

Jack Klumpenhower

SHOW

THEM

JESUS

Teaching *the*  
Gospel *to* Kids

“Sunday school curriculum is relentlessly moralistic. That is, it tells you *what* to do, but not *how* to do it. Jack Klumpenhower shows us *how* by taking us back to the person and work of Christ. Every Sunday school teacher should read this book.”

**Paul Miller**, Director of seeJesus; author of *A Praying Life* and *A Loving Life*

“Klumpenhower states the problem well: ‘Today, a frightening number of kids are growing up in churches and Christian homes without ever being captured by the gospel of Jesus.’ We want them to know about Jesus, but we leave them with lessons about behavior and they leave the church as soon as possible. Here’s a book that sweetly, masterfully, and powerfully tells us what the gospel really is and how it can really change a child’s life and eternity.”

**Bryan Chapell**, Author of *Christ-Centered Preaching*; pastor, Grace Presbyterian Church in Peoria, IL

“*Show Them Jesus* is a must read for every youth worker, children’s ministry teacher, parent, and VBS volunteer. Jack Klumpenhower does a masterful job helping us learn how to discover the gospel connections in every Bible story. In sharing example after example from his years of experience, Jack gives the reader a front-row seat in his classroom to learn how to give children a ‘rock-their-world’ vision of Jesus. This is the perfect training tool for pastors and children’s ministry leaders to use to train their teachers. I’ll be buying a copy for all my children’s ministry leaders.”

**Marty Machowski**, Family Life Pastor, Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, PA; author of the *Gospel Story for Kids* curriculum

“Jack’s book has done a very rare thing—he has taken the message of grace and applied it simply and directly to both teachers’ hearts and the children they shepherd. He doesn’t settle for mere external obedience in his students but bravely and compassionately goes much deeper, seeking out their hearts. This is a great application of Serge’s values to a central part of every church—its children.”

**Bob Osborne**, Executive Director, Serge

“*Show Them Jesus* deals with the tough questions that keep children’s ministry leaders up at night. How do I encourage kids to repent and obey without becoming a legalist? Should I tone down Old Testament violence when I’m teaching fourth graders? Klumpenhower answers these questions and more with his eyes on Jesus from first to last. But he doesn’t just speak to the head. He engages heart and hands as well, giving teachers an inspiring and practical framework for preparing Bible lessons, classroom environments, and family ministry where Jesus is the focus. I plan to purchase a copy for every volunteer in our children’s ministry.”

**Jared Kennedy**, Family Pastor, Sojourn Community Church in Louisville, KY

“The most common way of teaching a Bible story to children involves holding up the main human character and encouraging (or discouraging) children to be like him or her. *Show Them Jesus: Teaching the Gospel to Kids* provides welcome relief. The book is packed full of biblical reasons, practical guidance, and bountiful examples for teachers and parents who want to show children Jesus when they teach the Bible.”

**Starr Meade**, Author of *Training Hearts, Teaching Minds: Family Devotions based on the Shorter Catechism* and *Mighty Acts of God: a Family Bible Story Book*

“In *Show Them Jesus*, Jack Klumpenhower tells how to make Spirit-fed renewal, which springs from a foundation of love for Jesus, the overarching theme of our teaching. He impresses on us the importance of being ‘good-news’ teachers who ‘exit’ every Bible story through the cross of Christ. Make your aim in teaching to build in your kids love for Jesus, because that’s where the Christian life begins. Read this book for your kids; and reread it for yourself.”

**Nancy Winter**, Curriculum writer and editor; long-time Sunday school teacher.

“This book is a must read for every Christian and challenges us to ask the question: How are we handling the good news about Jesus? Do we really believe that Jesus is the goal of God’s great story of redemption—‘*the way, the truth, and the life*’? Jack reminds us that our teaching and application of the Scripture is to be unflinchingly centered on Jesus. Why? So we can all fall more in love with Him and worship Him wholeheartedly!”

**Rosemarie Green**, Director of Children’s Ministry, New Life Church, Glenside, PA

# SHOW THEM JESUS

Teaching the Gospel  
to Kids

Jack Klumpenhower



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## Introduction

# The Crew of Seventy-Two

The church I attended had a problem. It attracted many families, and parents eagerly brought their children to Sunday school and to mid-week youth meetings—all good things. The trouble was, there never seemed to be enough volunteers to teach all those kids. Since I *did* teach, I was invited to help solve the problem.

