



**LEAD THEM TO
JESUS**

**A HANDBOOK FOR
YOUTH WORKERS**

MIKE MCGARRY

“*Lead Them to Jesus* provides gospel-centered answers to the most common questions facing anyone in youth ministry. I’m planning to use this book to train all of our future youth leaders!”

Drew Hill, Pastor; award-winning author of *Alongside: Loving Teenagers with the Gospel*

“Mike has done a great service to the church with this book. *Lead Them to Jesus* is more than good—it’s essential reading. His overarching sections on biblical truths and practical helps will make this a reference book for youth workers for years to come. I plan to revisit the material consistently.”

John Perritt, Director of Resources, Reformed Youth Ministries; author of *Mark: How Jesus Changes Everything*; editor for the Track series for students; host of *The Local Youth Worker* podcast

“For every parent who has struggled to answer your teen’s theological questions or give a gospel response to postmodern issues, this book is as much for you as it is for youth workers! A reference book you will want to keep handy!”

Kristen Hatton, Author of *The Gospel Centered Life in Exodus, Face Time*, and *Get Your Story Straight*

“*Lead Them to Jesus* is a great and timely resource. This book will equip leaders with basic biblical truths and walk them through everything from leading students to Christ all the way to discussing a theology of suffering. Often you can find resources that address the theological or the practical, but this resource combines both orthodoxy and orthopraxy, allowing leaders to grow in their walks while preparing them to lead others to do the same.”

Shane Pruitt, National Next Gen Director, North American Mission Board (NAMB); author of *9 Common Lies Christians Believe*

“*Lead Them to Jesus* helps pastors and youth ministers equip and disciple their youth ministry team. Mike combines basic training in biblical doctrine with a gospel-centered philosophy of ministry and a practical mindset. The chapters that help youth workers care for students who doubt or struggle with biblical sexuality are particularly helpful. I can imagine a student ministry team huddling before their weekly gatherings to discuss a chapter each week.”

Jared Kennedy, Author of *God Made Me for Worship* and *The Beginner’s Gospel Story Bible*; managing editor of *Gospel-Centered Family*

“For many who work with young people, the constant barrage of questions and doubts from teenagers about Christianity, along with the practical struggles of youth ministry, can be wearisome and discouraging. Mike McGarry has written a thorough, clear, and remarkably helpful handbook to help address those discouragements head on. *Lead Them to Jesus* is the exact resource every youth worker needs in ministry.”

Shelby Abbott, Author of *DoubtLess* and *Pressure Points*; speaker; campus minister

“I cannot recommend this volume highly enough. Useful, compassionate, clear, and engaging, this is one book I will be passing out to volunteers and students for many years to come.”

Robin Barfield, Associate Minister, Christ Church, Wharton, UK; visiting lecturer, Oak Hill College and Union School of Theology

“Volunteer leaders form the backbone of any healthy student ministry. Unfortunately, many of these leaders feel ill-equipped to engage students with the truths of Scripture and the gospel of Jesus Christ. In his book, *Lead Them to Jesus: A Handbook for Youth Workers*, Mike McGarry offers youth workers answers to critical questions that students ask and presents helpful, practical skills to help them navigate student ministry.”

Tim McKnight, Director of the Global Center for Youth Ministry; associate professor of youth ministry and missions, Anderson University

“If you ever wanted an introductory handbook to just about everything you’ll need to know in youth ministry, then this is that book! *Lead Them to Jesus* is the book I wish I was given years ago.”

Tim Gough, Author of *Rebooted: Reclaiming Youth Ministry for the Long Haul*; director of Llandudno Youth for Christ, Wales

“*Lead Them to Jesus* is an outstanding resource for youth leaders. Mike McGarry offers short commentaries on forty important issues and tasks in youth ministry, and he doesn’t shy away from hot-button issues! This is a great handbook for providing biblical answers to the challenging questions of teenagers and learning to carry out the essential tasks of youth ministry.”

Mark W. Cannister, Professor of Christian Ministries, Gordon College

“There is a dearth of helpful, gospel-centered resources available to youth ministers fighting the good fight for today’s teenagers. I am so grateful

for longtime youth pastor Mike McGarry and his latest book, *Lead Them to Jesus*. I pray that this book finds its way into the hands of pastors and volunteers across the world.”

