

# CONVERSATIONS WITH NATHAN

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The following is a transcript, or at least a reasonably close version, of a series of conversations I had with Nathan, my seven-year-old, as we visited an evangelical church service on a recent Sunday evening. Although the discussion actually took place in several stages (ending late that evening at home), for literary purposes I have reconstructed the conversation as if it all happened during the service. I confess that a good portion of it did go on then, as I tried to explain evangelical worship to an impressionable youngster.

Nathan: Papa, this sure is a funny liturgy.

Papa: Well, it isn't exactly a liturgy. They don't believe in liturgy at this church.

Nathan: How can you not believe in liturgy? Isn't a liturgy just what you do in Church?

Papa: Yes. But what I mean is that they don't believe in having the service written down in advance.

Nathan: Why not?

Papa: They think that if they read something that's written down, they won't really mean it.

Nathan: But all they have to do is think about what it means, and agree with it, and then they'll mean it, won't they?

Papa: Sure. But they don't believe that.

Nathan: But somebody around here must believe it, because we all sang from the same hymnbook. Don't they mean it when they sing the hymns?

Papa: Sure they do. But they think prayers are different.

Nathan: You mean that they can agree with a song that they read, but they don't know

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how to agree with a prayer that they read?

Papa: Something like that.

Nathan: Then why don't they just memorize the prayers?

Papa: Because they think they wouldn't mean those, either.

Nathan: Can they memorize songs and mean them?

Papa: Sure. But they think music is different. You can read or memorize a song and still mean it. But if you read or memorize words without music, you won't mean them.

Nathan: But don't they teach their children "politeness liturgies"? Like "please" and "thank you" and "you're welcome," and "yes, sir," and "yes, ma'am"? And don't they teach them to mean it?

Papa: Yes, but –

Nathan: And what about Bible verses? Do they memorize Bible verses?

Papa: Of course they do.

Nathan: But they don't mean them?

Papa: Yes, they do.

Nathan: Without music?

Papa: Sure.

Nathan: How?

Papa: Can we change the subject?

Nathan: OK. Why didn't we confess our sins when we began the service?

Papa: This church doesn't believe in it.

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Nathan: WHAT? !

Papa: Shhh. Keep your voice down. I mean they don't think the Church needs to do it.

Nathan: Don't we need to be forgiven?

Papa: Sure. They just don't think it should happen in Church.

Nathan: What about the Creed? Why didn't we say the Creed?

Papa: Well, partly because it's liturgical. They think they won't mean it if they say it.

Nathan: We could sing it.

Papa: They don't know how.

Nathan: Oh – they haven't been Christians very long, huh? Let's teach it to them.

Papa: Let's not.

Nathan: Why not?

Papa: Because they won't want to do it anyway. Because it's liturgical.

Nathan: Why are they so afraid of liturgy? We could explain that it isn't hard to mean it when you say it.

Papa: But they won't want to do it anyway. They want to be different every week.

Nathan: Really? Different every week?

Papa: Yes.

Nathan: What do they do differently? Do they sometimes take the offering at the end of the service instead of in the middle?

Papa: No. That's always at the same time.

Nathan: Do they sometimes have the preaching at the beginning?

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Papa: No, that's at the same time, too.

Nathan: Then what do they do that's different?

Papa: They sing different songs.

Nathan: So does our church.

Papa: Well, it really comes down to the fact that they don't have prayers and responses for the congregation to read.

Nathan: Why not?

Papa: They think that reading prayers and responses keeps people from worshipping.

Nathan: Really? What do they think the people should do instead?

Papa: Just sit there and do nothing.

Nathan: That's worship? Doesn't it get boring?

Papa: Not if the elders keep things exciting enough on the stage.

Nathan: Elders? What elders? You mean those men up there on the platform are *elders*?

Papa: Sort of. But they don't always call them that.

Nathan: Why aren't they wearing robes and collars so you know what they are?

Papa: They say elders shouldn't wear special clothes.

Nathan: Why not?

Papa: They think that there's nothing special about clothing.

Nathan: Policemen and soldiers and judges wear special clothes.

Papa: Well, they think clothing isn't special for elders. They think elders should look like

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everybody else.

Nathan: Then why is that elder wearing a maroon suit with a blue shirt, a green tie, and a white belt?