We tried everything. Each year as the dreaded recruitment season arrived, the pastor issued appeals from the pulpit. We printed bulletin inserts. We personally asked our friends in the church to consider teaching. We begged for volunteers. But people kept telling us they were too busy, or that they weren't good at teaching.

So we made teaching easier. The church staff prepared all materials. An easy-to-follow lesson with games and crafts was waiting each week for the teacher, who simply had to show up. And although we held a weekly prayer meeting for teachers, we stressed that attending prayer was purely optional.

The teacher shortage just grew worse. You can probably see what we were doing wrong, but I didn't get it until one day when I was trying to talk another guy into becoming a teacher. I still remember the

ridiculously insulting words I blurted out. I told him, “It’s easy. Most of the work is done for you. And I think you’d be perfect for the job.”

I might as well have used the old line that any idiot could do it, and that he was just the idiot I had in mind. My friend gave me an odd look, and I realized how foolish I’d been. I’d forgotten that although teachers do want support, no one likes to give even a minute of their time for ministry that’s so easy it must be unimportant. And I’d arrogantly figured I was the sort of devoted teacher who might spend hours working on a lesson for the sake of Jesus, but others were not. It’s a mistake I never want to make again.

So, then. There are many good books designed to make your teaching easier, but this is not one of them.

## A JOB WITH JESUS

Luke’s Gospel tells how Jesus faced a problem similar to the teacher shortage. He was looking for workers to proclaim the kingdom of God. A series of prospects offered to help, on their terms. Jesus turned them down. He spoke of the work involved and the cost. Then he appointed seventy-two others to do the job. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. Therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. Go your way; behold, I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves. Carry no moneybag, no knapsack, no sandals, and greet no one on the road” (Luke 10:2–4).

Later, we learn what happened: “The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!’ And he said to them, ‘I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven’” (Luke 10:17–20).

Jesus tells us that the work of proclaiming God’s kingdom is dangerous. It takes courage. It demands earnest prayer. It’s more about faith than giftedness, and it requires no resources other than those

God provides. It's a high-stakes spiritual battle, using supernatural weapons. Anyone who's willing to engage the fight on this level is needed for the cause. Such an adventurer will reap a rare mix of power, humility, and wide-eyed joy.

Doesn't that sound better than the namby-pamby Sunday school I was trying to sell?

As I've talked with other committed teachers—those at church as well as parents who teach about Jesus at home—I've finally learned that what Jesus was talking about is why they keep at it. They want to make a real difference, for God and for their kids. They know it's hard work; they know that the devil Jesus spoke of will fight back. That's okay. They feel called by God and are itching to speak the good news of Jesus in all its wonder—whatever that takes.

None of us does this well all the time. We get busy or tired or sloppy. We too often give in to mediocre expectations. But amid this slumber, we dream of being like the seventy-two. So we need to encourage each other to live up to our calling.

That's the purpose of this book.

## WHY THOSE KIDS REALLY, REALLY NEED YOU

This book's main point is that we are called to teach the good news—all Jesus is and all he's done by his life, death, and resurrection to save those who're joined to him—and to treasure it as we work with kids. Since most prepackaged lessons and family devotionals don't do this, you'll need to make a deliberate effort. However, your effort will be doing the kids you teach a profound service.

Today, a frightening number of kids are growing up in churches and Christian homes without ever being captured by the gospel of Jesus. As children and teenagers they may seem to be believers, but then they reach their college and young-adult years and quit. They quit church—and any growing commitment to Jesus.

These kids actually have good reasons to quit. They look back and realize that they learned much about Christian behavior and churchy experiences, but whatever they learned about Jesus didn't

really change them. They never saw him so strikingly that he became their one, overriding hope and their greatest love. They were never convinced that Jesus is better—a zillion times better—than anything and everything else.

Our goal must be for kids to catch this rock-their-world vision of Jesus. Is this far-fetched? Not at all. We have the message of God's love in Christ. We also have prayer and the Holy Spirit. We *have* the weapons to win this supernatural war. Knowing this, we must faithfully show kids, at every opportunity, how Jesus *is* that much better. We must also believe it ourselves, so that our lives among these kids confirm Jesus's power to change sinners.