Charlotte Getz, Editor-in-chief, Rooted Ministry

“This is the book I wish I had when I started out in youth ministry. It deals winsomely with some of the most significant theological issues that youth pastors will face when working with teenagers, as well as offering excellent practical advice for running a regular youth ministry. I will be putting this into the hands of my team.”

Peter Wright, Youth Worker, Hill Street Presbyterian Church; tutor with Crosslands

“For youth workers wanting to help teens find answers to the hard questions of faith and life, Mike is a wonderful guide and this book is an amazing map. If you’re a youth worker, you need a copy.”

Christopher Talbot, Instructor of Ministry, Welch College; author of *Remodeling Youth Ministry: A Biblical Blueprint for Ministering to Students*

“Most resources for youth ministry workers prize either theology or practical tips over the other, but anyone serving in youth ministry knows that both are required to see growing disciples and engaged students, in addition to helping volunteers to feel supported and equipped to serve well. If you are a minister, volunteer, church leader, teacher, or even parent of a teenager in youth ministry, you need to own this book.”

Rebecca Heck, Codirector of Student Ministry, Intown Community Church, Atlanta, GA

“This is the book that youth ministry has desperately needed! It is a doctrinally rich and practically thorough resource for those caring for young people in the local church. It will be one of the essential go-to books for anyone concerned to nurture the next generation for Jesus.”

Melanie Lacy, Executive Director, Growing Young Disciples

“*Lead Them to Jesus* is the go-to resource for new youth workers and volunteers. Mike McGarry unites theology and practical skills into one resource to equip the next generation of youth workers. Every team would benefit from reading and discussing this book together.”

Doug Franklin, President, LeaderTreks Youth Ministry

“I have so often wished there were a book equipping laypeople for gospel ministry to teenagers, a resource that would help adults to think biblically, while inspiring their courage to dive into the messy, beautiful work of walking with middle and high school students. *Lead Them to Jesus* is the book I’ve long hoped for, and I can’t wait to give it to every leader in our ministry. Mike speaks both theologically and practically to the concerns of youth workers, showing how the cross and resurrection of Jesus shapes every last one.”

Chelsea Kingston Erickson, Pastor of Youth and Families, First Congregational Church of Hamilton, MA

“What a gift this is for youth workers who want to somehow give their volunteers all the practical tips, sage advice, critical warnings, and theological foundations that are necessary for biblical youth ministry! The format is just right for volunteers: short enough to engage, but deep enough to nurture and teach. I highly recommend it!”

Duffy Robbins, Professor of Christian Ministries, Grove City College, Grove City, PA

“*Lead Them to Jesus* is a book that youth pastors of any experience level will pull off the shelf over and over again. McGarry has given youth pastors a true gift in this theologically rich, biblically sound handbook.”

Cameron Cole, Founding Chairman of Rooted; coeditor of *Gospel-Centered Youth Ministry* and *The Jesus I Wish I Knew in High School*; author of *Therefore I Have Hope*

“Are you ready to aim teenagers and their parents toward Jesus and his church? *Lead Them to Jesus* is one of the resources that will help you to move in this direction.”

Timothy Paul Jones, C. Edwin Gheens Chair of Christian Ministry, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author of *Family Ministry Field Guide*; editor of *Perspectives on Family Ministry*

“In one concise resource, Mike McGarry has provided a wealth of theological and practical guidance for youth workers, both those with and without formal training. I cannot recommend this resource highly enough!”

Andy Blanks, Cofounder and publisher, YM360

“In a day and age where youth workers must navigate a growing volume of cultural confusion, there is an urgent parallel need for youth ministry clarity. I’m grateful to Mike for this most helpful contribution to our youth ministry world.”

Walt Mueller, Center for Parent/Youth Understanding

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Workers

Mike McGarry

 New
Growth
Press
newgrowthpress.com

New Growth Press, Greensboro, NC 27404
newgrowthpress.com
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Cover Design: Faceout Books, faceoutstudio.com
Interior Design and Typesetting: Gretchen Logterman

ISBN: 978-1-64507-130-3 (Print)
ISBN: 978-1-64507-131-0 (eBook)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: McGarry, Mike, 1980- author.

Title: Lead them to Jesus : a handbook for youth workers / Mike McGarry.

