

Jared Kennedy
**LEADING CHILDREN TO
WORSHIP CHRIST**

I. Introduction: The Colossian “Secret”

- A. Paul wrote to the Christians in Colossae to teach them how to live the good life as a Christian.
- B. The Colossians were a lot like us.
- C. Power for living the good life as a Christian comes because of who Jesus is and what Jesus has done (Colossians 1:15-17; 2:8; 3:1b-4)

**II. What does this have to do with leading children to worship Christ?
Everything!**

- A. When we prepare a worship service for children, we’re tempted to ask the question, “What do children need to learn?”
- B. In an essay entitled “On Three Ways of Writing for Children” (1952), C. S. Lewis wrote, “If we ask that question we are assuming too superior an attitude. It would be better to ask, ‘What do I need?’ For I think we can be sure that what does not concern us deeply will not deeply interest our readers [or singers], whatever their age.” In other words, children are just as human as adults, and most often need to learn the same things. Just like adults, kids need to learn and experience who Jesus is and what He has done.
- C. Kids need to praise the mighty Creator for all of His dazzling greatness. They need to sing about humanity’s rebellion against God, and confess their sins corporately through song. Children’s music should teach them how to confess faith in Christ—in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Children need to sing about how Christ speaks to the Father on behalf of Christians, and how He will one day return and restore this broken world. Children need to hear the gospel in their music—just the same as us. This is the main thing in Christian teaching for both adults and children (Colossians 1:28), and it should be the same with Christian teaching through music (Colossians 3:16).

III. So, what is the gospel? God—Kids—Jesus—Response

- A. **God is the _____ in all of the Bible's stories, so He should be central in the way that we teach and sing with kids.**
1. Where is God in the way that we typically teach and sing? Take, for example, the Sunday School song, *Only a Boy Named David*. Only David? Where is God? Moreover, you may have heard this story taught so that the main point is to be brave and face big obstacles with courage. But what will they remember about God?
 2. Children weren't made to know David (though I hope they do). They were created to know God and love Him. If we want to teach our children the gospel, we must begin with the main character—the God who made them, loves them, and rescues them.
 3. Keep it practical:
 - a. *Choose songs that _____ God for his attributes—his goodness and greatness. Kids need to praise the mighty Creator for all of His dazzling greatness (e.g. *Almighty Creator*).*
 - b. When telling a story through song, *make God the _____*.
 - c. *Sing and play to the glory of God—choosing _____ music that is excellent in its own genre—good music that even adults will like. In the same essay quoted earlier, C. S. Lewis said, “A children’s story which is enjoyed only by children is a bad children’s story.” The same goes for a children’s song.*
- B. **Kids are just as _____ as we adults, and we who work with kids must remember that they are fellow _____ in the same cosmic drama.** The “story of creation, fall, redemption, and consummation should frame every aspect of our lives—including family life,”¹ and that includes the way that we conduct a children’s worship service.
1. First in the storyline, we see that God _____ children for worship. All people are commanded to worship God—both believers and unbelievers (1 Chronicles 16:23-25). Just like adults, kids are created for worship. As Ted Tripp says, “Children are created to be dazzled.” Our desire as Christians is to bring up a generation of

¹ Timothy Paul Jones, *Family Ministry Field Guide: how your church can equip parents to make disciples*, (Indianapolis: Wesley Publishing House, 2011), 72.

children that are dazzled by God—captured by His creative and redemptive works—always talking about them to one another. We tell the next generation about God because He is the only true source of salvation and joy, and they were created to know Him (Psalm 145:3-7).² That can seem a bit abstract, but knowing and delighting in the Creator God could not be more concrete. It simply involves the recognition that this is our Father’s world. So, we should enjoy it and order our lives in accordance with His created design.

2. Next, we see that kids _____ against God and His created order. Just like adults, children are sinful. Even kids exchange delight in God’s glory for delight in the pleasures of the moment (Romans 1:21; 3:23). They, like us, are always worshiping something. The better question to ask is, “What are our children worshiping?”³ Dolls (and other toys) are often idols that compete for our children’s worship. If you don’t believe this, think about what happens when playtime is over and kids are called to bath time or bed. There is a battle for affections going on in our kids’ hearts.
3. Then, we see that children need _____ (more on this in the next section).
4. Finally, in light of _____ coming, we see that children are potential brothers and sisters in Christ.⁴ To be embraced by God’s redemption is to be adopted as God’s heir, gaining a new identity that transcends every earthly status (Romans 8:15-17; Galatians 3:28-29; 4:3-7; Ephesians 1:5; 2:13-22; Colossians 1:12). If our children stand beside us at the heavenly worship gathering (Revelation 7:9-12), it will not be as our children but as our blood-redeemed brothers and sisters (Luke 20:34-38).