Yes, in some ways it's hard. But because it's built on the good news—"your names are written in heaven"—rather than how "successful" we are, it isn't a burden. It's world-shaking, yet pressure-free.

How does this work? Let me share one example.

### A SCARY LESSON

A few years ago I was teaching a large group of elementary kids from the book of Joshua. I taught how God brought his people through the Jordan River and toppled the walls of Jericho. From there, the curriculum I was using skipped a chapter—the story of Achan.

Achan was an Israelite soldier. He spurned a direct command from God by taking some of the plunder of Jericho for himself. His sin was uncovered when God caused the Israelites to be routed in a subsequent battle. To reveal whose sin was responsible, God used a dread-filled process of picking first the tribe, then the clan, then the family at fault. The members of the guilty family came forward one by one, and God picked Achan. So the people stoned Achan, along with his wife, children, and livestock. Then they set them on fire and heaped stones on their charred bodies. Only after that did God turn from his anger.

Well now, it's easy to see why that story gets skipped.

What should I do? I don't like picking through the Bible for just the cheery parts, but my group of kids was fairly young. I was worried

that the lesson might be too scary. I finally decided I could teach about Achan—if I made sure that the good news of Jesus was my theme.

One of my helpers that day was also the mom of a student. Just before class she asked what the lesson was, and when I told her she became worried. Her daughter got nightmares, she explained. Tense stories often brought them on. I got a sick feeling. Surely I'd been stupid to think I could teach such a lesson to little kids. But there was no time to change it, so I taught about Achan. Dead soldiers. Selection process. Stoning. Fire. The whole ugly scene.

As I taught this, the concerned mom looked even more worried. So did some of the kids, who were particularly bothered that the other soldiers, family members, and animals got killed too. What had they done to deserve that? It was a good question, so I had the whole group gather around me as I sat on the floor with them.

“Yes, many were killed,” I told them, “but that’s what we should learn from this.” I read to them the Bible’s own commentary on the incident: “Didn’t the LORD’s anger come on the whole community of Israel? And Achan wasn’t the only one who died because of his sin” (Joshua 22:20, NIV).

“You see,” I said, “just one man sinned, but many died. That’s the lesson.”

The kids gave me confused looks. It wasn’t the sort of lesson anyone was expecting. I had their attention and pressed on.

“What if *you* sin? Or I sin? Does God punish us like he did Achan? Does anyone else get punished too? Or has God made a way to punish sin that has a better ending than this story has?”

The kids weren’t sure. Several knew that God wouldn’t be holy if he didn’t punish sin. They also knew that God forgives. They weren’t certain how it all fit together.

“The idea that a person might die for someone else’s sin is very important,” I said. “In our story, one man sinned but many died. But what if later in the Bible we found one man—just one man—who never sinned in his whole life, but still got punished? If that man never sinned but still died, then many could live.”

They knew I was talking about Jesus.

I went on to tell how Jesus lived the sin-free life each of us don't. I told how out of all the tribes and clans and families of the world, only Jesus is not guilty—so God picked him. To die. To take our place. God selected Jesus to take the punishment we deserve so we don't have to stand sinful and quaking, waiting for judgment like Achan did.

"Your sin is very bad," I told the kids. "It can hurt many people. But God loves you so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to become a man and die for your sin. Jesus was hurt most of all.

"I wasn't sure I should tell you this story because I thought it might be too scary. It's about the scariest thing ever—getting punished by God. But when you know the whole story, it isn't scary. If you belong to Jesus, he took your punishment and God becomes your Father. So I hope you won't be scared. You don't have to be scared of anything. Jesus makes the scariest thing of all go away."

I knew I'd done okay once it was over because the worried mom thanked me. She loved the story. The real surprise, though, came a few weeks later. The mom came up to me with a huge grin and told me her daughter's nightmares had stopped. The girl insisted it was because she knew that, due to Jesus, she didn't have to be scared anymore.

Well, that's the kind of result a teacher very rarely hears of, and my first reaction was skepticism. Could a little lesson about Jesus really cure such a problem? The nightmares would probably come back in time. But months went by and the mom remained delighted.

