



# HAVE THEY GOTTEN THE MESSAGE?

## *How Children View Salvation*

BY DONNA J. HABENICHT

If your students were asked these questions: "If Jesus were to come today or tomorrow, would you be saved? Would He take you to heaven with Him?" what would they say? The statements below are a small sample of the responses from interviews with a number of Adventist children and youth:

"I'm not ready—I have so many things to work on." (19-year-old)

"Yes, because I go to church every week, and I pray every night, study my lesson . . ." (9-year-old)

"Even good people can do one bad thing." (10-year-old)

"I must get some more stars in my crown." (18-year-old)

"I have been reading the Bible and I trust in God." (7-year-old)

"I have not asked forgiveness for all the sins that I have done today." (7-year-old)

"I have faith and I trust Him." (12-year-old)

"If you ask Him, He will save you." (11-year-old)

"I believe that even though I'm not perfect, God will save me because I'm willing to let Him live with me." (16-year-old)

"Even though I'm not perfect, God sees me through

### *What do children really understand about salvation?*

Jesus' life and therefore, I'm righteous in His eyes." (18-year-old)

"Christ came to teach the human family the way of salvation, and He made this way so plain that a little child can walk in it." This Ellen White statement has always intrigued me. What do children really understand about salvation? When can they understand

enough to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour? Is there a developmental pattern to their understanding? If so, could awareness of this sequence help us teach them more effectively about Jesus and salvation?

To try and answer these questions, with the assistance of graduate students at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan,<sup>2</sup> I am conducting a study of how ideas about salvation develop. I chose to use the semiclinical interview format utilized by Piaget in his studies of children's thinking. This method has been widely used in research on religious thinking during childhood and adolescence.<sup>3</sup> It allows the interviewer to probe the child's thinking patterns. The interviewee must generate responses, rather than merely react to ideas on survey documents. Even young children who lack the reading skills to participate in survey research can easily be interviewed.

During the interview session, we collected demographic and religious activities information, administered the vocabulary test of the Wechsler Scales of Intelligence to obtain a brief measure of verbal ability, and asked each person to make a drawing about salvation.

Currently, we have interviewed 276 SDA children, teenagers, and youth from 4 to 25 years of age, mainly from the Midwest region of the United States, but including other parts of the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico. A fourth of the participants were born in other countries, but were living in the U.S. We included people from rural and major metropolitan areas, small and large churches, public and church schools, and major ethnic groups in our sample. Victor Korniejczuk extended the study to South America, interviewing 120 randomly selected students ages 6 to 17 who attended church schools in Argentina and Paraguay.<sup>4</sup>

In this study, we are not trying to invent theology; we are only recording it as understood by children and youth. We asked questions about sin; baptism; being "saved"; the roles of works, trust, and grace in salvation; and the assurance of salvation. We also asked why Jesus came to earth and what He is doing now. Before completing each interview, we tried to determine the person's overall attitude toward salvation.

This article focuses on some of the major findings of special interest to teachers at all levels from kindergarten to university. An understanding of salvation includes many different ideas, as well as feelings and attitudes toward assurance. The results of our interviews clearly show that some of these ideas have a definite developmental pattern, with understanding gradually increasing as children mature. Other ideas do not show such a clear developmental pattern—younger children give responses almost as complete as those of

teenagers and youth.

However, this does not mean that children will "naturally" develop ideas about salvation. Each question we asked relates to what they have been taught. While understanding may mature, the basic ideas on which understanding is built must be learned from family, church, and school. The developmental pattern suggests guidelines for teaching because it tells us when children can best understand certain ideas. But we must always remember

that children have individual timetables—a few will understand earlier and some later than the majority. The amount of exposure to religious ideas also seems to influence when and what children understand.

### Sin

Since some understanding of evil seems basic to recognizing the need for a Saviour, we asked a series of questions about sin, beginning with "What is sin?" Answers to these questions clearly illustrate a developmental pattern. Four- to 5-year-olds say, "Sin is something bad" and tell about a "bad" thing they did. Six- to 7-year-olds

begin to make the transition to thinking of sin as disobeying God. By age 8 or 9 years, they are beginning to be more specific, although it takes until the mid-teens before a majority relate sin to disobeying God's laws. The idea that sin is a break in the relationship with God is first mentioned at age 16, but in our group only the 24- to 25-year-olds give this as a majority response. Graph 1 shows the development of this pattern of thinking.

