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THE SINNER'S PRAYER:
AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Paul Harrison Chitwood
December 2001

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APPROVAL SHEET

**THE SINNER'S PRAYER:
AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS**

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**THESES Ph.D. .C449s
0199701549669**

To Michelle,
for your undying love and support,
and to
my father,
for asking only that I do my best

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PREFACE

Credit for both the concept and the encouragement that were necessary to undertake and complete this work belong to my professor, Tim Beougher. My appreciation goes out to him for the confidence he continually expressed in me. I am also thankful for all of the teachers who, over the course of my life, have helped equip me for this task. Their investment in my learning has made my educational experience positive and beneficial. Along those lines, I commend the dean and professors of the Billy Graham School of Missions, Evangelism, and Church Growth at Southern Seminary. My experience there has challenged me to be both a better student and a better pastor.

I am also grateful for those who shared in the enthusiasm for this project and willingly participated in interviews. Among others, I was privileged to discuss the topic with Lyle Dorsett, Tim Beougher, Alan Streett, Jim Elliff, Robert Coleman, John Stott, J. I. Packer, Timothy Weber, David Bennett, Malcolm McDowell, Bill Leonard, Chuck Kelly, George Martin, Lewis Drummond, Cliff Barrows, Ralph Bell, and Charlie Riggs. Many thanks also go to fellow students, especially Tom Johnston and Tim McKnight, who kept their eyes open while doing research and informed me of leads that were helpful in my investigative process.

For two church families, First Baptist of Owenton, Kentucky, and First Baptist of Somerset, Kentucky, I owe many thanks for their patience, understanding, prayers, and encouragement over the past four years. They permitted me to continue to learn even as I continued in my responsibilities to teach and preach. I count it a great privilege to know them and serve them.

To my wife I owe a debt of gratitude that I could never repay for making the sacrifices that have been necessary for me to be a fulltime student and a fulltime pastor.

Our lifelong journey together can now resume. I also express my appreciation to our children, Daniel and Anna, for the time they have unknowingly given me.

Most importantly, thanks be to my Lord, who heard the prayer of a sinner.

Paul Harrison Chitwood

Somerset, Kentucky

September 2001

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

More diverse means are being used today to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20) given by our Lord than ever before in the history of the Church. Through print, the media, the Internet, and the public appeals of mass evangelists, pastors, missionaries, and lay workers, the gospel message is being heard around the world. It is a little known fact that the practice of evangelism has reduced the number of non-Christians per evangelical Christian from a ratio of thirty-two to one in 1900 to less than nine to one at the turn of the millennium.¹ The kingdom of God is expanding at an incredible rate.

A significant factor in this expansion is the training and preparation of witnesses to share a verbal presentation of the gospel. In this verbal presentation, the witness presents the plan of salvation and invites the hearer to make the decision to receive Christ as personal Savior. More often than not, seekers are asked to make their commitment to Christ by voicing the words of a prayer. Ronald Johnson describes the process as it typically occurs:

The normal pattern is to first secure a person who will listen to what you say. Sometimes this may be done by church members going door-to-door in a neighborhood during an organized soul-winning visitation night or stopping people on the street during the course of the day or even talking to a person in the seat next to you on the airplane.

Once a person's attention is secured, then the gospel message or "plan of salvation" is told to the person in a rather matter-of-fact way, often using a memorized presentation or gospel tract or a marked New Testament. Finally, the person is asked to make a response to what he has heard, usually in the form of praying a model prayer. Generally, if the person agrees to pray a prayer along

¹David B. Barrett and Todd M. Johnson, "Status of Global Mission, 2000, in context of 20th and 21st centuries," accessed 9 May 2000; available from <http://www.gem-werc.org>; Internet.

with the witness, the assumption is made that the listener has professed his faith in Christ.²

The “model prayer” to which Johnson refers is typically known today as the “Sinner’s Prayer.” The Sinner’s Prayer has many forms and variations, but is usually worded in similar fashion to the following example taken from Billy Graham’s evangelistic tract, *Steps to Peace with God*, “Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am sinful and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died to pay the penalty for my sin. I want to turn from my sin nature and follow You instead. I invite You to come into my heart and life. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”³

The popularity of the Sinner’s Prayer today is amazing. In 1998 award winning Christian recording artist Ray Boltz wrote and recorded a song entitled *The Sinner’s Prayer*.⁴ Evangelism Explosion, the most popular evangelistic training tool in the world today,⁵ includes instruction to lead the lost to pray the Sinner’s Prayer as a part of its curriculum.⁶ Modern gospel witnessing tracts almost always include some variation of the prayer. The Sinner’s Prayer is routinely heard in the public invitations issued in evangelistic campaigns and in local church services. Countless thousands, if not millions, have prayed some form of the Sinner’s Prayer. Clearly, the Sinner’s Prayer is one of the most popular evangelistic tools in use today.

Despite its popularity, very little is known about the Sinner’s Prayer. Other than its suggested usage by gospel witnessing tracts, materials, and training manuals, hardly anything has been written about the prayer. Questions about its origin and development have remained unanswered. Thoughtful reflection upon the theological

²Ronald W. Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 33.

³Billy Graham, *Steps to Peace with God* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1997).

⁴Ray Boltz, *The Sinner’s Prayer* (Shepherd Boy Music, Nashville: 1998).

⁵Evangelism Explosion International, “EE International – Ministry Growth,” [on-line], accessed 9 May 2000, available from <http://www.eeinternational.org/eeiii/eeegrowth.htm>; Internet.

⁶D. James Kennedy, *Evangelism Explosion* (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1977), 43.

content and appropriateness of the prayer is scarce. As an evangelistic method that has gained enormous popularity and widespread acceptance, the Sinner's Prayer warrants our attention.

Thesis

The primary purpose of this dissertation is to trace the origin of the Sinner's Prayer. In that regard, this work will be historical in nature. Issues regarding theology and methodology will receive significant attention as secondary questions. Historical matters will also be an essential part of the discussion related to these issues.

What many people fail to realize is that although the Sinner's Prayer is widely used and enormously popular today, no variation of it is found in the Bible. Only one prayer included in the Scriptures even faintly resembles the Sinner's Prayer. This prayer, found in the Gospel of Luke, is a part of Jesus' parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In the parable, Jesus says, "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. . . . But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner'" (Luke 18:13).⁷ The tax collector's prayer is certainly the prayer of a sinner, but this prayer does not reflect the form or function of what is typically recognized as the Sinner's Prayer. Other passages in the Bible give instruction in accepting Jesus as the Savior (e.g., Rom 10:9; Acts 2:21, 38; 3:19-20; 16:31), but never suggest a prayer of commitment.

Of all the prayers we find recorded in the New Testament, none occur in evangelistic encounters or have as either primary or secondary concern the salvation of an individual lost sinner. The closest we come is in Jesus' prayer in the upper room when he prays for "those who will believe in me" (John 17:20). Even here, Jesus does not specifically pray for their salvation. Rather, assuming their salvation, he prays for their unity and their witness in the world.

⁷All Scripture will be from the New International Version.

Another example of prayer in the New Testament is the Model Prayer given by Jesus as a part of the Sermon on the Mount: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one” (Matt 6:9-13).⁸ The Model Prayer is significant both in that it expresses a plea for forgiveness and in that it is a sample prayer for believers to pray. It is not, however, a plea for salvation. Whether Jesus is addressing just his disciples (Matt 5:2) or the also the crowds (Matt 4:25, 7:28) is not entirely clear.⁹ Regardless, rather than expressing the initiation of a saving relationship with Christ, the prayer seems more fitting for one who is already a disciple. As such, one of the critical elements of the Sinner’s Prayer that is missing from the Model Prayer is that of stated belief or trust in Christ.

In addition to the Sinner’s Prayer not occurring in the Bible, it is also absent from the pages of church history. We fail to see it even through the rise of revivalism and mass evangelism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, research suggests that leading lost persons in praying the Sinner’s Prayer is a relatively new method in evangelism. My studies have revealed no occurrence of the Sinner’s Prayer before the twentieth century. The routine use of a model prayer for salvation of any form is also absent before the twentieth century. Therefore, the primary set of questions to be addressed by this dissertation pertains to the origin of the Sinner’s Prayer. If the Sinner’s Prayer is not found in the Bible, what is its origin? Can it be attributed to one single person or movement? Moreover, in what time period did it originate?

Chapter 2 examines the evidence and proposes a theory related to the historical origin of the Sinner’s Prayer. This chapter provides a brief overview of the changing methods of evangelism in the history of the church. Special attention is given to the

⁸See also Luke 11:2-4.

⁹Frank Stagg, *Matthew*, in vol. 8 of *Broadman Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1969), 102.

training of personal workers to help carry out the ministry of mass evangelism.

Evangelistic tracts are also a primary focus in this chapter because of the tremendous amount of light that the tracts shed upon the historical analysis of the prayer.

A secondary set of questions addressed by this dissertation will be theological in nature. Indisputably, the Sinner's Prayer has become the accepted and typical way to take the final step in becoming Christian. Once a lost person has prayed the Sinner's Prayer, little doubt remains in most minds as to whether or not the person is saved and heaven bound. Is the Sinner's Prayer the magical formula that converts the soul?

The use of the Sinner's Prayer in evangelistic invitations has recently come under criticism. Jim Elliff, president of Christian Communicators Worldwide and a faculty member of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, has written and lectured on this topic, critiquing the theological assumptions that are made by the prayer, particularly when it is used in conjunction with the public altar call. Elliff's conclusions challenge these theological assumptions, leading him to call for alternative ways to close evangelistic services.