I finally came to see that *I* was the one who lacked faith in the power of the good news. In spite of teaching it, I never expected it to work so wonderfully. It was all due to Jesus, of course, who lived the story I had the privilege of repeating. There's no story like it. I should have expected such results.

When the account of Achan is taught at all, it's usually with the moral point that stealing is wrong. Okay, but that girl needed to hear the larger biblical point: that sin destroys life with God. Then she needed the biggest point of all—the theme of the whole Bible: that wherever sin destroys, Jesus heals.

That girl learned about Jesus and believed. She also discovered that belief in Jesus is life-changing, that he truly is better than anything else.

## THE TEACHERS' MANIFESTO

So who am I to write this book? Well, I'm no expert. I've never been employed full-time by a school or church. I have stories to share, but they're as much about failure as success, and about what I've learned along the way. Some of it I'm not very good at yet. I still struggle.

I'm only a parent and volunteer who works with children and youth, leading lessons and other Christian activities. I'm just a Bible teacher—like you.

Yes, *you* are a teacher. Even if your role isn't teaching prepared lessons but one of the many other important jobs in children's or youth ministry, or if you lead your own kids in family devotions or home lessons—or want to start!—it's still teaching. Kids are watching and learning from you, and you have the job of showing them Jesus.

Most of what I'll share comes from my experience in the classroom because that's where I've learned to teach about Jesus. But once we grab hold of these ideas, they go wherever we go. I use them in more casual encounters with kids too, as well as at home with my own children. I'll help you apply them wherever *you* work with kids.

I'm going to assume that you too are a non-expert. The teachers Jesus recruited didn't start out well-equipped or particularly skilled either—so if you feel hesitant, or unsure you can teach a lesson like the one I just described, you're in a good place. I'm simply looking for parents, Sunday school teachers, youth workers, Bible club directors, camp counselors, song leaders—anyone who works with kids—to join me in this manifesto:

*We pledge to teach the good news and show kids Jesus.*

In this book, I'll suggest what that might look like. I'll tell my own story in the process, changing only names and other details to protect the kids. I'm going to let you see how I've done things because I know



from experience that observing other teachers—for both faults and strengths—is the best way to improve. I'll also give examples of how I've taught many familiar Bible stories. None of my examples is the only good way to teach those stories, but all of them celebrate Jesus.

In the first half of the book, I'll explain *why* teaching the good news is so important and give you ways to get started. I hope this will renew your excitement to tell about Jesus. Nothing helps more than for you, the teacher, to develop an incurable case of "Jesus fever."

In the second half, I'll share what I've learned about *how* to show kids Jesus. After thirty-odd years of both my own teaching and picking up tips from others, I have ideas and methods that work. Please take what you can use, add to it, and fit it to your own ministry. Build on it. Make it better. Don't stop until your teaching is everything Jesus said it could be.

Whenever God's people rediscover the good news, revival often follows—so we will be playing with fire. Our manifesto is subversive. It will put us at odds with both devils and do-gooders. Keeping it will require an entire life of becoming more deeply dependent on the transforming work of God's Spirit. It's for those of us who want to raise our game to the level of the seventy-two.

Are you with me? Let's get started.

## Section One

# *Why* Teach the Good News?



## Chapter 1

# The One-Note Teacher

*Because Jesus is everything we need*

A sermon without Christ!  
As well talk of a loaf of bread without any flour in it.  
How can it feed the soul?

—Charles Spurgeon<sup>1</sup>

Let me take you back to the beginning: for many years I thought I was a good teacher. Then everything changed.

My gift was teaching interesting Sunday school lessons. I knew the Bible well and told its stories creatively so that younger kids looked forward to story time. Teens happily discussed Bible passages. Even adults would stop by to sit in on my classes. My lessons had a point too. I would build to a climactic moment that taught about living for God. I led discussions applying it to daily life. Kids left with practical instruction they could put to work in the coming week.

Every so often I would teach about how Jesus died for our sins. For those lessons the practical point would be the need to accept him as Savior. Even without asking for on-the-spot decisions, this was sometimes awkward. There was the pressure of the topic, the need to be inviting but not pushy—and always the eerie sadness of the cross itself. But I prayed extra hard before those lessons, hunkered down, and taught them.