It is easy to see why young people focus on actions and on the commandments. Rules are important, specific, and concrete. Children can tell if they are "good" or "bad" by how they relate to home or classroom rules. It is the same with God, in their view. Beginning in junior academy may be the time to focus on the relationship aspects of sin, as adolescents are poised to grow in understanding.

Does everyone sin? Many of the youngest children think "good" people—grownups—do not sin, but that idea is quickly replaced with the belief that nobody is perfect. "Only God is perfect" is the most popular response at all ages beginning with 8 to 9 years. A few 10- and 11-year-olds talk about being born in an evil world, but sinful

human nature is not introduced by anyone until the early teen years.

The idea of a sinful human nature needs careful teaching, probably during academy and college, since the majority never used this idea. Understanding the sinfulness of human nature lays a crucial foundation for sifting through the underpinnings of many disciplines—psychology and theology, for example—and the techniques that flow from their philosophies. It is also crucial to understand the Christian worldview. Junior and senior academy and college students should certainly have the chance to grapple with this concept.

We have taught our children well about the origin of sin. Even some 4-

to 5-year-olds mention Lucifer as being responsible, although most of the younger children tell the story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit. Lucifer and the war in heaven come in strongly by ages 8 to 9. By age 10 or 11, a few children are mentioning his selfishness, pride, or jealousy as the original cause of sin, but it is not until 18 to 19 years of age that the idea that sin originated in the heart of Lucifer becomes part of the picture for at least a fourth of the interviewees. If youth do not grasp this idea fully, might they think God had something to do with the beginning of evil?

As late as age 20, a few subjects see no connection between personal choice and salvation or overcoming sin. They relate choice to making good decisions, but not until mid- to late teens do as many as half of the respondents talk clearly about the choice between God and Satan. The idea that the ultimate choice lies with the individual begins to come in during the mid-teen years, but is not strong until the early 20s. We need to teach much more clearly that each person makes choices between God and Satan all the time. This is an idea that children can understand. It is basic to the great controversy doctrine and the SDA worldview.

### God's Love

We asked several questions about God's love for sinners. Most young children are quite sure that God is not angry when they do something wrong. He is sad, but not mad or angry. By 10 to 11 years of age, children are certain that God loves the sinner and forgives the sin. And they give good reasons for their belief—God keeps us alive, He died for us, etc.

Actually, these responses are quite remarkable. Ideas about God have been extensively researched.<sup>5</sup> Generally, these studies conclude that children believe God is angry when they do wrong things. Our children believe quite the contrary—God loves them and He is definitely not angry, although some think He might love them a little less when they sin. We need to continue stressing God's love for every-



Female, 13 years old

one—even people who do wrong things. It is an important message.