Chapter three provides a theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer. After a brief survey of the doctrine of prayer, I pose answers to the following questions. First, what are the theological components of the prayer, and what theological shifts does it represent? Second, what theological tenets are suggested by the prayer and are these tenets biblical? Varying forms of the prayer will be presented. The theological components of the prayer are analyzed. In addition, the theological tenets suggested by the prayer are discussed. The focus is on comparing these tenets to the soteriological truths of the New Testament as recognized by mainstream evangelicalism. Jim Elliff's critique of the Sinner's Prayer is examined in this chapter and theological correctives are suggested.

Another secondary goal of this dissertation is to address the practical implications of the historical and theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer. This section

deals with methodology in evangelism, discussing the place of methods in evangelism, along with the dangers and ethical considerations associated with using the Sinner's Prayer as a method in evangelism. I then provide suggestions for reforming our use of the prayer.

This chapter is of critical importance for several reasons. First, in a practical way, evangelistic tools should always be evaluated. Evangelism is the most important task God has assigned to the Church. In order to be as effective as possible, right means should be employed. My research indicates that very little has been done to evaluate the use of the Sinner's Prayer in evangelism. An in-depth, scholarly assessment is long overdue.

Second, church membership records reveal a startling truth. While massive numbers of people are joining local churches, a disturbingly large percentage of new members disappear from the fellowship within a few months. Jesus' parable of the sower and the soils, recorded in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 13:3-8, 18-23; Mark 4:3-8, 14-20; Luke 8:5-8, 11-15), clearly teaches us that some will seem to respond to the gospel but will later turn back. Are the hundreds of thousands of missing bodies with their names on church rolls in America a fulfillment of this prophetic parable, or are they indicative of something entirely different? Could it be that they represent people who have responded not to the gospel, but to an erroneous offer of cheap grace available to anyone who would repeat the words of a simple prayer?

Third, more important than the Church's failure to retain members is the danger of false security being granted to the lost. This issue is the cause for Jim Elliff's criticisms of the use of the Sinner's Prayer. Elliff contends that the typical way the Sinner's Prayer is used results in lost persons finding assurance in the ability of the prayer to save them rather than in the ability of Christ. Elliff observes, "belief in the efficacy of a prayer (and not the efficacy of Christ's work) and faith in that prayer will never save you and that prayer never died for you. I believe that people come with a

prayer and not with faith that has been engendered by God and will find themselves unbelieving still until the day of judgement, resting all their hopes on something so small and insignificant as a prayer, and the rightly worded prayer, that they prayed at a time in their lives.”¹⁰ Elliff is further frustrated by the way altar call respondents who have prayed the Sinner’s Prayer are then introduced as being “in Christ.” He believes that to assure persons of their salvation based upon this criterion is a grave error, going as far as to say, “So we seal people in deception.”¹¹

While Elliff’s line of reasoning will require a detailed examination, his warning against sealing “people in deception” will be a critical aspect of this dissertation. When dealing with matters of eternal significance, we must use careful discretion. What is more significant, eternally, than a lost soul coming to faith in Christ? Therefore, the importance of a methodological analysis of the Sinner’s Prayer cannot be overstated. If our methods, though unintentionally, are leading lost persons to put their faith in a prayer rather than in the Savior, then our methods must be altered.

Thus, we come to the fourth aspect of importance in dealing with the practical implications of this dissertation, which is, abuse cannot be righted until it is recognized. I have no doubts whatsoever that the majority of evangelists who use the Sinner’s Prayer do so with pure motives and the best of intentions. Those who choose to be faithful to the Great Commission in the contemporary world often do so at a cost.

Evangelism is not in vogue in our postmodern culture, a culture that exalts tolerance as its supreme ethic. The postmodern ethic of tolerance is derived from the denial of absolute truth. Without the existence of absolute truth, no religious worldview can claim preeminence. Therefore, no person has the right to suggest that others should embrace the truth that he or she has found, for to do so would be intolerant and even

¹⁰Jim Elliff, “Closing with Christ,” (audiocassette of message delivered at Sixteenth Annual Southern Baptist Founders Conference, 22 July 1998).

¹¹Ibid.

oppressive. The evangelist, who by definition poses a threat to the postmodern worldview, will bear witness to the truth of the gospel at a price.

This point being made, the integrity and sacrificial commitment of most contemporary evangelists, whether clergy or laypersons, are not the issues in question. The issue in question is the lack of critical reflection on theology and methodology. Thus, the importance of this dissertation comes to light. If there are problems with how the Sinner's Prayer is used, and I contend that is precisely the case, how will these problems be discovered unless someone begins to ask questions, offer answers, and open dialogue? Moreover, a concern for Christian ethics in the practice of evangelism insists that we address the subject of the Sinner's Prayer as an evangelistic tool. In order for contemporary evangelists to maintain, or at the very least, defend their integrity, we must be willing to address the questions and growing criticism surrounding the use of the prayer.

Chapter four examines these methodological issues related to the Sinner's Prayer in evangelism. Focus is placed upon practical questions regarding the way the Sinner's Prayer is currently being used in evangelism. In light of the historical and theological observations and conclusions presented in chapters two and three of the dissertation, chapter four also delineates the practical implications for the future use of the prayer.

Chapter 5 is a brief statement of the conclusions of the study. Suggestions for further study on the topic of the Sinner's Prayer are also presented.

Background

Credit for the idea that has resulted in this study belongs to my professor, Timothy Beougher. Beougher is not only a professor of evangelism and church growth, he is a practicing evangelist. As a professional scholar and practitioner, Beougher has spent much of his life studying, reflecting upon, and doing evangelism. His natural

curiosity and academic training yielded a question: what is the origin of the immensely popular Sinner's Prayer? Having never come across an answer to that question in his research and study, Beougher suggested the question as a possible research topic during a seminar on the biblical and theological principles of evangelistic ministry. Taking up the challenge, I assumed the role of a detective and began traveling, researching, and interviewing. What quickly became apparent was that no one I encountered had yet asked this particular question. The scholars and archivists I spoke with were fascinated by the question, but no one had answers.

Then Beougher suggested, as a new approach, contacting the American Tract Society (ATS). ATS is one of the largest tract publishers in the world and the oldest still in existence. The society was established in 1825 as "the result of a merger between the New York Religious Tract Society and the New England Tract Society—the largest two in the United States."¹² What resulted was a trip to the ATS headquarters in Garland, Texas, where I spent several hours over a two-day period reviewing all of the archived tracts, dating back to the beginning of the nineteenth century. The Sinner's Prayer did not appear until well into the twentieth century.

The results of my research were detailed in a paper submitted for credit in the seminar. After the semester came to an end, however, I found that many of my questions were still unanswered. I continued to research the subject and my findings were fascinating. As my interest in the subject grew, so did my awareness of the popularity of the Sinner's Prayer. I soon realized that nearly everyone in the evangelical world was using the prayer, but hardly anyone was giving any thought to where the prayer had originated or to how they were using it. Historical questions soon became theological questions, and both Beougher and I felt that the topic was worthy of a dissertation.

¹²Lawrance Thompson, "The Printing and Publishing Activities of the American Tract Society from 1825 to 1850," *The Bibliographic Society of America* 35 (Second Quarter, 1941): 4.

My research has revealed that very few scholars are asking serious questions about the Sinner's Prayer. As I have previously indicated, Jim Elliff has taken a stand that is very critical of the way the prayer is being used today. In addition to Elliff, R. Alan Streett, former professor of Evangelism and New Testament at Criswell College and now Senior Pastor of Trinity Evangelical Church in Dallas, Texas, makes a few brief comments about the Sinner's Prayer in his book, *The Effective Invitation*.¹³ Bill Leonard has also mentioned the Sinner's Prayer in his discussions concerning pluralism and conversion. Beyond these authors, research done in this area concentrates on primary source material found in the form of evangelistic training manuals, gospel tracts, and books on evangelism and personal witnessing. Personal interviews will also comprise an important part of the research. Although few scholars to date have asked critical questions about the Sinner's Prayer, there is a wealth of sources available that have proven to be informative to this dissertation.

Methodology

This study represents first an extensive examination of literary resources available on the training of evangelists. These materials reveal the methodology employed by mass evangelists, denominations, and evangelistic organizations. In so doing, these resources reveal how the Sinner's Prayer is used, who is advocating its use, and how early we see its occurrence in witness training.

Second, literary resources on the history of evangelism, the theology of evangelism, and the practice of evangelism have proven to be an important area of research. These resources are useful in both the historical analysis and the theological analysis of the prayer.

Third, this study represents a thorough examination of the gospel tracts available from the leading publishers. Research in this area is critical to the effort to

¹³R. Alan Streett, *The Effective Invitation: A Practical Guide for the Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1984), 178.

trace the Sinner's Prayer back to its origin. The tracts also yield very significant findings in the theological analysis of the prayer. I will argue in chapter two that the tracts are a vital resource in studying the historical and theological developments in evangelism because they represent the popular trends and methods of their day. From the earliest days of tract publication and distribution, leading evangelists have authored tracts and utilized them in their ministries.

Fourth, this study will include personal interviews with leading scholars and evangelists who are willing to share their insights and opinions on the subject. These interviews have exposed a tremendous interest in the topic of this dissertation and have given new direction to my research and findings. I am grateful for the willing participation of every person.

