

Clear and Confusing Invitations

Clearly communicating the gospel to children is vitally important. However, Awana® leaders and others often use confusing terminology when inviting children to accept Christ. Salvation is a gift provided by grace through faith alone in Christ alone. Because salvation must be simply received, it is confusing to ask an unsaved child:

1. Will you give your heart to Christ?

The Bible never tells anyone to give his or her heart to Christ. We are not saved by giving God anything, but by accepting His gift of salvation (Ephesians 2:8-9). Jeremiah 17:9a says: *The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked.* On the other hand, Romans 10:10a says that: *For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness.* Some believe this verse communicates the idea of a nonbeliever making a decision of his or her will to accept Christ. Even so, this verse does not say that a nonbeliever must “give his or her heart to Christ.” A nonbeliever is incapable of giving his heart to God. This invitation contains confusing and unbiblical terminology that does not clearly present the gospel.

2. Will you surrender your life to Christ?

Again, we are not saved by giving God anything, but by accepting His gift of salvation (John 1:12). Surrender implies giving everything to the Lord, an act that applies only to Christians. Romans Chapters 6 and 12 call for Christians to “yield” and “present.” These actions are commands for Christians to obey and dedicate their lives to God’s will. Do not confuse these actions with trusting Jesus Christ for salvation.

3. Will you confess your sins and ask the Lord to forgive you?

This invitation applies only to Christians who need to renew their fellowship with the Lord. The verse on which this invitation is based, 1 John 1:9, does not apply to salvation. Though they must admit their sinfulness before God, nonbelievers do not need to confess their sins to be saved. Plus, it would be impossible to know and confess all of your sins. Instead, God forgives and cleanses them from sin when they accept Christ’s payment for their sins (Romans 3:24).

4. Will you come to Christ and promise to serve Him from now on?

The promise to serve Christ has meaning only for believers. Because nonbelievers have no spiritual life (Ephesians 2:1), they cannot respond to an invitation for service. In addition the expression “coming to Christ” conveys the idea of trying to make oneself acceptable to Christ and implies the idea of doing good works (Ephesians 2:8-9). If “coming to Christ” means accepting Christ as Savior, however, then the first part of such an invitation may be acceptable. Because this invitation contains vague terminology, nonbelievers would probably misunderstand it. Service for the Lord is a natural by-product of salvation, but has nothing to do with salvation itself.

5. Will you come and “pray through” to Christ?

Phrases such as “praying through,” “hanging on,” “letting go,” etc., are entirely foreign to the salvation invitation. They imply effort apart from accepting Christ as Savior. Christ Himself promises to save us when we trust in Him (John 3:18, 6:47). Nowhere does the Bible say we must plead with God. When we come to Jesus Christ in faith, He accepts us as we are. Phrases such as “praying through” are often used by those who overemphasize emotions. They insist that people must continue praying until they “feel” like they are saved.

6. Right now, ask Jesus to come into your heart.

Children who hear this invitation are often confused and mistakenly think that Jesus literally comes into their hearts. The simplicity of trusting Christ becomes misunderstood. We are saved because Jesus paid the penalty for our sins on the cross (Ephesians 1:7). When we put our trust in Jesus Christ as Savior, the Holy Spirit indwells us and our bodies become His temple. Being indwelt by the Holy Spirit, however, is a result of salvation, not the method by which we are saved. Those who use this invitation often base it on Revelation 3:20. Unfortunately, they are using this passage out of context because it does not apply to salvation.

7. Will you make your commitment to Christ now?

This invitation is vague and misleading. The phrase “commitment to Christ” could mean anything from breaking sinful habits to serving in a ministry. Making a commitment to Christ is certainly a work on an individual’s part, and nonbelievers are unable to make such a commitment because they are dead in trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1). We are not saved by making commitments or promises to God, but by accepting His gift of salvation (John 3:16-18). Nonbelievers must accept this gift before they can make a commitment to Christ. And they can receive this gift only by trusting in the finished work of Christ (John 5:24).

8. Will you make Christ the Lord of your life?

This invitation is for the Christian who has not been submitting to the lordship of Christ in his or her life. Nonbelievers have no spiritual life and cannot make Christ Lord of their lives until they have first accepted Him as their personal Savior. That is why the idea of making Christ Lord of your life has no part in a salvation invitation. Jesus saved us from sin through His work on the cross. There, He took upon Himself the punishment for our sin and died in our place (Romans 5:8). His death and resurrection give us spiritual life so we can obey and serve Him (1 Peter 2:24). Making Christ the Lord of our lives is not the way of salvation, but should follow salvation as we seek to obey God’s Word.

9. Will you repent of your sins and be saved?

Repentance means a “change of mind” and manifests itself in changed behavior. Genuine repentance is the result of the convicting work of the

Holy Spirit, which leads to sorrow because of sin and a desire to turn from sin to God. Before accepting the gift of salvation, nonbelievers must realize their sinfulness (Romans 3:23, 6:23) and their need for a Savior. In salvation, repentance and trust are two sides of the same coin (Luke 24:47). Repentance alone is not salvation.

10. Just believe now and allow Jesus to touch you.

This invitation appeals to one's emotions and leaves out the importance of accepting Christ as Savior. Instead of emphasizing trust in Christ, this invitation focuses on an unusual experience that indicates salvation. Nowhere does the Bible say that we are saved when Jesus "touches us." Nor does it tell us to expect feelings or emotions when we accept Christ as Savior. True, feelings of joy, relief or peace are not uncommon at the moment of salvation, but our assurance of salvation rests on the promises of God's Word, not on our feelings (John 3:36).

11. Are you willing to forsake all your sins to obtain salvation?

Nonbelievers are unable to forsake their sins. The Bible does not teach that we must forsake our sins before accepting the gift of salvation. Instead, the Bible exhorts us to believe the good news that Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). When we put our trust in Jesus Christ, God accepts us as we are – lost and hopeless. On the other hand, once we accept Christ, we should forsake sin through the power of the Holy Spirit and learn to live for Him. (John 14:21; 1 John 5:2-3). This invitation wrongly exchanges the result of salvation (godly conduct) with the method of salvation (faith in Christ).

The following invitations are clearly worded:

12. Will you accept the Lord Jesus and trust Him as your own personal Savior?

This invitation is biblically correct. Accepting Jesus Christ as my Savior is putting my trust in what He did for me on the cross. Trusting Christ is personal because Christ died for me. Nonbelievers must personally trust Him to save them from the penalty of their sin. *As many as received Him* ... (John 1:12) is the open invitation for anyone to be saved. This is the heart of the gospel!

13. Christ died for your sins. Believe and trust Him personally, and you will be saved.

This invitation is also acceptable. Christ died for our sins and demonstrated His victory over sin by His physical resurrection from the dead (Romans 4:24-25; 1 Corinthians 15:3-4). When the Bible uses the word believe, it means an absolute trust in something. When we personally place our trust in this gospel message, we are assured of eternal life in heaven. Jesus lives to assure us that He will complete our salvation (Philippians 1:6).