² Tedd Tripp, “Session 14: Helping kids see God’s glory,” in *Case for Kids* DVD (Shepherd Press, CCEF, 2006)

³ Mike Bradshaw and Ken Boer, “Teaching Children to Worship Christ,” seminar notes from *WorshipGod09: Generation to Generation*, (Sovereign Grace Ministries, 2009).

⁴ This section is paraphrased from Jones, *Family Ministry Field Guide*, 74-75; and Rob Plummer, “Bring Them Up in the Discipline and Instruction of the Lord,” in *Trained in the Fear of God: Family Ministry in Theological, Historical, and Practical Perspective*, eds. Randy Stinson and Timothy Paul Jones (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011).

5. Keep it practical:
- a. *Call children to live in accordance with God's _____*. We call them to sing and praise, because they were created for worship. We encourage them to worship as young men and young women because God created them male and female. The Scriptures testify to gender confusion in worship (1 Corinthians 11:1-16; 1 Timothy 2:8-15). Consider the value of learning to worship in accordance with God's created design at a young age.
 - b. *Choose songs that teach a doctrine of _____* (e.g. *No One Is Good*).
 - c. *Choose music that addresses a child's idols by giving them a better vision of Christ as the _____ treasure.* Our songs should address a child's idolatry and even lampoon it. This is best done by painting a picture of the silliness of the idol in relation to Jesus. Sojourn pastor, Mike Cospers, has written about how we need our imaginations to be captured by truth, "We need to be won over by the surpassing beauty of Christ, the utterly compelling glory of God. We must see them as a greater good and a better hope than all the promises of our idols and daydreams."⁵ In this way, the work of a children's worship service (and any worship service) is to present Jesus as more beautiful and believable than our best loves (e.g. *Nothing Better than Jesus*).
 - d. *Be a _____ worship leader.* Calling children to their responsibilities comes naturally to us, but it can easily digress into shaming children—"Johnny, pay attention. You should be leading, and you are just playing around." Because God has placed us in the role of an authority over children, children are called to submit and follow us (Ephesians 6:1; 1 Peter 5:5), but if this is our only focus then we need to expand our vision beyond Creation and Fall. Because children are also potential brothers and sisters in Christ, we are called to lay down our lives for them (1 John 3:16).⁶ At the very least, _____, _____, _____, and make _____ contact.

⁵ Mike Cospers, "A Pipe Bomb of Truth Exploding Our Idols," at <http://thegospelcoaliton.org>, (November 4, 2010).

⁶ Paraphrased from Jones, *Family Ministry Field Guide*, 76.

- e. *Finally, be _____ about your own sin.* Because we are “elders” and parents, we seek to help children see their sin. We discipline, instruct, and encourage them to pursue what is pure and good (Romans 15:14; 1 Timothy 5:1-2). We help them recognize the right path and seek to restore them when they veer onto the wrong path (Matthew 18:21-22; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20; 1 John 5:16). *But*, as older brothers and sisters in Christ (at least potentially), we are willing to confess our own sin and repent before them as well (James 5:16). Because our children are potential brothers and sisters in Christ, we must seek to develop the “lead by repentance” habits of an older Christian sibling even before they come to faith.⁷
- C. **Jesus _____ children. So, when we talk and sing with children, we should talk and sing about Him—who He is and what He has done.** 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 should encourage us to simply and clearly teach children about Him—who He is and what he has done. As we discussed above, our culture thinks that children need lots of different things. But Jesus makes clear that He is the one thing that should not be missed (Matthew 19:21). Keep it practical:
1. *Choose children’s music that is clear, accessible, and “singable.”*
 - a. Children’s songs should be in a range that is appropriate for young children (pre-puberty) to sing. Too many songwriters write for their own low voices and not for kids’ voices.
 - b. Children’s songs should also have a _____ that is easy to learn.
 - c. Choose songs that are age-appropriate. A song’s meaning needs to be as clear as possible for children. Consider their age. Because young children have a difficult time with abstract concepts, we should avoid songs with a strong use of poetic and symbolic imagery and seek songs that have concrete language. “I look to the cross,” vs “Thank you for Jesus. He died on the cross for my sins.”

⁷ Paraphrased from Jones, *Family Ministry Field Guide*, 76.