Limitations

This dissertation represents a novel undertaking. To date, no one has published any work regarding the origin of the Sinner's Prayer. While I feel that I present strong evidence in making the case that the Sinner's Prayer developed gradually during the early twentieth century, I recognize that my rationale has several limitations. First, there is no "authority" on the subject who can speak to the question. Many of the scholars and evangelists who lived during the earliest decades of the twentieth century are no longer with us. Extensive interviews with individuals of varying ages have revealed that even those who lived during the years in question are hard pressed to recall when they first heard the prayer or whom they first heard using it. As a practice that gradually gained widespread and unquestioned acceptance, no one seems to have paid attention to its beginnings.

A second limitation of this study regards the level of specificity that can be achieved. Because no one person claims to have created the Sinner's Prayer and because no secondary source points to a specific person, it will be impossible to attribute with certitude the origin of the prayer to an individual. Rather, the approach of this study will

be to utilize primary and secondary sources to illustrate the developmental process of the prayer. While I will not surmise who created the prayer, I will propose a theory as to the time period during which it was created. I will also uncover the process and persons responsible for popularizing the prayer.

Third, in addition to these limitations, the basic limits of historical research will also apply. For instance, the nature of historical records is that they reveal some things about the past, but not all things. Thus, my research is limited to the extent that the availability of historical records is limited. This limitation leaves my conclusions open to a level of skepticism. For example, one could argue that the Sinner's Prayer originated much earlier than the twentieth century but it was not recorded in any the historical records that remain in existence today. That possibility I am willing to grant. It is the likelihood that that possibility is true that I will argue against. Nevertheless, I recognize the limitation.

The fourth limitation, directly related to the third, is that historical research even of existing records can never be exhaustive. Records may exist that have not yet been discovered by anyone but, when discovered, will contradict my conclusions. Furthermore, records may exist that have not yet been discovered by *me* that will contradict my conclusions. Either possibility should not, however, discourage us from revealing and posing theories based upon what we only now know. I must admit that I have been advised on more than one occasion against undertaking this project because of this limitation. Still, I refuse to believe that the limitations of historical research should cause us to abandon historical research. Rather, we approach our task with an appropriate level of humility. If, soon after this work is complete, or anytime in the future, historical records are discovered that contradict my conclusions, those records will be a welcomed find for they will aid us in our continuing efforts to understand our past.

Conclusion

One of the most revealing parts of my research on the Sinner's Prayer came very early in the process. While discussing the subject with an historian and archivist at one of the most prestigious evangelical seminaries in America, I asked the individual if he had given any thought to the origin of the prayer. "What do you mean?!" he replied. "The Sinner's Prayer is in the Bible!" Laughing at my supposed ignorance, he quickly concluded the conversation. Since that time I have asked the same question of dozens of historical and theological scholars. While hardly anyone has been able to provide definitive answers, more thoughtful respondents are intrigued by the question and hope to learn more on the subject. Many have also shared their concerns about how the prayer is being used in the practice of evangelism.

As a minister of the gospel and an advocate of church growth, I have an unwavering commitment to the task of evangelism. My intention throughout this dissertation is not simply to trace the historical roots of the Sinner's Prayer. I sincerely seek to provide a critique of an evangelistic method that will be both positive and beneficial to anyone who seeks to fulfill our Lord's Great Commission.

As I have researched and written on the topic of the Sinner's Prayer over the past three years, my views have gradually changed. At the outset, I was more apt to defend the use of the prayer and somewhat skeptical of anyone who criticized the prayer. But as I looked more carefully at the issue, and as I have stopped to listen and observe the manner in which the prayer is being used, I have, to some degree, joined the critics. Nevertheless, I intend to be balanced and fair in my approach. Although the prayer has severe limitations that seem presently by most to be disregarded, I am not yet ready to abandon it, even in my own ministry. Rather, I hope to advocate an informed and critical use of the prayer that will be an aid and not a barrier to the most important business in the entire world, the business of saving souls. My sincere prayer is that the work produced in

this dissertation will make a positive contribution to the efforts of professional, pastoral, and lay evangelists as we, together, work toward growth in the kingdom.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the results of research aimed at discovering the origin of the Sinner's Prayer. Historical evidence will be presented that will support the hypothesis that the Sinner's Prayer has developed gradually as a result of the systemization of evangelistic efforts in the areas of mass evangelism and personal evangelism. The evidence will be presented from three major areas of research. First, evangelistic literature in the form of books, magazines, journals, and training manuals will be used to illustrate the gradual development of methods in evangelism. Second, personal interviews will provide important details about the ministry of specific evangelists. Third, gospel witnessing tracts will prove to be a critical source of information because, it will be argued, the tracts are reliable indicators of past and present methods in personal evangelism. My presentation will follow a loose chronological order in an attempt to place the Sinner's Prayer in its historical context. Both primary and secondary source materials will provide significant insights into the origin of the prayer.

The Changing Face of Evangelism

Today, the point of decision during which lost persons are asked to accept Jesus as Savior commonly includes the person praying the Sinner's Prayer. If the Sinner's Prayer has not always been used, what changes in the practice of evangelism have precipitated its popularity? An overview of some relevant events and important figures in the history of evangelism will prove helpful in answering this question. We will begin by considering evangelism as it was practiced during the New Testament time period.

In the Beginning

By its very nature, the Christian faith is personal and individualistic. The Bible teaches that humanity is in a corporate state of sin and darkness. God's saving work in Christ is effectual, however, not for corporate humanity but for individual human beings. Dating back to New Testament times, strategies for winning the world to Christ have targeted nations and people groups.¹ Such strategies have taken many different forms but have, by necessity, always included an appeal to individual persons to accept the life-giving message of Christ. Daniel Armstrong highlights the need for a personal response to the gospel when he writes, "Mass evangelism in the strictest sense is inaccurate terminology, for there can be no such thing as mass evangelism. The gospel can be proclaimed to the masses, but souls can only be won for Christ individually; one by one they must pass over into conversion."²

New Testament evangelism entails the response of individual persons to the person of Christ. As John Mark Terry observes in the opening lines of his book, *Evangelism: A Concise History*, "The history of evangelism began with the birth of Jesus Christ, the Evangel."³ Jesus, the messenger who embodied the message, revealed himself as the way, the truth, and the life. Through his atoning death on the cross, the way was made to eternal salvation. His Great Commission placed the responsibility of proclaiming his gospel to the world squarely upon the shoulders of his church. Terry states, "The church's later ministry of evangelism drew its inspiration and direction from

¹For example, Jesus' earthly ministry focused primarily upon the Jews (Matt 15:24). Paul affirmed that the gospel was first for the Jews and then for the Gentiles (Rom 1:16). Paul says of himself, "I am the apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom 11:13). Herbert Kane lists nine principles that comprise Paul's mission strategy. J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 73-85. These principles reveal Paul's focusing on certain Roman provinces and large cities, in particular, upon people groups and geographical regions.

²Daniel Armstrong, "An Examination of Evangelism in America Beginning with the Eighteenth Century in the Light of New Testament Principles of Evangelism" (Th.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955), 248.

³John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 3.

the evangelism of Jesus.”⁴ Jesus’ evangelistic methods varied greatly, but his approach was always personal.⁵ Whether teaching the crowds or conversing one-on-one, he confronted individuals with the need to believe in himself.

In confronting lost persons with their need to believe, Jesus asked for a personal response of faith evidenced by action. Jesus instructed the disciples to follow him. The Rich Young Ruler was commanded to sell all his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow Jesus. The Adulterous Woman was told to leave her life of sin. The gospel writers never suggest that repeating the words of a prayer was a part of coming to faith. Becoming a follower of Jesus was a matter of the will once the heart had experienced conversion through belief. Reciting a spoken prayer was not a necessary part of the process.

Evangelism in the Early Church

The early church followed both the example and the instruction of Jesus. Before his ascension, Jesus instructed his followers, “This is what is written: the Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). The book of Acts serves as a case study for how the early church carried out its assignment. Michael Green, in his notable work, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, observes that the pattern for evangelism in the early church included three basic elements.⁶ First, the evangelist preached a person. The message was wholly Christocentric. Second, the evangelist proclaimed a gift. The gift was forgiveness and

⁴Ibid.

⁵Leighton Ford identified thirty-five personal interviews recorded in the gospels. Leighton Ford, *The Christian Persuader* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 67.

⁶Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 150-52.

adoption. Third, the evangelist looked for a response. This response included three parts: repentance, faith, and baptism.

Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost illustrates the pattern for evangelism in the early church. Peter, the evangelist, preached Christ. He recounted Jesus' death and resurrection, stressing that Jesus was Lord: "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Peter also proclaimed the gifts of forgiveness and the Holy Spirit for those who would respond through repentance and baptism to evidence their faith: "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38). As with the example of Jesus, the early church did not stress the importance of reciting a prayer. Rather, salvation was found in faith and evidenced by action. Prayer certainly has an important role in salvation. The point being made here, however, is that a sinner's recitation of a standardized or model prayer for salvation would have been a foreign concept in the early church.⁷

Evangelism in the Empire and the Middle Ages

From New Testament times until the Protestant Reformation, the church experienced significant growth and expansion. Methods of evangelism continued to vary greatly, but the personal appeal to come to saving belief in Jesus remained as the primary emphasis in genuine proclamation. Of course, not all proclamation was genuine. The problems of false and forced conversions have been well documented.

