

Ron Buckland is Minister for Family Ministries at Monash City Church of Christ in Melbourne, Australia and a former National Director of Scripture Union Australia. He has many years of experience in working with children and, over that time, his thinking about their faith and responses to the gospel has developed. In his book, *Children and the Gospel*, he explores how children respond to Christ and challenges the way we see a child's spiritual journey. The following is an extract from this book.

Decisions towards Christ

One of the challenges in writing about evangelism among children is that many adults believe it will be exactly the same for every age group. I have no problem with this idea, as long as the discussion is about the content of the gospel and the lifestyle of the gospeller. But too often evangelism is linked to a particular understanding of response about which I do have some problems.

A particular interpretation of Paul's experience on the road to Damascus, recorded in Acts 9, has been the basis for the dominant understanding of what response to the gospel means in many Christian circles. It has been developed as a model of response. Then it has become something like a goal for the evangelist, who will look for this kind of response, and only this kind of response.

The main ingredients, according to the interpretation, are that the response was sudden, time specific and definite (even spectacular). Paul encountered a bright light, fell from his horse, met the risen Christ and was struck blind. Forever afterwards Paul could point to this moment of surrender to Christ.

This was when Paul made his 'decision for Christ', although this is not a phrase Paul ever used. That phrase has come, over time, to equal 'conversion' in the minds of some Christians, so that response cards at evangelistic events have

often referred to three possible categories of response:

- (a) decision for Christ.
- (b) assurance of salvation.
- (c) rededication.

Some see Paul's experience as based on Jesus' own teaching about the need to be born again (John 3), and draw the conclusion that every person must make a clear, time specific 'decision for Christ'. They apply this conclusion to all age groups, including children. The aim in evangelism becomes to help people of all ages make a 'decision for Christ', which is equated with conversion.

It should be clear by now that I am totally positive about the idea of response. But there are some real problems associated with this use of one interpretation of Paul's experience. For example, the impression is given that this is when Paul encountered Christ for the first time. But this is the man who held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, and heard the martyr's plea that those killing him be forgiven (Acts 7:60). That experience went into the mind of someone already zealous for God, to the point of persecution. The Paul who encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus at noon that day was already on another kind of journey.

Then there is Acts 16. There are two conversion stories in that chapter. One is the Philippian jailer, who as far as we can tell was pagan one minute and Christian the next, with an earthquake in the middle. Very time specific! But in the same chapter is Lydia. She is a 'God-fearer', a term describing a non-Jew attracted to belief in one God. Lydia went to the river with some other women that Sabbath and heard Paul talk about Jesus. During this time 'the Lord opened her heart' and she became a follower of Jesus. A sunrise conversion: Lydia had been moving towards this moment for some time. Forever after, Lydia would certainly

point to that morning as significant. But she had been on a journey for some time, and had made a number of decisions about faith before that morning.

Many people, including children, make decisions towards Christ. Let me tell you a story that illustrates how this idea can release us. One night I was at an adult evangelistic event, as a counsellor. When the invitation was given, I went out alongside a young man, to be available to him when appropriate. When we got to talk, I asked the series of questions I use in such situations. First, 'Why have you come forward?' The answers I have received over the years have ranged from 'To become a Christian,' to 'To go to the loo,' and 'To see Billy Graham up close'. To the last two I asked a follow up question like, 'Was there any other reason?' The answer, in both cases was 'No', so I directed one to the loo and the other one back to his seat. This is a very important first question!

This young man said, 'To become a Christian.' So my next question was, 'Have you ever done anything like this before?' He replied, 'Yes, three times.' To which I asked, 'What happened those times?' He responded, 'I was told I became a Christian,' 'Did it work?' I asked. 'No' he said. 'Well, how do you know it will work this time?' 'I don't. I just hope it does.' My response card allowed for 'conversion', 'assurance' and 'rededication'.

What emerged was that he had been told three times he had been converted, based on a 'decision for Christ'. What further emerged was that, like many of us, he wanted Jesus to be his Saviour, but not his Lord. There were areas of his life, getting smaller as God worked on him, that he wanted to keep to himself, while benefitting from God's forgiveness in Christ.

After talking, I suggested that what he had done that night is make another 'decision towards

Christ', like the ones he had made before. I encouraged him to keep on going. We had talked about Christ as the master of the life and lifestyle of his followers. He would continue in the local church he had joined and to read his Bible. And I wish response cards had at least one other category!