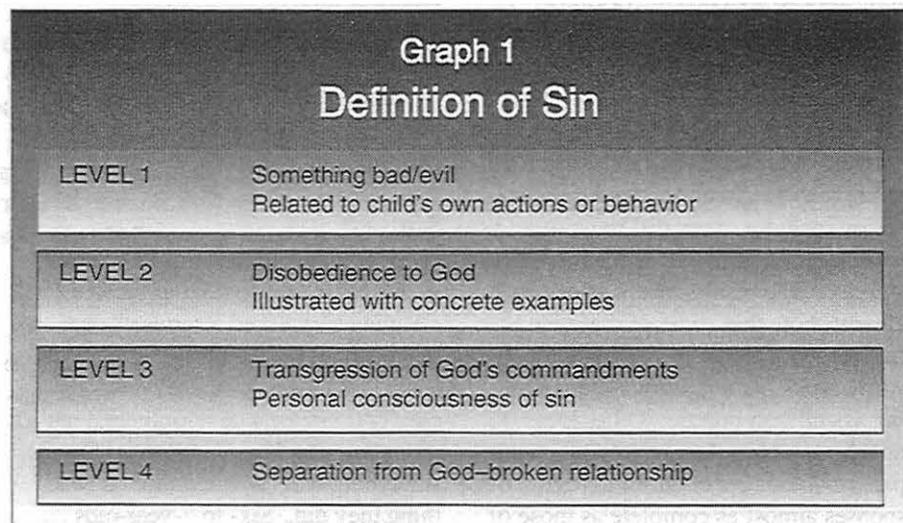
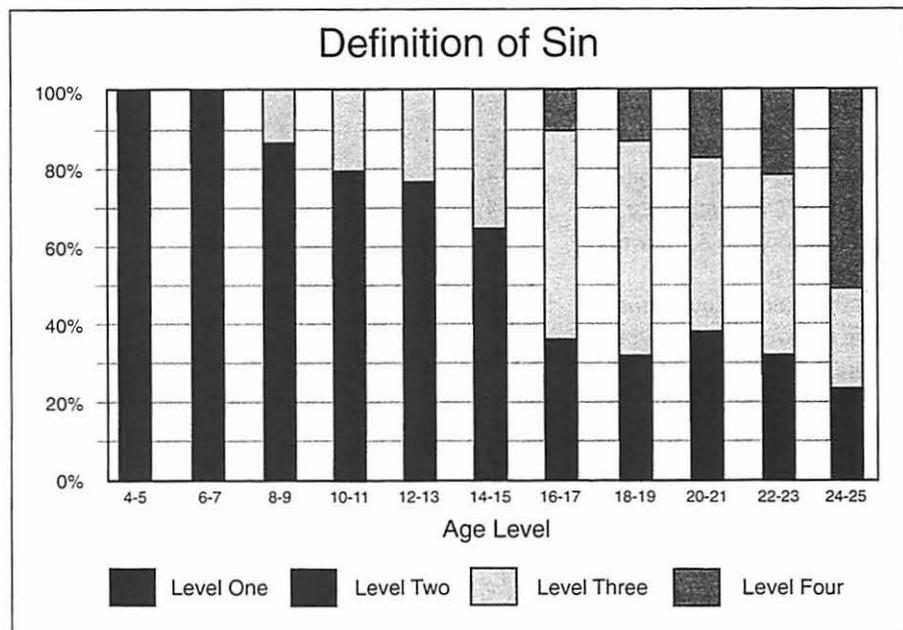
### Being Saved

Adventists do not talk very much

about “being saved,” and this showed in our interviews. Most do not know what “being saved” means, or they only mention freedom from sin, without linking it to heaven. Less than a third talked about eternal life, a relationship with God, freedom from Satan, sin, and dying, or said that “being saved” is a free gift from God. Children and youth do need to understand what “being saved” implies. This is our ultimate goal.

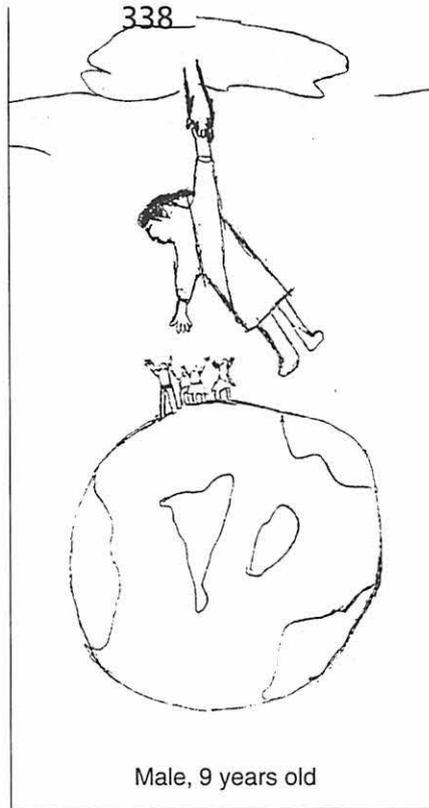
### Works Versus Faith/Grace

Several of our questions addressed the issue of works versus faith and grace in salvation. In answer to the question, “Who will go to heaven?”



children make a transition from mostly works responses to more faith/grace responses at ages 8 to 9. After that, there is no really significant change in the proportion of works versus faith/grace responses until the oldest year of our study. Behavioral responses are given by about 45 percent and faith/grace responses by 40-45 percent. The remainder are a combination of the two, sometimes in an integrated form and other times just a simple statement with both ideas.