In such cases as the expansion of the Roman Empire after the conversion of Constantine, the authenticity of much of the church's witness and growth is highly questionable. The relationship shared by the church and state had a dramatic impact upon evangelism. As R. A. Markus observes, "Force was acceptable, even a normal

⁷Paul's instruction in Romans 10 stresses the importance of making verbal confession that "Jesus is Lord," but, once again, this does not reflect the form or the function of the Sinner's Prayer.

means, for the propagation of the faith.”⁸ Even during the waning years of the Empire, the Roman Church continued to insist that the sword was an important tool for evangelism. The policies of Pope Gregory the Great (540-604), who is well known for his emphasis upon world mission, serve as a good example. From his powerful position, Gregory made it clear that landowners were responsible for the souls of their tenants and ordered them not to tolerate pagan practices. Gregory insisted that those who refused the faith were to be “so burdened with rent that the weight of this punitive exaction should make them hasten to righteousness.”⁹ Likewise, military commanders and civil officials were enlisted to bring pagans “to the service of Christ.”¹⁰ Punishment was to be exacted on those who resisted. Slaves were to be beaten and tortured. Freemen should be jailed and fined.

Continuing through the Middle Ages, problems of abuse of power and a compromised gospel hampered the cause of authentic evangelism. Within the Roman Catholic Church, the sinner’s need for Christ was replaced by the need for baptism. Terry explains, “Evangelism in the Middle Ages consisted primarily of persuading people to accept baptism. The Roman Catholic Church taught that baptism brought a person into the church, which alone could dispense salvation. The priests taught that salvation came through baptism and the mass.”¹¹ The conclusions of R. Alan Streett echo those of Terry when Streett writes, “Under Roman Catholicism, sinners were saved by the church, not by the atoning death of Christ. Salvation was obtained by the observance of seven sacraments, and not through a relationship with the living God.”¹²

⁸R. A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 85.

⁹Pope Gregory the Great, *Letter IV.26*, in *Gregory the Great and His World*, 81.

¹⁰Pope Gregory the Great, *Letter IV.25*, in *Gregory the Great and His World*, 81.

¹¹Terry, *Evangelism*, 57.

¹²R. Alan Streett, *The Effective Invitation: A Practical Guide for the Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1984), 82.

Examples of authentic, Christ-centered evangelism during the Middle Ages can be found. Men such as Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1165), Peter Waldo (1179-1218), St. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), and John Wyclif (1320-1384), are all recognized as evangelists who led in significant efforts toward reform and emphasized faith and repentance in their preaching.¹³

Evangelism in the Protestant Reformation

As baptism and church membership began to overshadow a personal response of repentance and saving faith in Jesus, the need for reform arose. Martin Luther's stress upon justification by faith and his criticisms of abuses in the Roman Church set in motion the Protestant Reformation. Roland Bainton writes, "The Reformation was above all else a revival of religion."¹⁴ Streett observes that the leaders of the Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli, Martin Luther, and John Calvin, "rekindled the spirit of evangelism."¹⁵ One of the most significant changes that the Reformation brought to evangelism was the return to biblical evangelism.¹⁶ Biblical evangelism emphasized salvation by grace as opposed to salvation by sacramental works and church membership.

Another significant change wrought by the Reformation came in the area of preaching. A return to preaching that emphasized the biblical text and the gospel message can be seen in the reformers. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin are all credited as outstanding preachers whose message focused upon Scripture. This renewed focus brought into light the need of the individual to embrace the gift of salvation by personally trusting the Savior.

¹³Paulus Scharpff, *History of Evangelism: Three Hundred Years of Evangelism in Germany, Great Britain, and the United States of America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 5-7.

¹⁴Roland H. Bainton, *The Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*, enlarged ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 3.

¹⁵Streett, *The Effective Invitation*, 82.

¹⁶Terry, *Evangelism*, 76.

Evangelism in North America

In North America, one of the most influential factors in evangelism was the Great Awakening of the early eighteenth century. Terry observes, "The revival transformed the religious and moral character of North America and shaped the nature of American Christianity. To this day American evangelism bears the imprint of the Great Awakening."¹⁷ A significant factor in the Great Awakening was the emphasis upon a personal religious experience for believers. As W. W. Sweet explained, "the central fact in the great upheaval in American life, which we call the Great Awakening, and with which Jonathan Edwards had so much to do, was that religion is a personal matter; that it is an inner experience or it is nothing."¹⁸ Justo Gonzalez concurs when he observes, "From an early date, many among the North American colonists had felt that a personal religious experience was of great importance for Christian life. But that feeling became more generalized . . . when the first signs of the Great Awakening appeared."¹⁹

Bill Leonard credits this emphasis upon a personal religious experience to the Puritan concept of conversion. He observes, "Puritanism bequeathed an important legacy to the process of getting saved in America. The Puritans were among the first to require conversion experience of all who would claim Christian faith and church membership."²⁰ The Puritans, as "intense pietists" were concerned about an "inner experience" of faith.²¹ Sydney Ahlstrom explains the way this concern evolved over time. He writes, "a specific conversion experience was at first rarely regarded as normative or necessary."²² In due

¹⁷Ibid., 113.

¹⁸W. W. Sweet, *Revivalism in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 85.

¹⁹Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity* (San Francisco: Harper, 1985), 2: 228.

²⁰Bill Leonard, "Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture," *Review and Expositor* 82 (Winter 1985): 117.

²¹Ibid., 114.

²²Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 132.

time, however, “these Nonconforming Puritans in the Church of England came increasingly to regard a specific experience of regeneration as an essential sign of election.”²³ The Puritan understanding of the conversion experience was in keeping with their Calvinistic theology. Leonard remarks, “Sinners were relatively passive participants in whom sovereign grace was infused, bringing that regeneration which activated repentance and faith. At no time was the will so free as to pray a prayer by which grace was instantaneously received.”²⁴

Recovering the emphasis upon a personal religious experience often yielded an emotionalism unusual for churches of the colonies. A new fervor for evangelism also resulted as individuals were challenged to seek a personal experience with Christ. The “open-air” preaching of George Whitefield to massive crowds unified the local revivals that were being experienced in the colonies and set the stage for mass evangelism. Terry notes that because of the Great Awakening “the revival meeting became the most common method of evangelism in North America.”²⁵ Along with and as a part of the revival meeting, the popularity of preaching was amplified. In addition to Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards held center stage. An early work on the history of preaching contends, “the powerful era of American preaching began with Jonathan Edwards.”²⁶

The Second Great Awakening, which took place during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, also had an enormous impact upon frontier evangelism in North America. Lewis Drummond explains its beginning: “Historians generally agree that the Second Great Awakening burst into being on the eastern seaboard of early America in about 1790. It began in Maine and moved into Maryland, and soon the whole north-east was feeling its impact. It was there it had its greatest influence. But there was

²³Ibid.

²⁴Leonard, “Getting Saved in America,” 117.

²⁵Terry, *Evangelism*, 124.

²⁶T. H. Pattison, *The History of Christian Preaching* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1912), 354.

more to come. In those days, the East Coast of the young country could contain no more citizens. It was filled to its Appalachian Mountain brim. As the eighteenth century ended, the dam broke. Streaming through the Cumberland gap in the eastern Kentucky hills, a floodtide of new pioneers flowed to the West. . . . And the revival that had such impact in the East flowed westward with them.”²⁷

One of the important results of the westward expansion of the revival movement was the shift in theology reflected in frontier evangelism. Expressed primarily through what came to be called the “camp meeting,” frontier evangelism soon took on a life and character of its own. As John Boles explains, “The camp meeting itself slowly evolved from a spontaneous overnight meeting to a planned, carefully executed revival technique.”²⁸ Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. outlines the camp meeting technique in his work *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845*. Dickson reveals the intricate and detailed planning that came to characterize the meetings, extending from the preferred dates, to desirable site locations, tent models, and camp layouts. The services were also patterned. An especially important aspect of the layout was the “pen.” Bruce explains, “Immediately in front of the stand [pulpit] was an area variously known as the altar, mourners’ bench, or anxious seat. Unsympathetic observers called the area ‘the glory pen,’ and in spite of the derogatory connotations, this provided an accurate description; for, although there were sometimes seats in the pen, its significance was as a distinct area, separated from the congregation and the pulpit, where sinners under conviction were brought to experience conversion.”²⁹

²⁷Lewis Drummond, *Charles Grandison Finney and the Birth of Modern Evangelism* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), 18-19.

²⁸John B. Boles, *The Great Revival 1787-1805* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972), x-xi.

²⁹Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., *And They All Sang Hallelujah: Plain-folk Camp-Meeting Religion, 1800-1845* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1974), 71, 73.

