

*100 Things Every Child
Should Know before
Confirmation*

A Guide for Parents and Youth Leaders



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To Owen

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1

Growing a Life of Faith Together

I can identify four moments from my teenage life that significantly changed how I understood the Bible and Christian faith. These four moments sparked within me a motivation to learn more about Scripture, to be engaged in my community and to seek out conversation partners on what has been a lifelong journey of faith.

The first came during confirmation when I finally noticed that the Bible contains no stories of Jesus' life as a teenager. I remember writing in my confirmation notebook, 'How am I supposed to relate to Jesus as a teenager when we don't know what it was like for *him* to be a teenager?' I knew the stories of Jesus' birth, his ministry, his death and his resurrection, but as a 13 year old it didn't seem like our lives had much in common. This was the first moment I remember that I really wanted the Bible to be meaningful to *me*.

Around that same time I re-read the story of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke and for the first time understood it as theologically significant. I already knew the details well, having spent a week of theater church camp cast in a musical version of the story. But it wasn't until I was a teenager that I understood the importance of the father's unqualified forgiveness and the desperation that the son felt. All of a sudden, what had seemed like a simple parable gave me language to describe the grace and love of God in a way that finally made sense to me.

A year or so later I had a similar experience, but this time at a large Presbyterian youth conference. In one of the worship services the Gospel lesson was the story of the woman at the well from the Gospel of John. In addition to the reading of the passage, a group of performers created a liturgical dance that retold the story of Jesus' encounter with this marginal woman. Up to that point I knew in my mind that Jesus had unique encounters and relationships with women,

but it was only through this creative interpretation of this powerful story that I realized that maybe I, as a young woman, had a unique way to relate to Jesus.

Finally, in my later teen years my youth pastor told me there were parts of the Bible she really struggled with – especially the writings of Paul. Even though I knew who Paul was and knew that many of the letters in the New Testament were written by him, I had never read any of them closely enough to know how full they were of language that limited the authority of women. I was fascinated both by her frustration at the Bible and by her commitment to it nevertheless. No one had ever shared that with me before, and when I also came to struggle with the Bible, she served as a model for how a person can faithfully ask hard questions of the Scriptures.

I share these four epiphanies because they have two things in common that are essential in the spiritual development of our children and young people. First, each of these revelations was rooted in the Bible stories and church experiences that had been planted in me from a young age. Second, each occurred because of a connection I had to the adults in my community of faith – my Sunday school teachers, my parents, my pastors, even the faithful and thoughtful leaders of that youth conference. Each of them took the time to nurture within me the tools I would need to deepen my faith, and each knew when the time was right to introduce me to a more sophisticated, more personal, maybe even more radical way of understanding the Bible and the Christian experience.

The Confirmation Experience

As a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA) for the past 12 years, it has been my great privilege to be a part of the same kinds of moments of growth and deepening of faith for young men and women.

In many instances these kinds of epiphanies happened within the context of confirmation class. In the Presbyterian Church students around the ages of 13 and 14 typically spend a year in preparation to confirm their baptism – or be baptized as an adult – and to become what we call an *adult* member of a local congregation. Because these classes are usually smaller than a regular Sunday-school class or youth event, they can be a fertile environment to nurture within young people a curiosity about the Bible and Christian faith and to provide

a safe space to ask and even answer some of the questions about the Christian experience they have rolling around in their heads or weighing on their hearts.

The longer I worked with young people in these classes the more I noticed, year after year, that students were no longer coming to the class with the kinds of questions I had had, and were barely prepared to engage in any of the questions I placed before them.

Concerned that this was a symptom of our congregational life or our curriculum, I started asking colleagues in other churches and other traditions if they were having the same experiences. Indeed they were, and they were just as frustrated as I was becoming. For all of us, this year in which we had hoped and planned to help young people take an important next step in their journey of faith – connecting what they already knew from the Bible with their personal experience, learning how to ask faithful questions of the Bible and the Church and finding their place within the community celebrating the gifts they had to offer – was gradually turning instead into a remedial Sunday school class where we rushed to try to pack in everything about the Church and the Bible they should have already learned at an earlier age.