Rather than making a once-for-all decision to follow Christ, many people take gradual steps into the dawning light that can become the radical reorientation that is Christian conversion. It is not necessarily a cumulative process. Only God knows the point at which a person is 'saved'.

If we faithfully teach what it means to belong to Christ, and the cost, we are evangelising. This is true, whether it is our own children, or outreach ministry. Children can, and probably will, make decisions towards Christ as a result of our teaching. It may be appropriate to understand what their response means for them, but we are not responsible to get the response, or to decide what it means to God. That is incredibly releasing.

Certainly people who say they belong to Christ should be able to say something about their decision-making process, and even its timing. But, as one writer put it, it really doesn't matter if you spin around quickly on one heel, or turn slowly and thoughtfully. What matters is the direction you finally face, and that you walk in that direction.

Many people grow into faith. They move through steps and stages at their own pace. This is partly because of their own unique developmental clock, and partly as a result of their (unique) experiences of life. The joy of Christian ministry is to be available to people, helping in the arena of knowledge and the interpretation of life in relation to God.

The children of believers are not unlikely to mirror something of the experience of Timothy in the New Testament. 'From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus,' wrote Paul in 2 Timothy 3:15. Even here, there are no

pressure-free guarantees given. The 'Timothys' of this world are in touch with the knowledge that can lead to salvation, but they must still exercise individual faith to enter into what is promised.

The Christian life is an ongoing series of responses to Christ. That doesn't mean we are converted over and over again. But it does mean that we continually give evidence about the direction of our life by the decisions we keep on making. As we move through the ages and stages of life, we will face many decisions. We give evidence of the direction of our faith journey by the decisions we make along the way.

For example, it is not possible for a nine-year-old boy to submit his sexuality to Jesus. His sexuality is dormant at that age. By the time he is 19, with hormones hopping in all directions, it is important that this aspect of who he is has been related to Christian discipleship. Similarly, an 18-year-old single woman cannot surrender her marriage to Jesus, except in some theoretical, 'in principle' way. Not that there is anything fundamentally wrong with 'in principle' submission. It is just that it will have to become reality for a 28-year-old mum if Christian discipleship is to be real. Finally, we can only actually surrender to Christ those things about which we face real choice.

What the idea of surrender means for a Christian will change beyond recognition between the ages of seven and seventy. It is the direction of the decision-making that decides the destiny. Jesus taught that it is not about 'blasting out of the blocks', that matters most; it is finishing (Matthew 10:22). The Christian life is more like a marathon than a sprint. (See Hebrews 12:1,2.)

The children with whom we minister will make any number of decisions towards Christ. When we accept this, and understand what is going on, we can be positive, supportive of the child and settled in our own mind. Calmly urgent, in fact.

Children and the Gospel,
Ron Buckland, ch 9

Activities

...we warn and teach them in order to bring each one into God's presence as a mature individual in union with Christ.

Colossians 1:28 (GNB)

If we take this as our key principle, we must weigh up all other goals: short-, medium- and long-term. Do they help us move closer to our ultimate goal? If the answer is no, don't do it!

With this in mind, decide the following:

What is my goal for this year?

What is my goal for this series?

What is my goal for this week?

How do your answers contribute towards reaching the big goal? Talk and pray together as a team of leaders and decide on your goals.

Excellence in ministry with children and their families

Although helpful done on your own, these activities will be most valuable completed together as a group of leaders so you can share your thoughts and plans, and help build your team.

The goals of ministry with children

When we talk about *goals of ministry*, we need to distinguish between short-, medium- and long-term goals. Unless we make those distinctions, people in ministry get confused. I remember a training session with people from quite different church backgrounds. I asked them to write down the goal for their children's ministry for the year. Every person wrote a variation of: 'to win boys and girls to Jesus Christ and to help them grown into mature Christian disciples'.

I gently challenged both parts of this statement, whilst affirming both as important *long-term* goals of ministry. However, if our short-term goal is the conversion of the children in our care, we take on a role of the Holy Spirit. God decides when people become Christians, not us.

And 'mature Christian disciples' is a lifetime goal, not one for this year. We will want what we do this year to contribute to the growth of

Christian discipleship, but we can't finish that job as a goal in any one year.

In fact, if we emotionally own such a goal it will mean that we will fail if we don't reach it. So, if Johnny or Tammy have not responded to Christ as we approach the end of our year with them, we may be tempted to push for a particular kind of response. If we do that, we become manipulative, something we say we are against in ministry of excellence with children.