I felt good about my “ministry niche” and wouldn’t have changed a thing. But then God let me hear about Joe.

Joe was a fellow teacher who seemed smart enough, but bland—not the type who might captivate a group of kids. Yet Joe began teaching large-group lessons like I was doing. Others who saw him teach liked his lessons. They told me I might like them too. By the third time someone told me how good Joe was, I felt threatened. So I took the bait.

I decided to sit in on one of Joe’s lessons. I took a seat in the back of the room and reminded myself to be neither jealous nor smug—to resist comparing his teaching with mine—but I couldn’t help it. I was hoping I’d watch Joe teach and then be able to reassure myself I was still top dog in my teaching circle.

## LEARNING FROM JOE

Joe’s lesson was about Samuel, who was still a boy when God called him to be a prophet. I recognized it as an ideal lesson for any storyteller. It’s about a child, so kids can relate, and the story builds to a nice climax. God calls repeatedly to Samuel at night. Samuel trots off each time to Eli the priest, whom he thinks must be the one calling. Eli eventually figures out what’s happening and tells Samuel to respond and listen to God.

The Samuel story offers an opportunity to teach about being a good listener. Samuel listened, and God did great things through him. How could our students listen at home? At school? On the playground? What might God do if they listened better? I settled in to observe Joe’s lesson. I wondered which of these themes he’d draw out, and how.

Although Joe wasn’t a dynamic speaker, I had to admit he set the stage well for Samuel’s big moment. He explained how God was largely silent in the days before Samuel. The rulers in the land were inept and the priests corrupt. The last big-time prophet had died centuries before. The people needed God to bring justice, and they were hungry to hear him speak.

Joe had a reason for that setup. To my surprise, his lesson didn't focus on Samuel's effort to listen but on God's desire to call out. Joe mentioned how God actually came and stood near Samuel's bed while calling his name. I'd never noticed that. And Joe discussed with the kids how God called with such a normal voice that Samuel was sure it must be Eli.

Joe was excited at how, after all that waiting, God's voice of justice came gently, personally, and humanlike to a child. "What does that tell you about God?" Joe asked. To show how God still speaks personally and humanly, he then read from Hebrews 1:1–2: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son."

By his *Son*? Joe was turning the lesson toward Jesus. I was impressed. It was a gutsy move I wouldn't have dared try. Bringing up Jesus when he wasn't already in the story always felt uncomfortable to me. But Joe pressed on. He said that Jesus came down and spoke too. Jesus taught us in ways no other prophet could. He showed us the face of God by walking among us and laughing with us, by scolding bullies and casting out demons, by looking into our sad eyes with tears in his own.

Most of all, Jesus spoke by dying on the cross. By bringing both justice and love to us in this way, he spoke the most beautiful word anyone could. Centuries before, God had left heaven to stand beside Samuel. In Jesus, God left all that glory to live beside you and me, and to die in place of you and me.

Now, Joe said, Jesus is risen. He gives his Spirit to speak to our hearts, in words soft enough to melt us and packed with the power we need to obey. God has spoken and he continues to speak—like never before.

### A Taste of Jesus

I'm probably making Joe's lesson sound smoother than it actually was. Frankly, he stumbled around a lot as he said all this. His delivery

was dry. Some of the kids got fidgety. Still, I sensed his focus on Jesus was the right way to teach the Bible, and I waited for the sales pitch—the part about accepting Jesus as Savior. But Joe never went there. He said a prayer—a real prayer asking that what we learned about Jesus would touch our hearts—and he was done.

Where was the application? Wasn't he at least going to tell the kids how to listen like Samuel? No. Gradually, I saw that Joe's chief purpose was just to let us see Jesus a little bigger and better than we'd seen him before.

Joe did lead a discussion to help the kids connect what they learned to life on the playground. He suggested that when they're the target of unkind words they might remember how God spoke to Samuel, and how richly Jesus had spoken to them. This would help them respond in a godly way to mean talk. But it was more about the heart than it was a rule.

It was good for Joe to make that connection. And it worked because, before Joe ever got to that point, his lesson had already begun stirring kids' hearts—and mine. It worked because the cross of Jesus—not principles for good living—is the engine of the Christian life. By simply getting a taste of Jesus, I was eager to listen to God in a way that wouldn't have happened if Joe had *told* me to listen. Joy in Jesus *was* the application!