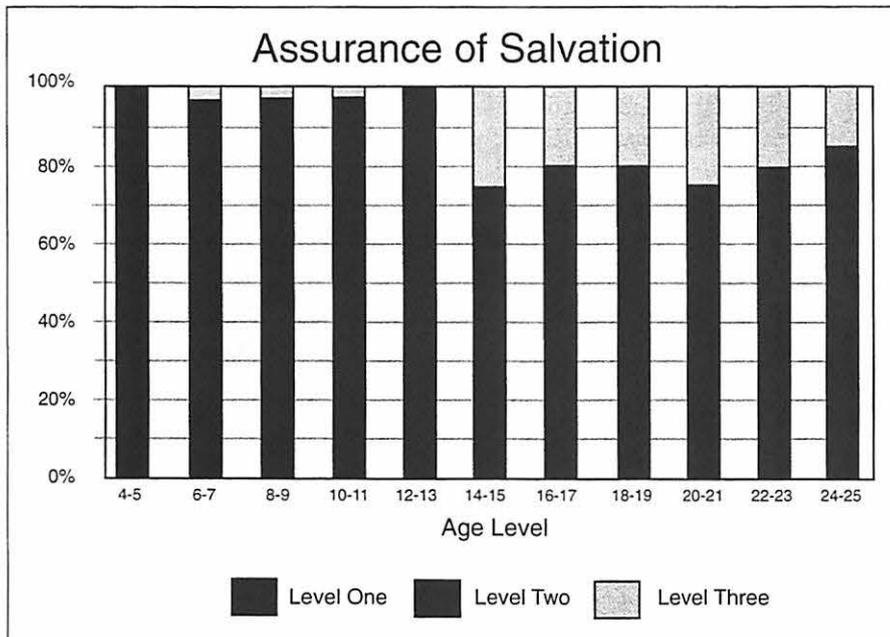
The question, "What is the most important thing you can do to be saved?" generated a greater proportion of faith/grace responses. Around 30 percent of 6- to 7-year-olds give faith/grace responses. By ages 14 to 15, more than half are sure faith/grace is the only way to be saved, with more than 80 percent giving this response in



the 20s. The behavioral responses eventually disappear in the 20s.

When we probed about assurance of salvation, 95 percent of 4- to 5-year-olds are confident Jesus will take them to heaven. But this confidence begins to erode rather quickly. By age 10 to 11, there is a crisis of confidence. Half are uncertain or plainly state that Jesus would not save them. Twelve- to 13-year-olds and 18- to 19-year-olds are a little more confident, with almost two-thirds giving a strong yes. But the crisis in confidence continues through the teens and early 20s. In our group, the 24- to 25-year-olds were again more confident (70 percent, the highest since age 6 to 7). Graph 2 shows this picture. Interpretation of this graph needs to consider the overall picture, rather than minor variations from year to year.

Four- to 6-year-olds have very simple reasons for their assurance—they have been told, they heard it in the Bible story. They know Jesus is coming and believe He will take them with Him. They have what might be called a "blind faith." With new thinking abilities, uncertainties begin to surface from 7 to 9 years. Children seem almost pre-occupied with forgiveness. Forgiveness weighs heavily on their minds, illustrated by one child who told me: "Mom doesn't pray right. I tell her, but she doesn't do it right. She doesn't ask for forgiveness for everything, so I do it



### Graph 2 Assurance of Salvation

LEVEL 1	Spontaneous, unconditional assurance of salvation
LEVEL 2	Some uncertainty, doubts about forgiveness and readiness. Not for them to say—God's decision
LEVEL 3	Negative answers

myself afterwards.”

Overwhelmingly, the reasons given are behavioral ones: “I’m not good enough.” “I won’t ever measure up.” “I don’t know if I’m good enough in heaven’s view.” “I try to be nice, I try not to be so mean, I try to show an example like I am trying to bring my friends to church.” Children talk a lot about “trying hard.”

A great deal of uncertainty is expressed about one sin keeping the person from being saved. The idea that it is “the set of the sails” or the direction of one’s life, the commitment to follow the Lord that matters seems lacking. The “one sin” is really bothersome to quite a few children and youth. They need the message of assurance.