Description: Greensboro, NC : New Growth Press, [2021] | Includes bibliographical references. | Summary: "Veteran youth pastor Mike McGarry offers a practical, comprehensive tool to jumpstart your youth ministry and help youth workers with biblical answers to the tough questions students ask"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020057252 (print) | LCCN 2020057253 (ebook) | ISBN 9781645071303 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781645071310 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Church work with teenagers--Handbooks, manuals, etc. | Church work with youth--Handbooks, manuals, etc.

Classification: LCC BV4447 .M3725 2021 (print) | LCC BV4447 (ebook) | DDC 259/.23--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020057252>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020057253>

Printed in the United States of America

28 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 1 2 3 4 5

For the youth workers at South Shore Baptist Church.
I wrote this book for you.

Contents

Introduction	1
Starting Point: What Is the Gospel?	4

SECTION 1: BIBLICAL TRUTHS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

1. How Do I Become a Christian?	9
2. Can I Trust and Understand the Bible?	13
3. What Is the Trinity?	18
4. Is It Okay to Doubt?	23
5. How Can a Loving God Send Anyone to Hell?	27
6. Why Did Jesus Need to Die?	32
7. How Do We Know Jesus Rose from the Grave?	35
8. Will Jesus Really Return?	38
9. Who (Not What) Is the Holy Spirit?	43
10. Why Is the Church Important?	48
11. How Do Christians Interpret the Old Testament?	52
12. Can Christians Believe in Evolution?	57
13. Should Christians Be Tolerant?	62
14. How Should Christians Think about Mental Health Struggles?	66
15. Does Committing Suicide Condemn You to Hell?	70
16. Why Pray If God Will Do What He Wants?	74
17. Why Does God Allow Suffering?	77

SECTION 2: PRACTICAL HELP FOR YOUTH WORKERS

18. Starting a Youth Ministry	81
19. Attributes of a Great Youth Worker	86
20. Fostering a Healthy Ministry Culture.....	91
21. Fun and Games in Youth Ministry.....	96
22. Understanding Gen Z's Religious Worldview.....	101
23. Mentoring and Discipling Students	106
24. Preparing a Bible Message	112
25. Teaching Students and Keeping Their Attention.....	116
26. Leading Effective Small Groups.....	120
27. Handling Discipline	124
28. Using Social Media Effectively	128
29. Thinking about LGBTQ Issues.....	133
30. Helping Students Who Struggle with Porn.....	140
31. Discussing Sex and Dating	145
32. Organizing a Ministry Calendar.....	150
33. How to Plan a Mission Trip	154
34. Navigating Conflict Between Students.....	159
35. Breaking Down Cliques	163
36. Forming a Partnership with Parents.....	166
37. Supporting Single-Parent Families	171
38. Supporting Students from Unbelieving Families.....	176
39. Responding to Criticism	180
40. Boundaries, Confidentiality, and Mandated Reporting.....	184
Conclusion: Playing the Long Game in Youth Ministry	190
Acknowledgments	192
Additional Resources.....	193
Endnotes.....	197

Introduction

As I write, there is a meme going around on the Facebook groups for youth workers. It shows an overwhelmed-looking young man, and is captioned, “I don’t know what I’m doing . . . but I’m figuring it out as I go!” It got a lot of likes and comments. People resonate with its message.

This book is written so you won’t.

Most youth workers are volunteers who make generous sacrifices of their time, emotions, and money in order to lead students to Jesus. They use their vacation time to go on camps, retreats, and mission trips with hormonal teenagers (have you ever smelled a middle-school boys’ cabin after two days?). In their passion for serving students, they are often plugged into a ministry wherever there’s the greatest need, given a few quick pointers on what to do, and then set loose with a vague promise of training. Too often, this has been my own practice with youth workers, and it doesn’t set them up for long-term, joyful service.

The idea for this book came from my own need for it. After serving in the same church for more than a decade, I began searching for resources to equip my new team of youth workers. The handbooks I found were either outdated or failed to help youth workers see how the gospel shapes each topic addressed, and my favorite youth ministry blogs weren’t comprehensive enough. Resources seemed to provide youth workers with a

solid theology for ministry or with practical skills, but not both. As I wrote down a list of topics I wanted to talk about with my youth workers, I realized I had a good table of contents for a resource that could help more than just my own team. This book brings theology and practice together with a singular vision for gospel-centered youth ministry.