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- d. We should not use “Christianese.” Avoid using church clichés and technical words like election, justification, sanctification, etc. unless you are careful to teach children a definition for these words that they can remember. Use simple catechism questions and answers to help your explanations (e.g. “What is sin? Sin is anything you think, say, or do that breaks God’s law.”). See the catechism songs by Judy Rogers or Diana Beach Batarseh
2. *Choose songs that focus on the _____ about what Jesus has done rather than what a child should do or feels.* In children’s ministry, we often emphasize the ABCs: (A) Admit you are a sinner; (B) Believe in Jesus; and (C) Confess faith in Him. There is really nothing wrong with this (see Romans 10:9-10) so long as we make clear that salvation is not about what we do but about what Christ has done.⁸ However, if we only talk to kids about what they should do, we may confuse or discourage them. When these children become aware of their sins, they may become introspective and worry, “Did I do enough? How can Jesus live in my heart when I still get so angry?” The ABCs and “invite Jesus into my heart” language are subjective, but who Jesus is and what he has done by dying and rising from death are objective facts from history. An excellent song in this respect is *Jesus Came To Earth*.
3. *Choose songs or _____ that help children to see Jesus throughout the Bible.* “Whatever portion of the Bible one is studying, it is important to remember that the person and saving work of Jesus Christ is the ultimate focus of God’s revelation.”⁹ One pastor has said, “Jesus is the Metropolis of the Bible, and every passage contains a road that leads to him.” It is the responsibility of both lead worshipers and Bible teachers to help children find that road from the text to Jesus every week. Christmas carols and Easter hymns contain some of the clearest explanations of the gospel. At other times, there will not be a song that makes a direct connection between Christ’s work and the text being taught.

⁸ This section adapted from Marty Machowski, *Leading Children to Gospel Faith and Repentance*, (Covenant Fellowship Church, 2007), 2; Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics*, (IVP, 2006), 176-77.

⁹ Rob Plummer, *40 Questions about Understanding the Bible*, (Kregel, 2010), 151.

4. Worship leaders should work with children's Bible teachers to choose songs and write clear explanations that emphasize the particular aspect of Jesus' saving work that is being highlighted by the weekly lesson. We type out a script for our leaders to ensure theological precision, to help musicians who are still learning how to work with children, and to help keep the service moving.
 5. *Always choose _____ songs to ensure you are singing about the Jesus of the Bible.* When we attempt to give Jesus to children without the Bible, we are in danger of giving them a Jesus of our own making. We begin to teach about the gospel according to our own understanding of it, our traditions or our experience, rather than according to what God has revealed in his book. (2 Timothy 3:16). Children need to sing songs that present the Bible's teachings with clarity and accuracy. One of the best ways to do this is to teach children Scripture memory songs. Some of the best are the ones by Mark Altrogge and those by Seeds Family Worship.
- D. **Christians respond to God by faith and not by works** (Ephesians 2:8-9). The gospel requires a response, so we must speak and sing freely about responding to Jesus—praising, repenting, trusting, and obeying. Our songs should encourage children to confess their sins and ask for mercy. Worship leaders should encourage singing, raising hands, clapping, dancing (Psalm 98). One of our favorite songs at SojournKids is the spiritual popularized by Kirk Franklin:

When I think about Jesus
 And what He's done for me...
 When I think about Jesus
 And how He set me free...
 I want to sing, [shout, jump, dance]
 All day and all night.

On the other hand, we must discourage children from believing that their responsiveness makes them a Christian. Children, just like adults, can deceive themselves into thinking that good works or religious practices are saving. We don't assure children that a prayer for mercy (a "sinner's prayer") guarantees that they will go to heaven, because saying a prayer does not guarantee that a child's heart has changed. As much as we want to assure our hearts with things we can manipulate (our knowledge, emotional experiences, prayers, or our works), these things offer no lasting hope. Similarly, we must discourage children from seeking assurance in the emotional experience that they have during a worship service. Here are a few practical pointers for encouraging responsiveness while avoiding false assurance. Keep it practical:

1. *Enjoy _____ yourself!* Expressive joy in the gospel message makes it believable to our children. Leaders who truly display the joy of the Lord in their whole being encourage children to believe. Parents and teachers are the curriculum that children will learn most fully. So, be expressive yourself. It is a good thing to praise the Lord (Psalm 92:1).¹⁰
2. *Encourage kids to be responsive and _____!* We shouldn't demand outward expression from our kids, but we can encourage it. The Scripture calls all people to clap their hands to the Lord. We should feel comfortable doing the same thing. The call to worship God is universal (Psalm 47:1). Call your kids to respond to God with their hearts, but don't set your expectations too high for their responsiveness or heart engagement in singing, because many of the children are not yet believers. Remember, your leadership and example is the most important thing.
3. *Liturgical diversity encourages _____ responses.* What? You do a liturgy with your children? Well, yes. We believe that a liturgy is a great tool to teach kids about the various ways that Christians express faith—praise, confession of sin, thanksgiving, confession of truth. Incorporating these different types of songs will help children learn about God and learn to pray to Him. It will give them thoughts about Him and words to say to Him that they might not otherwise have. This is the goal of the forthcoming SojournKids Music album.
4. *Recognize _____ of responsiveness in young children, and be patient.* Christian educators, Larry Richards and Gary Bredfeldt, outline five basic levels of learning:¹¹
 - a. Rote—a child's ability to repeat back stories, verses, and biblical truth without thought of meaning
 - b. Recognition—a child's ability to recognize biblical concepts that have been taught before.
 - c. Restatement—a child's ability to express new concepts in his own words and to relate them to a biblical worldview/system of thought.
 - d. Relation—a child's ability to relate biblical truths to life and see an appropriate gospel response/application