### To Know Nothing but Jesus

Joe understood Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 2:1–5, and he helped me to understand it as well.

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Paul's statement that he decided to teach *nothing* but Jesus and the cross is a jaw-dropper. *Nothing* else? Does he really mean that? If he does, then the implications for our own teaching are profound. Consider three things this passage tells us.

*First, the content of the message matters; it must be about Jesus.* Corinth was a stopping point for traveling sages who spouted wisdom about personal success and religious insight. Paul would not be one of them. His message about the cross of Christ was so superior that he spoke it plainly—weakly, he says, with trembling. He let the cross itself do the talking.

We shouldn't take this to mean that lively presentations are bad. Joe might have benefited from a more engaging style. But he got the main thing right. Joe had the same single-mindedness Paul had. What mattered was Christ crucified. Joe determined that his time with the kids would revolve around Jesus, and he pushed other considerations aside. He understood that those kids had school teachers or Sesame Street to tell them how to be good listeners. They needed *him* to show them something better—how Christ speaks so stunningly that listening will never be the same.

*Second, the cross of Christ applies to the entire Christian life.* It isn't just something you believe to become a Christian. It's also the framework for living *as* a Christian. Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half and spent that time teaching—just the cross. Perhaps after a while the Corinthian believers told Paul they were ready for new material. They knew this cross stuff. He could move on. But the beauty of Jesus's cross is so vast one could spend a lifetime catching just a fraction of it.

In fact, Paul did address a variety of topics in the church at Corinth. In 1 Corinthians alone, he gives instructions about bickering, sexual sin, marriage—even hairstyles. Does this mean he's exaggerating when he says Christ is his only message? No. It means that the most powerful way to handle *every* sin in the life of the church is to apply a deeper understanding of the cross of Christ.

If Joe's lesson had included God's call to initial belief in Jesus, that would have been okay. But by teaching the cross of Jesus without that



invitation, Joe did something powerful. He treated the cross as ongoing fuel, even for kids who were already Christians.

*Third, faith in this message comes from God.* There's every reason to speak God's message God's way—because it's God who brings true repentance and spiritual growth.

Here lies the real reason I didn't make the cross the theme of my own lessons: I thought it felt corny. I didn't want to try too hard to be spiritual when I should be, well, more normal. I thought I knew what would work best with the kids I taught, and *what would make me look wise*. Although I claimed to rely on God, I feared entrusting my teaching to his ideas and the Holy Spirit's tools.

The message of Jesus's death and resurrection is a tool of the Spirit to change hearts. Nagging is not. Rather than coax the kids into temporarily *acting* better, Joe told about Jesus and trusted God to use that message to make the kids *become* better.

## EUANGÉLION

In Bible times, the Greek word for “good news” or “gospel” (*euangélion*) was not a religious word. It was used for good news brought by a herald—perhaps news of a battle won or a king crowned—something everyone needed to hear and respond to. Jesus and the New Testament writers latched onto this word and used it to express the core of Christianity.

In Luke, *euangélion* is the approach God takes to the arrival of Jesus. The angel's announcement to the shepherds is: “I bring you good news (*euangélion*) of great joy” (Luke 2:10). Luke goes on to use the word more than twenty times in the books of Luke and Acts.

In Mark, *euangélion* is the first thing out of the gate: “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel’” (Mark 1:14–15). This may be the most concise summary of Jesus's teaching in the Bible, and it's all about *euangélion*.

Paul uses some form of *euangélion* more than seventy times in his epistles. “Good news” is the central expression that powers the church.

## How Christians Are Different

What should we make of this? Well, for sure we must not treat the good news as if it were a typical religion. Typical religion is about doing what your god or gods require; it's following your beliefs and methods to achieve some goal or approval. This is true whether you're offering pagan sacrifices in an ancient temple or seeking enlightenment through meditation. You *do* something to *earn* something.

Let's face it: Christianity is often packaged this way. Live a good life and things will go well for you. Find the right spiritual resources and you'll be blessed. Ask Jesus into your heart and you'll be saved. This is why many people say all religions are the same. In some sense, they're right.