This is a natural follow-up to my previous book, *A Biblical Theology of Youth Ministry: Teenagers in the Life of the Church* (Randall House Academic, 2019). That first book tells about a biblical theology for youth ministry. This book shows what that actually looks like. It is written to give you a biblical and practical resource that will help you build your ministry to teenagers around the gospel.

Most youth workers who preach the gospel and hold to historic Christian doctrines consider themselves gospel-centered. While these practices are essential, they do not automatically make a minister or a ministry “gospel-centered.” While other ministries might be gospel-absent, these are simply gospel-present. Gospel-centered youth ministry is built on the firm conviction that the gospel should directly inform every facet of the youth ministry. To that end, this book presents clear guidance on ways the gospel shapes not only how to teach biblical sexuality and theology, but also how it shapes mission trips, game time, parent ministry, and the youth group calendar.

Gospel-centered youth workers want to lead students to Jesus, regardless of the topic or event. This book is divided into two sections to help you accomplish that mission. The first equips youth workers to answer questions teens often have about God and the Bible. The second is a guide to the practical tasks of operating a youth ministry.

SECTION ONE: BIBLICAL ANSWERS FOR YOUTH WORKERS

Theology drives methodology. Many have said it, and it’s true. What we believe about God, salvation, and the Bible has a very real impact on the way we minister to students. For this reason,

there are some important doctrines that youth workers should be equipped to discuss with students. After all, how can we help students grapple with who God is if we ourselves don't have a basic understanding of the Trinity? Or how can we help students endure suffering if we have a thin view of why God allows suffering to exist?

If you want to make lifelong disciples, social media and merely "hanging out" isn't going to cut it. You need to be prepared to go deep with students about what they believe and why, and you can't take them where you've never gone.

This book assumes that you, as a volunteer youth worker, have never received formal education in biblical studies or theology. Please do not avoid section 1 even if you find the theology difficult at times. The topics covered in this section will equip you to grow as a disciple maker, even as your own doctrinal understanding is stretched.

SECTION TWO: PRACTICAL HELP FOR YOUTH WORKERS

This second half of the book offers practical skills I have learned over fifteen years in ministry and countless conversations with fellow youth pastors. In the midst of its practical counsel, this section will keep showing the ways the gospel shapes every facet of youth ministry. As I highlight repeatedly throughout this book, the gospel is more than an evangelism tool. It is the lifeblood of the entire Christian experience. Without the gospel, everything else we have to offer students might be fun, but it's ultimately futile. The gospel gives life and joy and hope to the way we play games, address conflict, partner with parents, integrate students into the life of the church, or talk about sex.

The gospel truly is good news of great joy for all people. May it fill your soul with joy as you lead students to Jesus.

Starting Point: What Is the Gospel?

The gospel is the best news in the history of creation. And yet, even as church kids may be so familiar with some parts of the gospel that they stop listening to it, and even though some could tell you that *gospel* means “good news,” most still struggle to articulate what that good news actually is. It is “good news of a great joy that will be for all the people” (Luke 2:10), but maybe the reason students are so fuzzy on the gospel is because we are too. The gospel is so much more than an evangelistic message that ushers people into heaven. Instead, it’s more like the heart transplant that brings the Christian to life and keeps him alive every single day.

GETTING CLEAR ON THE GOSPEL

It is impossible to preach the gospel without highlighting the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus lived a sinless life, died a painful death as the substitute for all of God’s children, rose from the grave in victory over sin and death, and will return to complete both his judgment of sin and the salvation of his people. This is good news for every generation, and it is worthy of being proclaimed every chance we get. I have heard many evangelistic ministries hold out to students the promises of the gospel (especially salvation from sin and the love of God) while barely

mentioning the cross and resurrection. At these types of youth events, a call to repentance is frequently absent or severely downplayed in order to proclaim the love and mercy of God to students who are hurting. But talking about the love and grace of God is not the same thing as presenting the gospel. Faithful Jews and Muslims can talk about God's love! Christian youth workers need to remember that neglecting to preach the whole gospel out of a desire to keep the gospel simple and clear will only lead students to shallow faith that fails to grasp the full breadth and power of their salvation.

At its heart, the gospel is the proclamation that God saves sinners through Jesus Christ. It is not a "new law" or a revision of the Ten Commandments. It is not a philosophy to grasp, or even a theology to unlock. Instead, it is the grace of God that sinners receive by faith. Because of the gospel, sinners have become children of God, set free from bondage to sin and guilt and shame, and they have a new destiny: eternal joy in the presence of God, their heavenly Father. This, my friends, is good news indeed!