¹⁰ The "Enjoy," "Encourage," and "Explain" parts of this outline were adapted from Bob Kauflin, "Q&A Training Children to Worship God," at *Worship Matters*, <http://worshipmatters.com>, (3/31/06).

¹¹ Lawrence O. Richards and Gary J. Bredfeldt, *Creative Bible Teaching*, Revised, (Moody, 1998), 120-127.

- e. Realization—a child’s ability and desire for putting gospel applications into action in his daily life.

This outline reminds us that children typically learn the language of faith before their faith is fully realized. That’s normal. Bob Kauflin has written, “Younger children, who may not know God yet, may still participate enthusiastically in various external forms of worshipping God. However, we want their worship to be from the heart, and not simply a matter of conforming. They need a clear knowledge of who God is and what He has done. That includes His nature, His attributes, and His works, especially our redemption through Christ. As the Holy Spirit enables them, they will become increasingly aware of their sinfulness before God, accept His gracious gift of forgiveness through the Gospel, and be included among those who will forever be growing in their love for and worship of God.”¹² In the mean time, we can encourage them to grow in responsiveness and patiently wait on God to do his work.

5. _____ *what you are doing*. Take time to explain what you are doing. Worship leaders have the privilege and responsibility to show our kids the greatness, power, and glory of Jesus. Take time to talk about the words we sing. Take time to explain why we do what we do (Exodus 13:8). Take time to ask questions about what a song means and how its words apply to kids’ lives. Ask questions to find out how much our kids really understand about what we’re doing. Take time to explain common practices (e.g. lifting hands).¹³
6. *Don’t be afraid to give children gospel assurances*. Children should be taught that Jesus alone saves, and they should be assured that they can bank on Him. Taking care to avoid false assurances should not discourage us from giving children the assurance that Jesus offers. Everyone who comes to Him will be saved. Jesus says, “Let the children come.” “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ And let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17). We should feel free to assure children that Jesus saves. We should freely invite children to come to Jesus and

¹² Bob Kauflin, “One more thought on Training Children to Worship God,” at Worship Matters, <http://worshipmatters.com>, (3/31/06).

¹³ Marty Machowski and Mike Bradshaw, “Training Children to Worship God,” seminar notes at *WorshipGod06* (Sovereign Grace Ministries, 2006).

keep coming to him for their whole life. Should children be led to memorize, recite, or sing Bible passages that give personal assurance—passages like Job 19:25-26, Psalm 23, Psalm 42:11, Galatians 2:20, or Romans 8:16? Yes. Leading a child to memorize these assurances is not the same as giving a false assurance. These are not false assurances but the very words of Christ. What do we do if we hear children assuring themselves with one of these passages? We must say to them, “Keep believing! Keep believing!”

7. *Don't _____ children for commitments, because the pressure is off.* Instead, we trust that God is already at work our kids' hearts! Our responsibility is to faithfully teach and sing the gospel to them and leave the results to the Lord. Sometimes we're tempted to pressure children, because we feel that getting them saved is our responsibility. It is not. Salvation is God's work. 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. Give children an opportunity to respond, but trust God to work in the hearts of his children to bring them to himself through faith, in his time and in his ways.

IV. Conclusion. One of the questions that this seminar is designed to answer is, “How is leading a children’s worship gathering different from leading an adult gathering?” We have discussed some differences like age-appropriate language and a “singable” vocal range. But there are actually more similarities than there are differences. As C. S. Lewis said, to ask the question “What do children need?” assumes far too superior of an attitude. There is no *mystery* or *secret* for leading worship with children. Just as with adults, Christ is the mystery. Just like adults, kids need to learn and experience who Jesus is and what He has done. Just like adults, kids need to praise the mighty Creator for all of His dazzling greatness. They need to sing about humanity’s rebellion against God, and confess their sins corporately through song. Just like Christian music for adults, children’s music should teach them how to confess faith in Christ—in His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension. Just like adults, children need to sing about how Christ speaks to the Father on behalf of Christians, and how He will one day return and restore this broken world. Just like adults, children are tempted to find assurances in things they can manipulate instead of Christ alone. Children need to hear the gospel of Christ in their music—just the same as us.