But Jesus didn't bring typical religion. He brought *good news*.

I used to work in a television newsroom. Our best stories were always those with an immediate effect on our viewers' lives. For example, if there's a heavy snowstorm, it will almost always lead off a local newscast. The principle is, "Here's what's happened, and it will change your life." News is not what *you* do—it's what someone else has done that affects you.

The good news means you relate to God based on what *Jesus* has done for you, not what you've done to prove yourself worthy. If you're a believer, the good news says that God already accepts you fully—he's adopted you as his child—because you're joined to Jesus, who died on the cross for you.

Yes, believing this means a changed life. Flat out. You'll have a hungry, iron grip on Jesus. You'll run after him forcefully. But you'll do it because you rest in him. All your effort to obey will be a response to what he's already done, never a performance to win his favor. There's no need for such scheming. No pressure. No false fronts.

The typical lesson for kids isn't like this. Instead, it tends to be what mine were for years—little more than a lecture about some way you ought to live for God. Such lessons create pressure and invite pretending.

We've been dispensing good advice instead of the good news. Eventually, kids will tire of our advice, no matter how good it might be. Many will leave the church. Others will live decent, churchy lives but without any fire for Christ. We'll wonder why they've rejected the good news, because we assumed they were well grounded in it. In fact, they never were. Although we told stories of Jesus and his free grace, we watered it down with self-effort—and *that's* what they heard.

Fellow teachers, our challenge is to proclaim the good news of Jesus so clearly and consistently that no kid of ours will ever place him in a category with typical religious leaders. Our calling is to be good-news fanatics. I stress this because if I don't, someone will hear me talk of teaching about Jesus and get the wrong idea. They will think, "Yes, we ought to teach kids to be like Jesus and to follow his example." This would be *typical* religion.

What a tyrant Jesus would be if he lived a perfect life and then, as his main message, told us to be like him. What a setup for failure! What discouragement and worry would mark our lives! What masquerades they would be! We must understand that our central hope is in Jesus's *full* saving work, not just his instructions, and that kids will be stuck in the pressure-filled mode of trying to measure up unless we bombard them with this *good news*.

One more thing about the good news: when it comes to teaching it, all of us are clumsy. We all begin life inclined to try to earn our way before God. We all must learn to teach against our first instincts.

## QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT BE ASKING

*Why shouldn't I just follow the lesson points in my teacher's manual, or read my kids a children's devotional? Don't the folks who publish those materials know better than I do what kids need to hear?*

Some published lessons are better than others. If you search, you can find several with good stuff. But few teachers always follow them straight through. Most of us use them as starting points and then pick and choose what works for us. We change things and add our own insights and activities that seem right. We chat with kids about what

matters to us and about what we know matters to them. Good teaching is personal. If you use published material, make the good news the guide by which you tailor your lessons.

*But what if I add something about Jesus and get it wrong?*

An eager teacher who puts extra thought into a lesson—and shares what he or she’s learned about Jesus—beats a timid one every time. You’re right that if you try often enough to be Jesus-centered, you might eventually teach something half-baked. We should work hard to avoid that, and the second section of this book will help. But it still could happen. That’s okay. The greater error is to teach from the Bible and fail to point out Jesus at all.

*Wouldn’t it be better to say we should be God-centered? Aren’t you leaving out whole chunks of teaching about God by focusing only on Jesus?*

The disciples said the same thing—to Jesus’s face! “‘Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.’ Jesus said to him, ‘Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, “Show us the Father”? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?’” (John 14:8–10). Although we look to the entire Bible for a full picture of God, the most complete picture we find is Jesus himself. The Bible tells us “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God [is seen] in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Corinthians 4:6). A focus on Jesus *is* God-centered. Plus, to love Jesus is the godliest activity imaginable. The Father has loved the Son perfectly, for eternity. Loving Jesus isn’t ignoring the Father—it’s imitating him. The theologian John Owen put it this way: “Nothing renders us so like unto God as our love unto Jesus Christ, for he is the principle object of his love; in him doth his soul rest, in him he is always well pleased.”<sup>2</sup>

*Did I read you right? Did you say “Ask Jesus into your heart and you’ll be saved” is not the good news?*

Kids *do* need to respond to Jesus in faith, and the call to do so is part of the good news. But the good news is also more than just

“Ask Jesus.” We too easily turn faith into little requirements—like saying a certain prayer—that end up being all about something external *we* must do. On Pentecost, Peter preached the good news of what *Jesus* has done (using the Old Testament like Joe did, I might add). He didn’t immediately ask for a behavioral response, but first let that good news lead to a heart response: “Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, ‘Brothers, what shall we do?’” (Acts 2:37) Only then did Peter tell his listeners to repent and be baptized, as a necessary part of what God was already working in them. I’ll say more about how the good news works in nonbelievers in chapter 3.