The gospel of grace lies at the heart of everything youth workers are trying to accomplish. There is nothing the church has to offer students that the world can't match—apart from the gospel. Dig deeply into it, plumbing the depths of its many facets throughout the entire Bible. Also keep your own heart warmed toward the majesty and mystery of this good news, lest it become dry and routine to both you and the students you serve.

REVISITING HOW WE PRESENT THE GOSPEL TO STUDENTS

There are two approaches to gospel proclamation that I believe need to be revisited: one that crams Jesus down students' throats, and another that attempts to "preach the gospel without words." Although they appear to be opposite approaches, they are actually different sides of the same coin. Both try to compel a genuine profession of faith. This means that, at best, these approaches only produce false converts who conform to the externals of Christianity for a while.

The force-feeding approach fails because we're all the same in this regard: when someone crams something down your throat, you're probably going to vomit it out even if it's good for you. We know this, but some youth workers and parents continue to do it anyway. Many church kids have not rejected Jesus as much as they've rejected him being forced upon them through pressure to think and behave Christianly even if their heart isn't in it. Their zealous parents and youth workers misunderstand the gospel because good news of great joy doesn't need to be forced; it simply needs to be announced. The gospel must take root in the heart before it changes students' behavior. Proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ with confidence, and trust the Holy Spirit to do the work only he can do.

The "preach without words" approach falls short because none of us can *be* the gospel. The gospel is the announcement of God's grace poured out on sinners through the life, death, resurrection, and eventual return of Jesus Christ. When Christians live in a way that reflects the gracious love of God, it may warm nonbelievers toward hearing the gospel. But they still need to *hear* it, because it's news about who Jesus is and what he's done—not about what we have done to love them. So let's drop the talk about "being the gospel" and renew our commitment to being changed by the gospel, loving others as Christ loved us, and telling them what God has done through Jesus.

MORE THAN AN EVANGELISTIC MESSAGE

The gospel is so much more than just a message that initially calls sinners to trust in Jesus for salvation and new life. The gospel of grace lies at the heart of our whole salvation: justification (our righteous standing with God), sanctification (our growth in holiness), and glorification (our coming perfection). And yet, with sanctification it is common for discipleship ministries to overlook the centrality of the gospel. Instead, they merely share practical counsel for students about how they can work to become more like Christ. This usually happens with

good intentions, but it leads students into works-righteousness rather than daily dependence on the Spirit. As the apostle Paul cried out in Galatians 3:3, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?”

Theologians often refer to four chapters of salvation history: creation, fall, redemption, and glorification. This is helpful for youth workers to remember because it lets us locate where students are in their walk with Christ. Of course, none of us are still in the creation chapter, and no one currently in your youth group has already been glorified. So every student you meet is marked by either the fall or redemption. Students who have not professed faith in Christ and repented of their sin are still marked by the fall—they do not belong to Christ and they need to hear and believe the gospel. But those who have confessed their sin and confessed Christ Jesus as Lord and have professed their desire to turn from sin and follow Jesus (repentance) are marked by redemption. Their lives been transformed by the grace they have received and by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit as they hear and grow in the gospel. This is why the gospel is the heartbeat that drives your entire ministry to students.

You must ask yourself this: Do you really believe the gospel is good news of great joy, or do you think it’s just okay? Students can tell when your heart is lukewarm toward the gospel. If you proclaim the gospel from your heels, holding back from presenting it with joyful enthusiasm because you aren’t sure it’s all that great, they can tell. The single best thing you can do for your ministry is to continually warm your own heart by the life-giving message of the gospel. If the gospel is just okay news, then it’s on a level playing field with any number of other life-improving philosophies. But if it’s true that God really does save sinners through Jesus, and that it’s all a work of grace, then it really is good news!

SECTION 1

**Biblical Truths for Youth
Workers**

1

How Do I Become a Christian?

The gospel is the proclamation of the good news that God saves sinners through Jesus Christ. Inherent in this message is an invitation to come and be saved. But what does that mean, and how can youth workers help an interested student who is not a Christian become one?

Not every Christian knows when they became a Christian, and that's okay. Following Jesus is about more than a singular moment when someone prays a prayer; it's about living as a dearly loved child of God who has received grace through faith in Jesus who lived, died, rose again, and will return one day. That being said, it is important for youth workers to know how to lead students who are either “on the fence” or are self-professed non-Christians into a new life with Christ.