The frontier was dominated by three denominations: Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians.³⁰ At the outset, the Presbyterians and Baptists, as a rule, were more Calvinistic in their theology. Over time, however, as Terry explains, “The predominant theology of the frontier changed from Calvinism to Arminianism. The camp meeting preachers emphasized the human free will to choose salvation. The Arminian doctrine also affected evangelism. The Awakening featured individualistic evangelism and de-emphasized the value of doctrinal creeds and theological education.”³¹ Peter Cartwright, a Methodist frontier preacher during the Second Great Awakening, attests to this theological shift in his autobiography. Referring to the Presbyterians, who were well known for their strict Calvinistic doctrine, Cartwright writes, “In this revival they, almost to a man, gave up these points of high Calvinism, and preached a free salvation to all mankind.”³²

To better understand the theological shift that took place on the frontier, one must come to appreciate the critical role of preaching in the Second Great Awakening. As we have noted, the role of the pulpit in evangelism was bolstered by the phenomenal success of First Great Awakening preachers like Whitefield and Edwards. With the outbreak of revival during the Second Awakening, preaching became an even more critical element in evangelism. Zealous evangelistic preaching and emotionally charged response characterized the camp meetings. The role of the minister had evolved from counselor to persuader. Preaching pushed for decisions. The more emotional appeals typically yielded greater results. Boles explains, “An emphasis on emotions, it is true, was widely used to gain the potential convert’s attention and emotive consent. As such,

³⁰Boles, *The Great Revival 1787-1805*, 1.

³¹Terry, *Evangelism*, 137.

³²Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography of Peter Cartwright, the Backwoods Preacher*, ed. William P. Strickland (Cincinnati: Hitchcock & Walden, 1856), 46.

emotionalism performed a necessary and extremely successful role in the ministerial efforts toward evangelization.”³³

It is important to note, however, that the emotionalism exhibited by many frontier preachers was not intended to exploit or deceive. Moreover, sermons were much more than mere emotional harangues. Rather, congregations first heard “an orderly and well-structured sermon, buttressed by biblical quotation and even historical or literary allusions.”³⁴ The sermon was followed by an emotional appeal calling lost sinners to conversion. Boles observes, “In many cases, these passionate calls to conversion were separate talks delivered either by a specialist in exhortation or another minister called upon to enforce the previous message on the minds of the listeners.”³⁵

This emotional and vigorously evangelistic preaching confronted sinners with their hopeless and deplorable condition before a holy God and charged them with their responsibility to appeal to God’s offer of grace made available through Christ. Thus, the element of human decision was thrust to the forefront of the evangelistic arena. Boles explains, “If the minister’s purpose was to lead men to Jesus Christ, then by implication the listeners had acquired an enlarged degree of responsibility. This only made the southern evangelical emphasis on the conversion experience a more individual, more inward matter than before.”³⁶ Conversion, therefore, came to be understood as more volitional and less compulsory than viewed by the Calvinists of the First Awakening.

This shift in theology and methodology is a critical factor in the historical roots of the Sinner’s Prayer. Calvinistic theology stressed the need for sinners to turn to God and pray for God to grant saving grace, but never was it suggested that by way of a

³³Boles, *The Great Revival 1787-1805*, 111.

³⁴*Ibid.*

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶*Ibid.*, 138.

prayer one could automatically receive salvation. The praying of the Sinner's Prayer is indicative of the belief that individual persons can and must volitionally choose salvation.

Altar Call Evangelism

The growing emphasis upon individualistic evangelism and the human free will to choose salvation naturally gave rise to public invitations to make a decision for Christ. In his recently published work, *The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage*, David Bennett traces the history of the altar call. Bennett argues that the public invitation was first used in the eighteenth century and then became systematized in the early nineteenth century.³⁷ In so doing, Bennett takes issue with the conclusions of Streett, who traces the history of the altar call in his popular work, *The Effective Invitation*.

Streett argues that the origin of the public invitation can be found in the biblical text. He writes, "From the beginning of human history to the present, God has continued to extend an invitation to the lost to respond openly to His offer of forgiveness. The pages of the Old and New Testaments are replete with examples of God, through His chosen servants, calling men to make a public commitment of faith."³⁸ Streett defends his position by citing examples of specific texts that illustrate the appeal for a public commitment. He observes, "The first-century gospel preacher always concluded his evangelistic sermon with an appeal for the unconverted present to repent of their sins and place their faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord of glory. Often these appeals called upon the individuals additionally to demonstrate their sincerity by taking a public stand for Christ before friends, relatives, neighbors, and even enemies. This call for the sinner or new convert to make an initial public profession of faith is the basis for the modern-day practice of extending a public invitation."³⁹

³⁷David Bennett, *The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 29.

³⁸Streett, *The Effective Invitation*, 56.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 55.

According to Streett, the practice of issuing a public invitation continued from the first century until the time of Constantine. With Constantine's conversion and proclamation that Christianity would be the state religion of the Roman Empire, Streett observes, "The public invitation, for the most part, fell by the wayside."⁴⁰ While a "faithful remnant of believers"⁴¹ continued to practice what Streett considers to be biblical evangelism, even to the point of extending various forms of a public invitation, the examples of such are few and far between. One notable example of the faithful remnant mentioned by Streett is Bernard of Clairvaux, who Streett argues, "issued a public invitation on a regular basis."⁴² Quoting Lloyd M. Perry, he states, "The basic appeal of Bernard of Clairvaux was for people to repent of their sins. Often he would call for a show of hands from those who wished to be restored to fellowship with God or the church."⁴³ Streett goes on to remark, "The fact that a call for a show of hands was used as a method of public invitation during the twelfth century should put to rest the theory that the public invitation first appeared in the ministry of Charles Finney!"⁴⁴

Streett cites the restoration of evangelistic preaching during the Reformation as a primary step in recovering the public invitation. In the Reformation churches those who responded to sermons dealing with the need for personal repentance and faith were dealt with privately.⁴⁵ Their initial public profession of faith took place when they were presented before the congregation to receive communion.⁴⁶ Streett points to this practice

⁴⁰Ibid., 81.

⁴¹Among this faithful remnant, Streett lists Gregory of Nazianzus, John Chrysostom, Patrick, Boniface, Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter of Bruys, Arnold of Brescia, Peter Waldo, Antony of Padua, Berthold of Regensburg, Johann Tauler, Gerard Groote, John Gekker, Savonarola, Hugh Latimer, John Wycliffe, the Anabaptists, and the Separatists.

⁴²Streett, *The Effective Invitation*, 84.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Ibid., 84-85.

⁴⁵Ibid., 82.

⁴⁶Ibid.

as “the first step in restoring the public invitation to its New Testament place of prominence.”⁴⁷ He then identifies the eighteenth century as the era during which “the public invitation gained gradual acceptance and use.”⁴⁸

Although popular, Streett’s position has been challenged by Bennett and by Erroll Hulse. In his book, *The Great Invitation*, Hulse criticizes Streett’s reading of history in regard to the public invitation, stating that Streett “imports the method, as well as our modern evangelical culture and outlook, back into history. So extravagant are some of Streett’s suggestions that you can almost envisage Constantine himself making his way down the aisle to grasp the hand of a crusade evangelist while the choir sings, ‘Just as I am!’”⁴⁹ Hulse disputes Streett’s findings on point after point, giving credit mainly to Charles Finney for creating the atmosphere conducive for what Hulse calls the “new evangelical sacrament” of the invitation system. Leonard would seem to agree with Hulse in his use of the term sacrament when he writes, “By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, coming forward to the anxious bench or inquiry room, or to shake the preacher’s hand, was an integral part of getting saved in America. It created what might be called the sacrament of walking the aisle, an outward and visible sign of an inward and evangelical grace.”⁵⁰

In his challenges to Streett’s work, Bennett also criticizes Streett’s reading of history, as well as his interpretation of the biblical text. After analyzing Streett’s treatment of the Bible passages used to defend the public invitation, Bennett claims, “When all these Scriptures are considered, the use of the public invitation in exceptional circumstances can be justified, but they do not support the systematic use of the

⁴⁷Ibid., 82-83.

⁴⁸Ibid., 93.

⁴⁹Erroll Hulse, *The Great Invitation: Examining the Use of the Invitation System in Evangelism* (Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1986), 89.

⁵⁰Leonard, “Getting Saved in America,” 121.

practice.”⁵¹ With regard to Streett’s reading of history, Bennett argues that at several critical junctures, Streett mishandles references. He also accuses Streett of drawing extreme conclusions from sources that provide less than accurate details of historical events.⁵²

In contrast to Streett, Bennett’s approach to tracing the origin of the altar call begins with his examination of the ministries of seventeenth century preachers John Wesley (1703-1791), George Whitefield (1714-1770), and Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), contending that none of them used the altar call. Rather, their usual practice was to meet privately with seekers for a time of prayer and counsel, not in an organized or systematic fashion. Hulse is found in agreement with Bennett when he states, “There is no evidence that Whitefield set up a counselling system.”⁵³ Referring to the time period of Whitefield, Wesley, and Edwards, Hulse writes, “It would seem that revivals varying in intensity continued towards the end of the eighteenth century and on into the nineteenth century, and that a variety of methods were used to gather the distressed in order to counsel them. We should emphasize that the purpose was to advise and help those who were distressed. There are no reports of methods employed to encourage people to come forward at the conclusion of meetings.”⁵⁴ This lack of evidence is used to conclude that neither formal times of counseling nor formal invitations were being issued.

Bennett suggests that this practice of counseling privately with seekers likely gave rise to the public invitation. He writes, “It would seem highly probable that the seed

⁵¹Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 185.

⁵²For examples of Bennett’s criticisms of Streett regarding Bible interpretation and deficient research, see Bennett’s remarks on pp. 2-4 and in chapter eleven, where he begins by stating, “Alan Streett is a major advocate of the [invitation] system, whose book (based on his dissertation) seems to have been widely circulated, so his work will be used as the primary example of those who state that the Bible does support the use of the public invitation.” Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 177.