The first clear statement about Christ’s righteousness as a solution to the problem of imperfection did not come until age 16. As this type of response becomes more frequent, naturally the uncertainties and negative responses decrease.

What can we do about the crisis of confidence that begins at age 7 and does not approach any real resolution until in the mid-20s? Somehow, we must communicate the message of Christ’s righteousness as a beautiful garment of white linen that replaces our filthy rags. In God’s eyes, we are perfect because Jesus is perfect. This is a message our children and youth desperately need to internalize.

This message *can* be understood because even some relatively young children have gotten the idea. Although children’s thinking leans easily toward actions and their consequences, trust is also an important part of their personality and thinking. At all ages, some children say, “I have faith in Him and I trust Him.” This seems to be the childhood expression of righteousness by faith—“I have faith and I trust,” or “I believe.” As one 6-year-old said, “You have to believe and be forgiven.” I think he has gotten the message. But the majority do not understand how to deal with the imperfection problem.

This is an ongoing study. Much work remains to be done. We are beginning to interview SDA children who

have never attended church schools and are also designing a study that will measure the influence of the school, church, and family. We would like to interview more children and youth from different parts of the U.S., from different ethnic groups, and from more countries outside of North America. Eventually, we hope to develop the levels of understanding for the various concepts involved in salvation so they can easily be used by any teacher to interview his or her own students and ascertain their level of development.

But we cannot wait until all the data comes in and we have all the problems resolved to begin to make a difference in the lives of our young people. Each of us—from kindergarten teacher to college professor—has a captive audience. If we understand the needs of our students, we can individually make a difference as we try to communicate the real message of salvation—Jesus is everything! We are not in this alone—the Holy Spirit is the real communicator of the message. It is really His message—but we can serve as His mouthpiece. ✍

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Ellen G. White, *Messages to Young People* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Assn., 1930), p. 15.

2. Many graduate students helped with this project, but Dorothy Hayward and Victor Korniejczuk deserve special mention. Dorothy interviewed many adolescents and did the original sorting of the data. Victor did the latest sorting of the data, including a lot of computer data entry, and helped with the qualitative analysis that led to developing the levels of understanding that were used to analyze responses. I would also like to thank Jimmy Kijai, my colleague in the Department of Educational and Counseling Psychology, who provided much help with the statistical analysis of the data.

3. David Elkind, “The Development of Religious Understanding in Children and Adolescents,” in M. P. Strommen, ed., *Research in Religious Development* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1971), pp. 665-685.

4. Victor A. Korniejczuk, “Development of the Concept of Salvation in Argentinean and Paraguayan Seventh-day Adventist Children and Adolescents From Ages 6 to 17 Years.” Doctoral dissertation, Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Mich., 1994.

5. Kenneth E. Hyde, *Religion in Childhood and Adolescence* (Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1990), chapters 3 and 4. Hyde also presents an excellent discussion of the difficulties of research on religion.

## ACCEPTING JESUS AS MY SAVIOUR\*

1. God loves me (1 John 4:8; Jeremiah 31:3).
2. I have done wrong and am a sinner. Sinners must die (Romans 5:12; 3:23).
3. Jesus died so I could live forever (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 15:3).
4. Jesus forgives all my sins (1 John 1:9; Isaiah 1:18; Psalm 51:7-11).
5. I want Jesus to be my Saviour (John 1:12; John 3:16).
6. I am part of God’s family now. He is making a home for me in heaven. He will come to take me to live with Him in heaven (John 14:1-3).
7. Jesus made me a new person. I want to live His way now (Colossians 2:16; John 3:3-7; 2 Corinthians 5:17).
8. Now I want to talk to Jesus every day. He is my Best Friend (Psalm 32:6).
9. When I do something wrong, Jesus can take away my bad feelings (guilt). He forgives me (1 John 1:9; Isaiah 1:18). He will help me grow as a member of His family (2 Timothy 3:15; Psalm 119:11).
10. I know that Jesus will always love me and be my Saviour (John 3:36; Hebrews 13:5).

#### Helpful Source Material

\* From the pamphlet “Coming to Jesus: Growing in Him.” Available for U.S. \$49 each (discounts on bulk orders), plus shipping, from Advent Source, 5040 Prescott, Lincoln, NE 68506. 1-800-328-0525.