Papa: Well, it's still a suit. The point is, he can wear anything he wants.

Nathan: You mean an elder could wear a robe and a collar if he wanted?

Papa: No. He can wear anything *but* a robe and a collar.

Nathan: So they *do* think clothing is special!

Papa: Well. . . .

Nathan: There! Someone did it again!

Papa: Did what?

Nathan: He said "Amen." See? That's why this place needs a liturgy book. Half the people don't know when to say things.

Papa: I told you. They don't do a liturgy here.

Nathan: Some people do. Hear that? Somebody just did it again. If we had a book, we could all say it together. That would keep some people from getting it wrong and saying it while somebody else is talking.

Papa: But Nathan, I'm telling you. There's no liturgy. People just say "Amen" whenever they feel like it.

Nathan: WHAT? Where does the Bible say to do that?

Papa: It doesn't.

Nathan: Then why do they do it? Aren't they afraid?

Papa: Why should they be afraid?

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Nathan: Because it's a vow, a covenant promise. Doesn't it mean that we agree with God, and that if we don't keep this promise we are asking God to destroy us? Isn't it even a special covenant name for Jesus?

Papa: Sure. But they don't know that. They think it means something else.

Nathan: What do they think "Amen" means?

Papa: They think it means "I feel good."

Nathan: Look at that!

Papa: What?

Nathan: There are people raising their hands !

Papa: So?

Nathan: In our church, the elders raise their hands to God when they pray. But in this church, everybody else does it, whenever they feel like it. And they make up their own liturgy as they go along, You know what I think?

Papa: What?

Nathan: I think that in this church *everybody is an* elder – except the elders.

Papa: That may be the best description I've heard yet.

Nathan: You know, Pa, those elders are tricking us.

Papa: How's that?

Nathan: They really do have a liturgy for their prayers. They keep saying the same thing over and over again.

Papa: Really?

Nathan: Sure. I don't know what they mean, but there are two special words they keep

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using in all their prayers.

Papa: What words?

Nathan: Well, the first one is “just.” They keep saying it. “Lord we just thank you for just being so just special.” Stuff like that. They must have it written down, because they all do it.

Papa: What’s the other word?

Nathan: It’s not really a word. It’s a special sound, like a little clucking noise: “Tsk.”

Papa: What?

Nathan: Tsk. Tsk.

Papa: What are you talking about?

Nathan: Listen. It goes like this: “Lord, tsk, we just, tsk, we just, tsk, we want to, tsk, thank you, tsk, Lord, for, tsk, for just, tsk, being just so, tsk, special, tsk.” Right?

Papa: OK, quiet down and listen to the special music.

Nathan: Wait. What’s that guy doing? He looks weird.

Papa: Shhh. He’s just singing.

Nathan: Yeah, but he’s shaking all over the place. He looks like he’s going to fall down.

Papa: Well, that’s the way the “special music” singers do it in this church. He’s just trying to rock to the beat.

Nathan: Why? It looks dumb.

Papa: Let’s figure it out. Why do we have a choir in our church? What do you think they’re doing there?

Nathan: It’s part of our worship. They help us worship God.

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Papa: OK. Now, why do you think this church has people sing?

Nathan: Well, I guess they're trying to worship too. But it seems more like they're trying to look like they're on television.

Papa: Sort of like MTV?

Nathan: Not that bad. It just looks like they want people to notice them instead of praying. Unless — Do you think maybe he's just kind of sick?

Papa: We'll talk about it later. It's time for communion now.

Nathan: What's this?

Papa: Shhh! It's bread.

Nathan: Come on, Pa. What is it really?

Papa: It's bread, honest. It's a little, tiny cube of bread.

Nathan: Looks like a piece of cracker to me.

Papa: Well, sure. It is a piece of cracker.

Nathan: Should we give them some money so they can afford bread?

Papa: They can afford it. But they want to do it this way.

Nathan: Why would anybody want to eat this? Do they like the taste?

Papa: Probably not.

Nathan: Then why would they eat something they don't enjoy — especially at Communion? We're supposed to be happy when we eat with God.

Papa: Be quiet. It's time to drink the cup.

Nathan: OK. Yuck! What is this stuff?



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Papa: Urn, it's. . . .

Nathan: Tastes like grape-flavored Kool-Aid.

Papa: Grape juice, probably.