⁵³Hulse, *The Great Invitation*, 92.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 93.

beds of British and American evangelistic counseling were sources from which the public invitation grew. Sometimes the preacher met with individuals, at other times with groups. But in the early part of the eighteenth century the initiative to hold such an encounter was most often with the subject, and it was never in response to a public invitation.”⁵⁵

As the employment of this type of counseling became the norm, ministers began to make public appeals for seekers to meet with them after services. The next step in the process was for the appeals to become more direct and the need for public response more important. According to Bennett, the altar call, as we now know it, developed through this process over time. He is able to cite scattered examples of public invitations later in the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, usage of the altar call is widespread and gradually systematized. Bennett credits the evangelistic camp meetings, in the first decade or two of the nineteenth century, as being the arena in which the altar call was systematized.⁵⁶ From that era onward, the altar call became a standard part of evangelistic services.

The development of the altar call is an important factor in tracing the origin of the Sinner’s Prayer for at least two reasons. First, the altar call represents a further shift in the theology of evangelism. As Terry has indicated, the frontier tendency was to shift from the Calvinistic emphasis upon Divine sovereignty and to focus on a human response. This focus on a human response paved the way for a prayer to express that human response. Second, the altar call represents a new methodology in evangelism. With the rise of the altar call, evangelistic preaching often became an appeal to sinners to publicly respond to the invitation to accept Christ, rather than an appeal for sinners to make their peace privately with God. This appeal insists on a “decision” for Christ. The decision is evidenced by response to the invitation and, later, will be coupled with

⁵⁵Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 31.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 79.

voicing the words of the Sinner's Prayer. Thus, the altar call is one of the important forerunners to the Sinner's Prayer.

Evangelizing the Masses

Growing out of the First Awakening and becoming popularized in the Second Awakening, revivalistic evangelism became the breeding ground for mass evangelists. The two most prominent evangelists of the nineteenth century were Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) and Dwight Lyman Moody (1837-1899).⁵⁷ Their efforts at mass evangelism created the need for a systemized way of dealing with seekers. And so, with the nineteenth century, the use of methods in evangelism became popularized.

Charles Grandison Finney. Charles Grandison Finney, a lawyer by trade from New York State, was converted in October of 1821. Finney straight away testified to a great filling of the Holy Spirit and a gift to evangelize, stating, "I immediately found myself endued with such power from on high that a few words dropped here and there to individuals were the means of their immediate conversion."⁵⁸ Finney soon left his law practice in pursuit of the ministry. Gaining ordination as a Presbyterian, Finney began an itinerate ministry as a missionary to small churches. Over time, Finney's ministry propelled him to national and even international prominence as an evangelist.

Finney, who came to be known as the "Father of Modern Revivalism," gradually developed a systemized approach to revival meetings. His "New Measures" included protracted and union meetings, advertising, and the anxious bench. Where revival services had once lasted a few days, protracted meetings lasted for multiple weeks. The union meetings unified the efforts of as many of the area churches as was possible, regardless of denominational ties. The use of advertising allowed for the services to be widely publicized and had a significant impact on attendance. The anxious

⁵⁷Terry, *Evangelism*, 141.

⁵⁸Drummond, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 22.

bench, where sinners would come to the front of the church or meeting hall to pray and talk with counselors, was a very significant step in the development of the invitation process.

Although Finney cannot be credited with inventing the altar call, he is one of the most important figures in the process of systematization. Hulse contends, "It is Finney who marks the watershed of a new era for city-wide modern evangelism and the invitation methods that are used."⁵⁹ Lewis Drummond refers to Finney as "the watershed between men of awakenings like George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards of the eighteenth century, and mass-evangelists . . . of the nineteenth."⁶⁰ American historian Sydney Ahlstrom refers to Finney as "an enormously successful practitioner, almost the inventor of the modern high pressure revivalism which, as it spread, would have important consequences for the religious ethos of the nation as a whole."⁶¹

While Finney does represent a "watershed" in evangelism methods, many have mistakenly credited him with being the inventor of the "new measures." Bennett, however, rightly observes, "Though an ardent advocate of these 'new measures,' and innovations generally, he was the originator of few of them. With regard to the altar call . . . he was not the first to use it, nor the first to develop a theology that would allow for it, nor even the first to form it into a system. Yet there can be little doubt that by practice and the written word Finney above all people made it widely acceptable, and established it in the evangelical mind as the essential accompaniment of evangelistic preaching."⁶²

John F. Thornbury points to Finney's convictions about the anxious seat and the public invitation as being especially revealing. Thornbury observes from Finney's writings that Finney seems to have viewed the anxious seat "as a *means of grace*, a test of

⁵⁹Hulse, *The Great Invitation*, 94.

⁶⁰Drummond, *Charles Grandison Finney*, 12.

⁶¹Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 460.

⁶²Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 103.

piety.”⁶³ As such, it was “a kind of crux in the dilemma of those who were not converted, a ‘test’ of their sincerity. The physical act of coming to the front of the church was projected as the outward sign of submission to God. To fail to move to the altar or anxious seat was rebellion against God.”⁶⁴ He continues, “This approach to the sinner’s problem tended to switch his attention away from a relationship to God and direct it to a spot at the front of the church.”⁶⁵ Thornbury warns that Finney’s approach confuses the sinner as to the difference between the physical act of moving to the front of the church and the spiritual act of faith and repentance. Thus confused, sinners may find comfort in thinking they are saved because they have moved physically, but are actually still lost because they have not been moved spiritually.

The emphasis that Finney places upon the public invitation is, indeed, alarming. In his *Lectures On Revival*, he actually equates the anxious seat to baptism. Explaining that the public response required by the anxious seat is a means to guard against false conversions, Finney writes, “The church has always seen that it is necessary to have something to serve this purpose. In the newborn church baptism met this need. The apostles preached the Gospel to the people, and then all willing to be on Christ’s side were called to be baptized. It held the same place the anxious seat does now: a public manifestation of determination to be a Christian.”⁶⁶

Another aspect of the public invitation employed by Finney is the “prayer of faith.” Citing Mark 11:24, “Therefore I say to you, whatever things you ask when you pray, believe that you receive them, and you will have them,” Finney argues that “the prayer of faith is faith that insures what is prayed for will come about . . . faith that

⁶³John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival: The Story of Asahel Nettleton and the Second Great Awakening* (Grand Rapids: Evangelical Press, 1977), 201.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revival* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1988), 171.

procures the exact blessing it seeks.”⁶⁷ He claims, “The whole of history of the church shows that when God answers prayer, He gives His people the thing they prayed for.”⁶⁸

Finney does not hesitate to apply his concept of the prayer of faith to matters of salvation. Concerning the salvation of all humanity, Finney asserts that God has not willed it, so it is not our duty to pray for it.⁶⁹ Yet when it comes to the salvation of individuals, Finney declares that those who claim to be Christians but have not offered the prayer of faith for the lost bear responsibility for the lost. He writes, “Millions are in hell because people who profess to be Christians have not offered the prayer of faith. When they had promises right in front of them, they didn’t have enough faith to use them. Parents let their children, even *baptized* children, go to hell because they disbelieved God’s promises. Many husbands have gone to hell when wives could have prevailed with God in prayer and saved them. The signs of the times and the indications of God’s plan were favorable; the Spirit prompted desires for their salvation, and they had enough evidence to believe that God was ready to pour out a blessing.”⁷⁰ He continues, “If they had only prayed in faith, God would have given it; but God didn’t send the blessing because they wouldn’t discern the signs of the times. . . . No doubt multitudes will stand before God covered with the blood of souls lost through their lack of faith. The promises of God still unpacked from their Bibles will stare them in the face and drag them down to hell.”⁷¹

Finney’s prayer of faith has dramatic consequences for evangelism. First, as Leonard remarks, “It is not far from that idea to the belief that sinners themselves may

⁶⁷Ibid., 51.

⁶⁸Ibid., 55.

⁶⁹Ibid., 59.

⁷⁰Ibid., 60.

⁷¹Ibid.

pray their own prayer of faith.”⁷² Thus, the prayer of faith is another important step along the way to the Sinner’s Prayer.

A second important consequence for evangelism is the manner in which Finney uses the prayer of faith to suggest that responsibility for the lost rests upon the prayers of the saved. Salvation, in Finney’s mind, is obviously not a preordained event. The types of prayers offered by converted sinners are the determining factor in a sinner finding the Lord. This teaching gives a new meaning to the importance of prayer in evangelism.

A third important consequence for evangelism concerns Finney’s comments about those who have failed to offer the prayer of faith and, therefore, have been the cause of millions going to hell. Of those have failed in this way Finney writes, “The promises of God still unpacked from their Bibles will stare them in the face and drag them down to hell.”⁷³ Finney seems to be suggesting that those who have not prayed for the lost, as a result, will find themselves in hell. Finney directs this comment to “people who profess to be Christians.”⁷⁴ We can interpret this phrase in two ways. First, Finney may be referring to people who profess to be Christians but in reality are not. If that is the case, why, we must ask, does Finney expect them to pray for the lost if they themselves are not true believers? Maybe that is the point he is trying to make. If they were true believers, they would be praying for the lost. But if, in fact, Finney is addressing those who are lost but claim to be saved, his argument is rather confusing. Are we to believe that the lost will not be saved because other lost persons, who think themselves to be saved, have failed to pray? If so, then Finney is suggesting that the salvation of the lost hinges upon the prayers of the lost. Unthinkable. Or, second, Finney may be suggesting that the believer’s own salvation hinges upon his/her faithfulness in

⁷²Leonard, ““Getting Saved in America,” 121.

