 1:15-17, CSB)

Our desire for our kids is not a full head but a warm heart. We want them to be moved to reflexively worship God for who He is revealed in Christ: “to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.”