As a way to try to understand what it seemed students were missing and what basic knowledge I expected of them, I created a list of 100 things I would want them to know before they stepped into my confirmation class. This list became a tool for me as a pastor, for parents in our congregation and for our staff to assess what materials we were covering in our weekly Sunday school and how we were resourcing parents to be Christian educators within their homes. As I worked with the list, it also became a way to help parents better understand the progression of faith development their children can experience when they are nurtured in the faith from an early age.

It also served as fodder for conversations on my blog about how we teach the Bible to children and how even knowledge of the simplest of Bible stories can provide the seed of a new and deeper way for young people to connect with their faith.

That list has now become this book, which takes this conversation one step further, looking at the ways parents, leaders and educators within the church can see how each conversation, each lesson plan, each community activity, each moment in worship can build upon another to grow within young men and women a deep and curious faith.

A Vision for Christian Education

In my experience, effective Christian education – in the church or at home – should take students through progressive steps of knowledge and understanding as they grow:

- when they are children, exposing them to the essentials of Scripture, worship, and Christian life;
- then, as they get a little older, starting around the age of 12, teaching them skills for identifying patterns and traditions when we look at these Christian essentials as a whole;
- as they take on more responsibility for their religious identity, fostering within them an ability to think critically about faith and Scripture and, based on this critical thinking, to make an ‘adult’ decision to confirm their identity as a Christian;
- finally, as older teenagers walking beside them, studying Scripture on a deeper level and, having claimed an identity as a Christian, practicing and learning what that means for who God has called them to be as well as how their faith informs their daily living.

It is at this critical third transitional step, when students are called upon to integrate what they already know about the Bible and Christianity into their personal identity (a step that in my tradition happens in the year-long confirmation preparation process), that we can most radically see the consequences of the holes that have crept in to our children’s religious education.

When I first created the list of 100 things and presented it to the Christian Education Committee in my congregation and then to the parents of an incoming confirmation class, there were two reactions. First, there was a sense of being overwhelmed at all the things students should have as a foundation in their primary Christian education. Second, as people worked more closely with the list it became clear that it barely scratched the surface when it comes to the potential for biblical and Christian knowledge.

This book will not focus on the reasons why so many of us as parents and educators are seeing more and more of our children unprepared to take meaningful steps in their faith development as they reach their teen years. There are too many to count and too many that we cannot even hope to change.

Growing a Life of Faith Together

- What we can do is be clearer about the basics we need to be teaching our children instead of just assuming they will pick them up along the way.
- What we can do is nurture parents in our congregations, giving them the tools, the education and the encouragement to be partners in their children's religious education.
- What we can do as parents is be more intentional about having real and honest conversations with our children about the Bible and our faith, without being worried that we don't know enough to be their teachers.
- What we can do is consider how each precious moment that we do have children in an educational setting at church can be a moment to work towards this larger goal of mature faith.
- What we can do is identify adult mentors within our churches who are willing to walk alongside young people as they grow into their faith, sharing models of Christian living and faithful curiosity.

It is my hope that this book will help us all to do each of these things better.

Growing Faith

Number 75 in the list in this book is the Parable of the Mustard Seed from the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus speaks about faith and how much one needs to have – telling his disciples that even a small amount of faith, as small as a mustard seed, will be enough to move a mountain. Several years ago at the end of one of my most engaged confirmation classes, the students – and their parents – gave me a small charm on a necklace, a miniature vial containing a collection of mustard seeds. On the bottom of the vial they had engraved 'Planted 2009'.

It was a touching gift, and I do believe that among that group of young people, seeds of faith were planted that have continued to grow within them as they live into their adult faith beyond high school. But the truth is that we had fruitful conversations that year because of the seeds that were actually planted and fed in them for years before – even before I was their pastor. Seeds planted by their parents, their Sunday school teachers, their grandparents, older teenagers in the congregation, and all the other people in their lives who encouraged their faith and made them feel like a welcomed part of the Christian community.

2

How to Use This Book

This list of 100 Bible stories, characters, verses, church traditions, habits and conversations represents the foundational knowledge that I believe children and younger teenagers should have in order to make the transition to the next level of faith expression as older teenagers and young adults. The list is broken up topically, moving through the Old and New Testaments, worship practices, and then ten items at the end focusing on how Christians relate to one another and to the world.