*It seems to me that Samuel is a good example of a kid who listened. Why shouldn’t I teach that?*

You could. There’s nothing wrong with that. The Bible *does* give us useful examples. However, all too often that’s all kids get from a lesson, instead of what they need most. If they get Samuel the good listener without first appreciating God the Great Speaker, they’re liable to end up relating to God only in an anxious, what-I-must-do way. Joe’s discussion time about how the lesson applied to life on the playground was important. It showed how God’s speech to Samuel three thousand years ago matters to Jesus’s followers today, and it encouraged the kids to believe and act on it. It’s good to challenge kids to obey God. Just make sure they’re responding out of faith in the love of Jesus, not out of mere moralism.

You also wouldn’t have to emphasize God’s speaking at all. There are other themes in the Samuel story, like God’s determination to end injustice or his provision of a good king (the broader theme of the whole book of 1 Samuel), and these too would make fine lessons that lead to Jesus. I’ll explain how to create such lessons in chapter 6.

*The way Joe taught the Samuel story just seems too hard to me. I could never come up with all that.*

You don’t have to. Joe was actually a very experienced teacher with much practice. It’s okay to start small. Begin by mentioning just one

or two ways the good news of Jesus applies to each lesson you teach. In time, build on that. Remember, even Paul didn't think he spoke the good news particularly well. The power is in the message. If you know the good news of Jesus and dare to tell it, you are supremely gifted to advance God's kingdom—no matter how well you speak.

### SHOW THEM JESUS RIGHT AWAY

It's good to take action immediately, while you're thinking about it. How can you apply these ideas right now? You might pick one or more of the suggestions from the list below:

*Teachers:* Pick a specific spot to talk about the cross of Jesus in your next lesson, discussion session, worship time, or whatever you lead. Besides helping your students see Jesus, this will accomplish two things: (1) you'll get used to looking for ways to connect the cross to every part of Christian life, and (2) you'll get comfortable talking about the cross, which sometimes feels weird until we get used to it. Be deliberate about doing this in every session you lead—*every one!*—until you've done it so much that talking about how Jesus died for us feels easy and natural.

Find another teacher who's committed to showing kids Jesus in every lesson. Arrange to sit in on a class. Afterward, note the things that teacher did to teach the good news—things you can learn from. Remember not to critique what the other teacher does wrong but to learn from what he or she gets right, and to let that teacher know what you appreciated!

*Parents:* If you feel uncomfortable talking with your kids about how Jesus died for us, start changing that right now by building a habit of mentioning the cross. Work it into family devotions, discussions in the car, or whatever you like. If you can't settle on any other specific time to mention it, simply add it to regular prayers at mealtime or bedtime. Pray something like: "Father, thank you for giving your Son Jesus to die for our sins." You can adjust the wording, but say the prayer *daily*, and engage in other Jesus discussions until talk of the cross becomes natural and no longer feels weird in your home.

*Grandparents:* If you don't see your grandkids regularly, write each of them a letter. Like Paul's letter to the Corinthians, make sure it says something about Jesus. Kids love getting mail, and they'll especially love getting a letter from *you!*

*Anyone:* Consider using the story of the boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3) to guide your personal devotions for a few days. Do it in three steps.

1. *Notice* ways God acts in the story. There are more than I mentioned in this chapter, so you might want to write them down.
2. *Meditate* on ways Jesus acts the same in the New Testament, as well as today, and thank him for the kind of Savior he is.
3. *Share.* The next time you're alone with your kids or have a few extra minutes in class, share about your time studying Samuel and what you learned. Let your kids observe your own desire to see Jesus.