Let's talk about responses

The question is not, 'Can a child respond to the gospel?' but, 'What does a child's response mean?' Every human being who receives information or has an experience, responds to it. The further away from Christian understanding children start, the more responses they will have to make. *The first response might be the need to move from a negative to a positive attitude.* That is, the response may well need to be an emotional one, alongside anything happening in the mind. A 'heart-move', not just a 'mind-move'.

Jim Engels invented the 'Engels Scale' to show visually the move from ignorance to mature Christian discipleship. The early version of the 'Engels Scale' looked something like this:

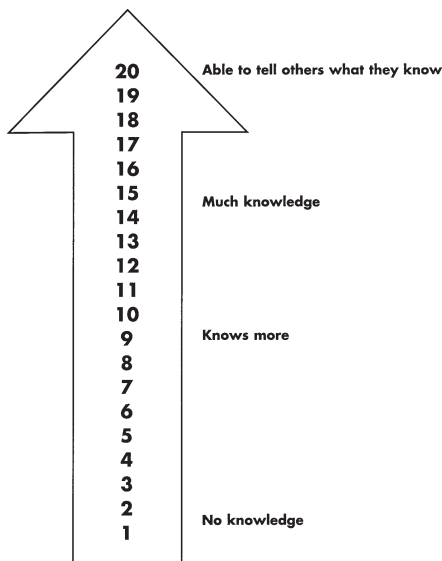


Diagram one

Later, Engels came to realise that he had left out the attitude/emotional side of human response in his scale. As a result, the 'Engels Scale' has changed:

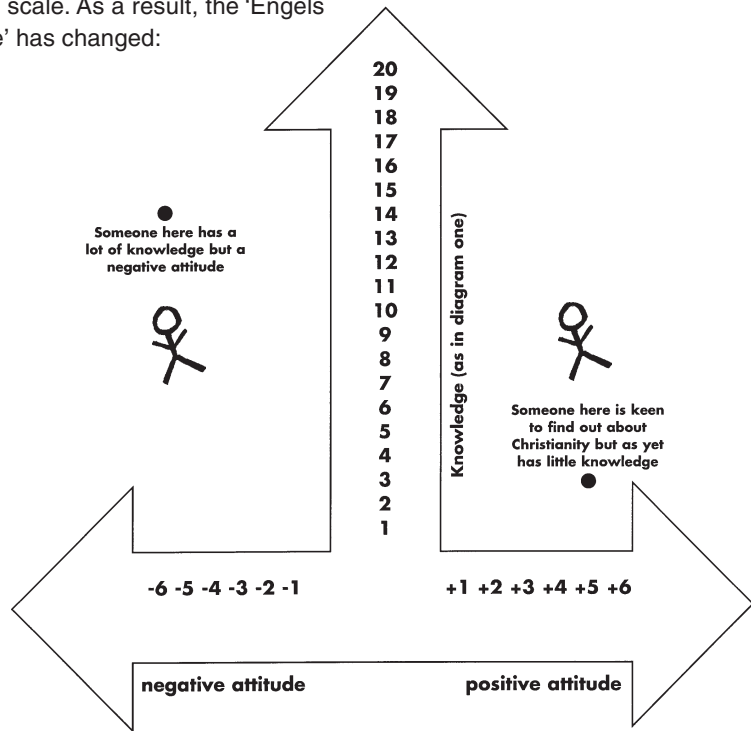


Diagram two

Activities

Think about individual children in your group, and 'plot' them onto the Engels scale. Which children are positive in attitude, but don't know much? Which ones are negative, but know a lot? Which ones are both positive and know much? Which ones are negative and know little?

Because we are committed to the worth of each individual child, plan some strategies for different

children. For example, with a positive child who lacks knowledge, perhaps you can lend them some materials they can investigate for themselves?

Doing this planning prayerfully as a group of leaders will be a great team experience. Look again at chapter 9 of *Children and the Gospel*.

Ron Buckland

Books to read:

- Children and the Gospel*, Ron Buckland, SU Australia 1 87679 413 5
- Children Finding Faith*, Francis Bridger, ScriptureUnion 1 85999 323 0
- Bringing Children to Faith*, Penny Frank, SU/CPAS 1 85999 410 5
- Mission Possible*, SU/CPAS, 1 85999 411 3