You can read this book from cover to cover to get a sense of the breadth of information we should be teaching children, or it can serve as a reference tool for parents and educators as they look for additional support related to specific items.

The most important thing to keep in mind is that in almost all instances I am assuming that you will use this book alongside a Bible. There are too many stories packed into this list for me to be able to quote or summarize all of them. I do my best to mention details and highlights that relate specifically to the insights I share on each item, but I have also given you the specific book, chapter and verse each refers to so that you can do the work of reading these parts of the Bible on your own. This book and this list is not meant to replace or summarize biblical material but rather to help highlight some essentials for parents who are looking for a way to make teaching the Bible to children seem more manageable.

The second important thing to know is that each suggestion or interpretation I offer for each item is simply a starting point for conversations and interpretation. I am not offering a definitive interpretation of any part of the Bible but rather am giving examples of child-friendly ways to enter into conversations about Scripture when they are young and then more challenging ways we can study Scripture together with young people as they mature in their faith.

Most of the writing I do and the initial impetus for this list is to help parents gain a better sense of how to be an active part of their child's religious education. When I became a parent I began to realize that as a pastor I had the benefit of training and preparation that made having conversations with my son about faith, church and the Bible relatively second nature to me. But I also soon realized that what I was doing with my son at home was not really very complicated or beyond the reach of any parent. The problem is that we don't take the time to equip parents to do this work and to have these conversations. This book aspires to be a source of encouragement and empowerment for parents to take on this task.

It should also serve as a resource and tool for Christian educators in the congregational setting – both professional and volunteer. The list as a whole can be a way to spark conversations about what the essentials are in your context and can also be a tool for intentional conversations with parents about what children should be learning and how to spark these conversations across the generations.

Finally, this book can serve as an inspiration for parents and educators alike as we envision the religious potential for our children as they grow in their faith. While the goal in a moment like confirmation is to empower students to profess their faith in Jesus Christ publicly, we should also focus on a broader and more long-term goal of equipping them for a dynamic and curious Christian life.

For each item in the book, I reflect on and give ideas in three different areas:¹

Planting the seed

These first sections are written mostly for parents and primarily for one-to-one conversations we can have with children as we introduce a variety of biblical stories and concepts, family traditions and Christian practices. Sometimes I have shared examples from my own conversations with my son, and sometimes I share my own struggles to teach these basics at home. Frequently these suggestions apply to more than just one item on the list but are general ideas for how to kick-start conversations on these topics with children.

¹ I group and discuss some items on the list together – such as, notably, the Ten Commandments but others too. Therefore you will not find individual 'Planting the seed', 'Feeding the soil' and 'Watching them grow' sections for every item on the list of 100.

Feeding the soil

These next sections address how we can nurture the seeds planted at home with parents in a congregational or community setting. Some of these ideas focus on larger issues of how we teach the Bible in the classroom setting. Others seek to be new ideas on standard Bible stories that can help to supplement existing teaching materials you are already using. Others again will challenge you to consider new topics on traditional Sunday-school lessons or will consider how we teach children at church *outside* the classroom, in the ways through which they are introduced to and included in the larger life and work of the church. Some of these examples come from the traditions and programs of the congregation I served for over ten years (2002–13) in South Bend, Indiana. Their willingness to engage children in the full life of the congregation and to experiment in the classroom helped to shape many of these innovative ideas.

Watching them grow

These last sections represent the potential next steps that young people can take in their faith as they build and expand on the concepts and practices planted in them at an earlier age. Most importantly, I have included some of the questions young people brought to me over the ten years that I taught confirmation class, as well as the questions I posed to them to try to expand the way they engaged with their faith and with the Bible.

As you move through this book and these different moments of growth and development you will note that I refer to different stages and ages in different ways. In order to be clear, here are the different groups of students to which I am typically referring:

- ‘children’ most often means from about age 3 to 11;
- ‘younger children’ typically refers to from age 3 to about 7;
- ‘older children’ means 8 through 11;
- ‘young people’ or ‘youth’ means 12 through 18
- ‘younger teenagers’ will typically mean 12–14;
- ‘older teenagers’ will mean 15–18.