Nathan: Doesn't taste very good. Did they forget to buy some wine?

Papa: No. They don't drink wine here.

Nathan: WHAT? !

Papa: SHHH!

Nathan: Why don't they drink wine?

Papa: They don't believe in it. They think it's wrong.

Nathan: But it tastes good.

Papa: Well, tasting good isn't everything.

Nathan: But God made it for us to drink, especially at Communion. It makes us happy, and it makes God happy, too.

Papa: That's right.

Nathan: Does the Bible say it's wrong?

Papa: No.

Nathan: Then why do they say it is? And why do they drink this yucky juice? And eat those crummy little cracker pieces?

No wonder they're so sad!

Papa: What?

Nathan: Well, look at them. Look how sad they all are. They don't look like they're

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enjoying this, do they?

Papa: Well, no. . . .

Nathan: Well, they aren't enjoying it a bit. But didn't you tell me that Communion is a special dinner with Jesus?

Papa: Yes.

Nathan: And when we come to Communion, the whole Church is coming up to heaven, right?

Papa: Right.

Nathan: And when we go to heaven to be with Jesus and have dinner with Him, we're supposed to be happy, aren't we?

Papa: Sure.

Nathan: Well, why aren't these people happy? Do they think heaven is a sad place to be?

Papa: I think they're sad because they're thinking about their sins.

Nathan: But they've been forgiven, and now they're in heaven! They're supposed to be thinking about Jesus!

Papa: Oh, they're thinking of Him, too. They're sad because they're thinking about Him dying on the cross.

Nathan: But He's not dying anymore. The whole reason we're doing this is that He came alive, right?

Papa: Right.

Nathan: Well, I don't think they could be sad about Jesus. I think they're sad 'cause they had to eat those icky crackers and drink that dumb old Kool-Aid.

Papa: Grape juice.

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Nathan: Kool-Aid. Hey, Papa. Why are those people looking at me funny?

Papa: Urn . . . it's because you took Communion.

Nathan: So? Everybody else did.

Papa: Not the kids.

Nathan: Why not?

Papa: Because they aren't allowed to.

Nathan: WHAT? !

Papa: SHHH! They only let grownups take Communion at this church.

Nathan: Why? If you've been baptized you can take Communion, right? Even babies can take Communion, because Jesus feeds them, too. Children need Communion as much as grownups.

Papa: But these children haven't been baptized.

Nathan: *WHAT?!*

Papa: Shhh. It's true.

Nathan: Why don't they want their children to come into the Covenant?

Papa: Well, they do. They just don't believe that children can be Christians until they get older.

Nathan: That's dumb. God can make anybody a Christian.

Papa: Well, I mean that they don't think He *will* make their children Christians. Until they get older.

Nathan: But Jesus wants little children to come to Him. Even babies. He said so, didn't He?

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Papa: Yes.

Nathan: Look. These people have families, right? Don't they feed their babies? They don't make their kids sit in a corner and wait till they're grownups before they can eat. So why shouldn't God feed His children, too? It must be sad for the kids to watch the rest of the family eating without them.

Papa: But they don't think their children really are God's children.

Nathan: But they teach their children to pray, don't they?

Papa: Sure.

Nathan: Who do they pray to?

Papa: "Whom." Objective case. And don't end your sentences with prepositions unless you have to.

Nathan: Do their kids call God "Father"? Like in the Lord's Prayer? Wait a minute. You aren't going to tell me they don't believe in the Lord's Prayer, are you?

Papa: Sure, they believe in it. And many of them teach it to their children.

Nathan: Well then. If they teach their children to say "Our Father: then that means they think their children are God's children, too. Right?

Papa: Uh . . . sort of. But –

Nathan: But they don't baptize them into Jesus. So how can they be God's children unless they're in the Covenant?

Papa: Right. That's why they don't give them Communion.

Nathan: Is this as confusing to them as it is to me?

Papa: It might be if they thought about it much.

Nathan: Well, how are their kids supposed to become Christians, if their parents don't

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bring them to be baptized?

Papa: When they get older, they're supposed to make up their own minds.

Nathan: About whether or not to obey God? That's pretty dumb. Do they have to wait till they're older to decide if they want to obey their parents, too?

Papa: Not usually. But they want their children to wait until they're old enough to love God.

Nathan: But I love God. I always have. And the Bible says that people can know God even when they're in their mama's tummy, doesn't it?