HELP STUDENTS COUNT THE COST

In group settings where nonbelieving students are hearing the gospel, some for the very first time, it's crucial to encourage students to count the cost of becoming a Christian as you proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ. Students who profess faith in Christ without knowing that he calls us to repentance, personal holiness, and persecution will likely fall away when their new-found faith becomes inconvenient. Doing this in one-on-one

settings is probably easier because you will be able to speak specifically to that student, raising questions and issues they need to consider. But in large-group ministry, especially in evangelistic settings, this concern is easily overlooked.

You see, the gospel is more than an invitation to find deep joy and receive eternal life. It's also an invitation to begin life as a child of God *today*. And that life is lived in a world that hated, betrayed, and killed the Son of God on the cross. We should expect a measure of opposition as well. Many students have professed faith at an evangelistic retreat only to walk away from the faith when life got difficult. While we want to be cautious of scaring away students who are considering Christ (because what we receive through grace immeasurably outweighs what we sacrifice for Christ), it is dishonest to minimize the difficult aspects of the Christian life until after they have decided to become a Christian.

SHOULD WE USE THE “SINNER’S PRAYER”?

Potential converts are sometimes asked to pray a “sinner’s prayer” that usually sounds something like this: “Dear God, I confess that I am a sinner and cannot save myself. Please forgive me of my sin through Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection and give me new life in him. Amen.” Many who have attended an evangelistic ministry and then prayed the prayer consider themselves Christians even though they have never repented of their sin. Perhaps they confessed their sin and their need for salvation, but they did not turn from sin and cast their faith onto Christ. In many cases, teenagers pray this prayer every year at camp because it didn’t seem to produce any lasting change previously. The fault is not entirely in the sinner’s prayer, per se, as much as in a weak understanding of conversion and evangelism. True faith and repentance are an inner response of the heart to the grace of Christ, not an external prayer.

Due to the misuses of conversion prayers, many pastors hesitate to encourage them at all. For sure, they are not mandatory.

But when sinners confess their sin and profess faith in Jesus Christ, prayer is an appropriate way to express that newfound faith. At such times, leading them in prayer is a faithful way to teach them about the importance of prayer for their new life in Christ. You will want to emphasize that the power is not in praying any particular prayer, but in the faithfulness of the heavenly Father who has secured salvation through his Son, has adopted the new Christian through the indwelling Holy Spirit, and now loves to hear from his child.

HOW TO LEAD A STUDENT TO SAVING FAITH

1. **Trust God.** Salvation is the work of God. You cannot save anyone. Relieve yourself from the need to give a perfect answer for every question. God is already at work in each person who believes, and he will use your imperfect gospel presentations to lead students to himself.
2. **Confidently proclaim the gospel.** Romans 6:23 is a helpful verse: “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Through faith in Jesus, by his virgin birth, sinless life, substitutionary death, bodily resurrection, glorious ascension, and eventual return, we have received adoption as holy and beloved children of God. That is God’s plan of salvation, and it is indeed good news of great joy for all people. Proclaim it widely with confidence.
3. **Invite the student to repent of sin.** If students cannot identify their specific need for salvation, and if they do not repent of their sin, then they do not want to be a Christian—they simply want the benefits of Christ. Repentance goes deeper than mere confession. Confession means “to admit,” while repentance means “to change your mind” or “to turn around.” When students confess their sin but do not repent, they are simply acknowledging their sin without expressing any desire for God to change them. Encourage students to pray, confessing their sin, professing faith in Jesus Christ, and asking the Lord for the grace to live as a disciple of Jesus.

4. **Affirm the grace of God.** God's grace is eternally greater than our imperfect faith and half-hearted repentance. No one confesses or repents perfectly. Every student will stumble their way through conversion—and that's the beauty of it. Highlight the power of grace to remove guilt and shame and to give a new heart and identity to each person who believes.
5. **Disciple the student or find someone who will.** The purpose of evangelism is not to give students a free ticket to heaven when they die, hoping they don't lose it along the way. Evangelism that does not consider how to help students meaningfully grow in their new identity as a child of God is both irresponsible and unbiblical. Follow up with students to ensure someone is helping them discover how to live their new life in Christ.