Papa: Well, these people think you have to wait until you are older and smarter, so that you understand what it's all about.

Nathan: You mean you can't have dinner with Jesus until you understand what it means?

Papa: That's the idea.

Nathan: Papa, do grownups understand everything about what Communion means?

Papa: Some people probably think they do.

Nathan: I don't think these people understand much about it. If they did, they'd bring their children into the Covenant and let them have dinner in heaven with them. And anyway, how are the kids supposed to learn what it means without doing it? That's like trying to get nutrition from reading a recipe, instead of eating the food!

Papa: Not bad. I'll have to remember that one.

Nathan: OK, so how can a kid get Communion in this church?

Papa: Well, when he gets older – say, around twelve or so – he asks Jesus into his heart.

Nathan: Papa, don't be silly. This is serious.

Papa: I'm not being silly. They tell you to ask Jesus to come into your heart.

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Nathan: I've never heard that. Is that in the Bible?

Papa: No. But they think it is. It's just an expression someone made up that means becoming a Christian. They also call it "receiving Christ," which is a little more Biblical.

Nathan: But Jesus is in heaven. And we receive Him every Sunday – every time we eat His body and drink His blood.

Papa: Uh, keep your voice down, willya? They don't talk like that around here.

Nathan: But Jesus talked like that.

Papa: I know. But they don't know that.

Nathan: Let's tell them.

Papa: Let's not, OK? Not right now.

Nathan: All right. Let's get back to how kids can become Christians and have Communion. When they get older they ask Jesus "into their hearts," right? So do they just go ahead and do it when they get to be twelve?

Papa: Not exactly. The grownups have to be sure the kids really mean it.

Nathan: How can they know that?

Papa: The kids have to cry when they do it.

Nathan: Cry? Real tears? How do they make themselves cry?

Papa: Well, some churches spend lots of time practicing. But, basically, they just have a preacher get up and tell real sad stories, so sad that they make people cry. So then the kids cry, and they walk up to the front of the church and ask Jesus to come into their hearts. Sometimes this happens during the summer. The kids go to a special camp where they listen to people preach at them. Then, on the last night, they all stand around a campfire and —

Nathan: And listen to scary stories?

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Papa: No. Sad stories.

Nathan: Aw, shoot.

Papa: Then they cry, and throw little twigs on the fire, and ask Jesus into their hearts.

Nathan: Why do they throw twigs on the fire? Do they think they have to do that to come into the Covenant?

Papa: They think that's how you have to do it if you're in the mountains. It's part of their Summer Camp Liturgy. But if you're home you don't need to.

Nathan: Then do they get Communion?

Papa: No. They usually have to wait, and go through a class to learn what it means to be a Christian.

Nathan: Wait. What have they been doing while growing up? Haven't they already had plenty of classes? Does a kid ever get Communion around here?

Papa: Sure, eventually. After he gets out of the class he can have it whenever everybody else does.

Nathan: Every Sunday.

Papa: No. Every month or so.

Nathan: Why not every Sunday? Don't they go to church every Sunday?

Papa: Yes. But they don't have Communion every Sunday.

Nathan: But what do they do, if they don't have Communion? Isn't that why we go to Church – so we can go to heaven and have dinner in Jesus' House?

Papa: Well, they sing songs and listen to a sermon.

Nathan: But that's part of the Liturgy of Communion. Communion is what the Church service is all about, isn't it? We're supposed to worship God, and then He feeds us with

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His food. Why do they go to church? Don't they go to meet God?

Papa: Sure. But they think they meet him by just listening to a sermon and getting excited about what the preacher says, if he's interesting enough to listen to. If he isn't a good speaker, then they think they haven't met with God.

Nathan: Look. Don't these people know that Communion makes them strong for living the rest of the week? How is anyone supposed to go without food for a month and still have any energy to do his work?

Papa: Well, they think that if they have Communion every week it won't seem special.

Nathan: It doesn't seem like it's very special to them anyway. I think it would be lots more special if they had it every week and gave it to their children. Maybe then even the grownups would understand what it means.

Papa: You're probably right.

Nathan: Wait a minute, Papa. I think I just figured out the real reason why they don't have Communion very often.

Papa: Why's that?

Nathan: 'Cause it's crackers and Kool-Aid.

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