⁷³Finney, *Lectures on Revival*, 60.

⁷⁴Ibid.

praying for the lost. If so, then Finney pushes Arminian doctrine to an extreme end. Not only can believers lose their salvation, they are certain to lose it if they do not pray for the lost. This proposition, too, is unthinkable.

Theologically, Finney has been described as a “New School Calvinist” by Garth Rosell, who remarks, “His preaching and teaching, always pointed and dramatic, stressed the moral government of God, the ability of people to repent and make themselves new hearts, the perfectibility of human nature and society, and the need for Christians to apply their faith to daily living. For Finney, this included the investment of one’s time and energy in establishing the millennial kingdom of God on earth by winning converts and involving oneself in social reform.”⁷⁵ In contrast to Whitefield’s belief that revival was an outpouring of God’s Spirit that humans could not affect, Finney taught that revival “is not a miracle . . . [or] dependent on a miracle in any sense . . . It is a result we can logically expect from the right use of God-given means, as much as any other effect produced by applying tools and resources.”⁷⁶ Terry observes, “Whereas Edwards and Whitefield held a Calvinistic view that emphasized God’s work in revival, Finney took an Arminian approach that focused on human actions.”⁷⁷

That Finney’s theology impacted his methodology is without question. Finney’s understanding of man’s natural ability to repent and believe had a significant influence upon his evangelistic methods. Thornbury holds that, to Finney, “Successful preaching . . . must be based on the proposition that men have the full ability to convert themselves.”⁷⁸ The result, as Hulse explains, “was a tremendous emphasis on the need to

⁷⁵Garth Rosell, “Charles Grandison Finney,” in *Great Leaders of the Christian Church* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1988), 319.

⁷⁶Finney, *Lectures On Revival*, 13.

⁷⁷Terry, *Evangelism*, 145.

⁷⁸Thornbury, *God Sent Revival*, 161.

press for immediate decisions.”⁷⁹ Furthermore, any person who seemed to make a decision was at once introduced as a true convert.

Finney’s compromise of Reformed theology and his emphasis upon personal soul winning, along with his use of methods, all are significant steps along the way toward a systemized way of dealing with the unsaved. As such, Finney helps set the stage for the new methods in evangelism that will give birth to the Sinner’s Prayer. Hulse observes, “So powerful did Finney’s influence become that his theology of salvation and his basic method in evangelism have become standard practice in America today.”⁸⁰ Furthermore, if Thornbury is correct in his observations that Finney took the focus away from a relationship to God and directed it to the altar, then Finney represents a dramatic shift in evangelism.

Dwight Lyman Moody. Coming on the heels of Finney and overlapping in the time of his ministry, Dwight L. Moody has been called the greatest revivalist of the 1800s.⁸¹ Lyle Dorsett observes, “In brief, Dwight L. Moody’s name is synonymous with evangelism and revivalism.”⁸² Moody’s ministry touched an amazing number of people. Dorsett asserts, “Except for two twentieth-century evangelists, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham, no American has had the privilege of personally presenting the gospel of Jesus Christ to so many people.”⁸³

Moody was a shoe salesman in Boston, Massachusetts when he was converted in 1856. Moving to Chicago later that year, he eventually left the business of the world to pursue the business of the Kingdom. Ministering through the YMCA and a Sunday

⁷⁹Hulse, *The Great Invitation*, 95.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

⁸¹Terry, *Evangelism*, 147.

⁸²Lyle W. Dorsett, *A Passion for Souls: The Life of D. L. Moody* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1997), 21.

⁸³*Ibid.*

School mission, Moody experienced great success and witnessed countless conversions. Like Finney, Moody in time grew to national and international prominence as a mass evangelist. Most scholars agree that one of the causes of Moody's success was his willingness to embrace and build upon many of Finney's methods. Terry explains, "Moody built upon Finney's methods and took mass evangelism to new heights of success."⁸⁴

In addition to other methods that Moody employed in his campaigns, the use of the "inquirers' room" and the training of personal workers are particularly significant. Although Moody is often credited with the invention of the inquiry meeting, research suggests that his role was as one who popularized rather than invented the practice. One nineteenth century author, Rev. C. L. Thompson, remarks that his first acquaintance with inquiry meetings was about 1817, twenty years before Moody's birth, being used by Asahel Nettleton (1783-1844).⁸⁵ In a book published in 1878, Thompson confesses that the exact date and person responsible for first using the method is unknown, but holds that it is "of modern origin"⁸⁶ and refers to it as "among the new methods of the past fifty years."⁸⁷

The inquiry meeting, Thompson explains, is "a 'second meeting,' in which the persons present are divided into two classes, the anxious, and those who are there to lead the anxious to the Savior."⁸⁸ He states that the inquiry room has two purposes. The first purpose is instruction.⁸⁹ Upon hearing the gospel preached, many sense the need to respond but have questions or lack complete understanding of the message. The inquiry

⁸⁴Terry, *Evangelism*, 147.

⁸⁵C. L. Thompson, *Times of Refreshing, Being a History of American Revivals With Their Philosophy and Methods* (Rockford, IL: Golden Censer Publishers, 1878), 380.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 379.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 378.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 379.

⁸⁹*Ibid.*, 383-84.

meeting allows these persons to be dealt with more intimately, or even on an individual basis. The second purpose is to lead individuals to make an “instant decision.”⁹⁰

Thompson refers to the inquiry meeting as the “valley of decision.”⁹¹

In his explanation of how to conduct an inquiry meeting, Thompson cites Moody as an example, describing in detail what he had observed at one of Moody’s evangelistic meetings. He writes,

It is at the close of the Tabernacle service. The anxious had been urged to enter the inquiry room. The merely curious had been specially urged not to disturb the solemn place by their presence. Mr. Moody in opening the meeting assumes there are only two classes present, the seekers and the workers. By a call for the inquirers to rise, he ascertains their number, and at once distributes them in different parts of the room and assigns a “worker” to each inquirer, or in some cases gathers two or three of similar circumstances and spiritual condition around one judicious and competent teacher. In a few moments the whole room presents a hushed and solemn scene. The Bible, without which no “worker” is welcome in that place, is freely opened, earnest faces bend together over its pages. In many cases, the teacher and the inquirer study its promises on their knees, and then engage in prayer. In almost every case the inquirer is urged to pray for himself, and if unable to form the sentences, the teacher makes the prayer, which sentence by sentence is solemnly repeated.⁹²

The “worker” Thompson mentions in his description is a personal worker trained to assist persons in the inquiry room. Biographer Lyle Dorsett explains, “That Moody put utmost priority on inquiry meetings is evident by the care he took to train workers In cities such as London or New York, the inquirers numbered in the hundreds. Therefore, pastors and devout lay men and women were needed to assist in this work. Without them it could not be done. To make certain that it was done properly, Moody conducted training sessions for workers in every new community where he worked.”⁹³

W. L. Muncy, Jr. credits Moody with being the first to train such workers. He writes, “A new technique which Mr. Moody brought to American evangelism was the

⁹⁰Ibid., 384.

⁹¹Ibid., 386.

⁹²Ibid., 392-93.

⁹³Dorsett, *A Passion for Souls*, 193.

training and the direction of personal evangelists.”⁹⁴ Muncy continues, “His enquiry room became a regular feature of his meetings. Here the people whom he had taught how to use the Sword of the Spirit in dealing with individuals did effective personal work. Out of this beginning has grown a vast amount of educational material and an extensive program of training personal evangelists in many Christian denominations.”⁹⁵ Beginning in 1889, personal soul winners received even more formal training at the Moody Bible Institute.⁹⁶

The significance of Moody’s use of personal workers lies not simply in the training of the workers but in the methods the workers were trained to employ. By training personal workers, Moody was able to duplicate his ministry thousands of times over. John Mott quotes Moody as saying, “I would rather set ten men to work than do the work of ten men.”⁹⁷ As such, Moody’s personal approach to decision counseling would be reproduced by each trained worker during the course of the crusade and indefinitely beyond the crusade. Apparent from Thompson’s review of Moody’s ministry, one of the methods that Moody passed along to his personal workers was to instruct sinners to pray for themselves. If the sinner was unable to do so, the personal worker “makes the prayer, which sentence by sentence is solemnly repeated.”⁹⁸ This account represents the first known occurrence of the practice of having individuals repeat the words of a prayer formed by another person at the point of decision. It is highly improbable, however, that Moody was training his personal workers to use a standard prayer, i.e., the Sinner’s Prayer. If that were the case, surely the prayer would have been recorded somewhere in

⁹⁴W. L. Muncy, Jr., *A History of Evangelism in the United States* (Kansas City, KS: Central Seminary Press, 1945), 145.

⁹⁵*Ibid.*

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 157.

⁹⁷John R. Mott, *The Larger Evangelism* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), 49.

⁹⁸Thompson, *Times of Refreshing*, 393.

written form, as with his other methods. Still, Moody's training of personal workers for the inquiry room stands as a significant marker along the process of the development of the Sinner's Prayer. His methods naturally lend themselves to the gradual formulation of a standardized prayer that, along with other methods, can be easily reproduced.

Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Although Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892) is better understood as a pastor than as a mass evangelist, his preaching gained such popularity in nineteenth-century England that Spurgeon spoke weekly to the masses from his own pulpit in the Metropolitan Tabernacle. Even though he is considered a contemporary of Moody, Spurgeon had a tremendous influence on the Chicago preacher. Moody once stated, "Everything he ever said, I read. My eyes just feast on him."⁹⁹ In his travels to England, Moody reserved time to hear Spurgeon in person on several occasions, stating later, "He sent me back to America a better man."¹⁰⁰

While there is no evidence that Spurgeon used what we call the Sinner's Prayer, one of his evangelistic tracts does contain instruction to pray and even a suggested plea to make to the Lord.¹⁰¹ Although the tract is undated, it is probably late nineteenth century.¹⁰² At the close of the four page tract, Spurgeon writes, "Sinner, I have a word from the Lord for thee: if you feel your need of a Savior, that blood is able to save you, and you are bidden simply to trust that blood, and you shall be saved. If you can rely simply on the blood of Christ first, and then you may do as much as you like.

⁹⁹David O. Fuller, *Spurgeon's Sermon Notes* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1990), 7.

¹⁰⁰Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Autobiography of Charles H. Spurgeon* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1867), 246-47.

¹⁰¹Spurgeon, *Salvation and Safety* (St. Paul, MN: Asher Publishing Company, n.d.) [on-line]; accessed 21 May 2001; available from <http://www.wheaton.edu/bgc/archives/docs/tract01c.html>; Internet.

¹⁰²The tract is published by Asher Publishing Company, a company that was started in December 1896 under another name. The name was changed to Asher Publishing Company in March 1898. Robert D. Shuster of the Billy Graham Center Archives at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, explained in email correspondence on 13 July 2001 that the tract is numbered 169, and judging from the price list, 169 is an early number for the company. Thus, he estimates the tract as being published soon after the company name was changed and most likely before the turn of the twentieth century.

See the Savior hanging on the cross; turn your eye to Him, and say, 'Lord I trust Thee; I have nothing else to trust to; sink or swim, my Savior, I trust Thee.' And as surely, sinner, as thou canst put thy trust in Christ, thou are safe."¹⁰³

Spurgeon's call to prayer and instruction as to what the sinner should say are not unlike other appeals of his day. As will be seen later, similar instructions are readily observable in nineteenth century evangelistic tracts. This example should not be mistaken for a standardized prayer. The words of the prayer are determined by the content and context of Spurgeon's written invitation to Christ. The mere occurrence of a suggested prayer does, however, indicate a new approach in evangelism.

Evangelism in the Twentieth Century

From the time of Moody and Spurgeon onward, the development of a standardized prayer can be traced. One of the earliest examples comes from one who learned from Moody, Reuben A. Torrey (1856-1928). While students at Yale Divinity School, Torrey and some of his classmates were so impressed by Moody's preaching that they asked him to teach them how to win souls.¹⁰⁴ Some years later, Torrey became superintendent of the Moody Bible Institute during its first year of its existence.¹⁰⁵ Streett notes that Torrey would lead individuals who responded to an invitation to pray a prayer of confession worded, "I have taken Jesus as my Savior, my Lord, and my King."¹⁰⁶

In his book, *Personal Work*, Torrey gives the following instruction to the soul winner. He writes, "Get the person with whom you are dealing on his knees before God. . . . Now, any one who is honestly seeking light, even though he has not as yet that

¹⁰³Spurgeon, *Salvation and Safety*.

¹⁰⁴Muncy, *A History of Evangelism in the United States*, 148.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 149.

¹⁰⁶Streett, *The Effective Invitation*, 101.

knowledge of Jesus that brings salvation, is in practically the same position as Cornelius, and one of the best things to do is to get that one to pray. It is certainly right for a sinner seeking pardon through the atoning blood to pray (Luke 18:13, 14)."¹⁰⁷ In *How to Bring Men to Christ*, Torrey recounts the story of leading a sinner to pray. He writes, "I said, 'will you accept him to-night?' He said, 'I will.' 'Let us then kneel down and tell God so.' We knelt down and I led in prayer and he followed in a very simple way telling God that he was a sinner but that he believed that He had laid his sins upon Jesus Christ, and asking God for Christ's sake to forgive his sins."¹⁰⁸

In another of Torrey's books, *How To Promote and Conduct a Revival*, H. W. Pope contributes a chapter entitled "Decision-Day in the Sunday School." In this chapter, Pope gives an example of how to conduct a "Decision-Day Service." At one point in his story, he writes, "Now we will have a few moments of prayer, in which I wish that every unsaved person in the house would confess their sins and receive Christ as their Savior. I will pray for you, and I will put it in such a way that if you will make my words your prayer it will bring Jesus Christ into your heart."¹⁰⁹

Although Pope does not provide an example of the prayer he would ask the unsaved to pray, his words are representative of a further shift in the theology of evangelism. To suggest that by making "my words your prayer it will bring Jesus Christ into your heart" is a tremendous leap forward toward what some charge, as with the altar call, to be a sacramental understanding of the Sinner's Prayer. To take Pope literally is to believe that by speaking the words of a prayer, we can instantly initiate conversion. This belief is a concept foreign to Reformed theology. Moreover, the concept of bringing or

¹⁰⁷R. A. Torrey, *Personal Work: Book One of How To Work For Christ, A Compendium of Effective Methods* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901), 184-85.

¹⁰⁸Torrey, *How to Bring Men to Christ* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1893), 30.

¹⁰⁹H. W. Pope, "Decision-Day in the Sunday School," in *How to Promote and Conduct a Successful Revival* by R. A. Torrey (Chicago: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1901), 87.

inviting “Jesus into your heart” is one that does not occur readily before the turn of the twentieth century.

The transition to a systemized presentation of the “plan of salvation” and a standardized prayer can be seen in the evangelistic literature and training manuals of the early twentieth century. According to Samuel Southard, the systemized plan of salvation, with which Evangelicals are so familiar today, was not common before this time period.¹¹⁰ Streett concurs, stating, “The [systemized] plan of salvation, including the Sinner’s Prayer, started after the turn of the twentieth century. Prior to this, there was no [programmatic] plan of salvation.”¹¹¹ Bill Leonard is also found in agreement when he writes, “Sometime this century [twentieth]—and my research is not clear on precisely when—the invitation to immediate conversion was increasingly associated with a specific prayer for and by the sinner which completed the event of salvation.”¹¹²

The earliest examples of sample prayers for sinners to pray usually appear in the form of testimonial stories wherein a personal experience is being recounted and the prayer that person prayed is shared. For example, in a 1907 monthly publication called *The Soul Winner*, the experience of a poor girl found wandering on the streets at three o’clock in the morning is described. The writer remarks that after the girl has heard the gospel explained, “Bowing down just as lowly as she could she said, ‘Lord, do have mercy and save a poor sinner like me: Lord, you know all about it and what a bad sinner I have been, but you know how I was driven to it and how sorry I am for it, and now, Lord, I confess it all to Thee and I fall under the blood of Jesus right now and claim Thy promise to forgive and save me now: and Lord, I give myself to thee—it is all I can do!’”¹¹³

¹¹⁰Samuel Southard, *Pastoral Evangelism* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962), 31.

¹¹¹Streett, telephone interview by author, 17 November 1998.

¹¹²Leonard, ““Getting Saved in America,” 122.

¹¹³George C. Cates, “Power of the Blood,” *The Soul Winner* (January 1907): 1.

Although the form of this prayer is somewhat distinct from the modern Sinner's Prayer, it does contain most of the basic elements, which are: recognition of sin, statement of belief, pledge of repentance, and the acceptance/invitation of Jesus. First, there is clearly a recognition of sin in the girl's prayer: "Lord, you know all about it and what a bad sinner I have been." Second, the entire prayer can be seen as a statement of belief, especially where the girl states: "I fall under the blood of Jesus right now and claim Thy promise to forgive and save me now." Third, the pledge of repentance could be questioned. Whereas the girl expresses sorry for her sin and pledges to give herself to the Lord, she never specifically states that she will turn from her sin. One could argue that turning to the Lord, however, will necessitate turning from her sin, thus expressing the idea of repentance. The fourth basic component of the modern Sinner's Prayer, the acceptance of Jesus or the invitation for Jesus to enter her heart, is not explicitly stated. Nevertheless, this example comes very close to the modern version.

Other evidence in the process of the development of a standardized prayer occurs in book by P. E. Burroughs. Published in 1914, Burroughs' book *Winning to Christ: A Study in Evangelism* offers instructions to the soul winner. Burroughs writes, "Lead the person whom you would win to pray. Lost souls are not saved without prayer, an earnest cry in their own behalf for mercy and pardon. They should be directed to approach God in prayer; they should be instructed as to the petitions which they are to make. Especially when we are seeking to lead them to a surrender to Christ, we should induce them to pray. If we can get them to kneel with us for prayer, if we can induce them to lift their voices to God either in their own words or in words which we may suggest, the way to surrender and trust becomes easy."¹¹⁴ Based on the nature of his instruction to the soul winner, Burroughs' seems not to trust the lost sinner to know what to say in expressing a desire for forgiveness and salvation. Burroughs' instruction is

¹¹⁴P. E. Burroughs, *Winning to Christ: A Study in Evangelism* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention Publishers, 1914), 105.

clear: the lost person “should be instructed as to the petitions which they are to make.” If such instruction is deemed necessary, then the components of the lost person’s prayer are obviously considered to be crucial. Being viewed as so crucial, we can easily see why a standardized prayer that would express the appropriate petitions soon arose.

Albert Gage offers specific instruction in leading the lost to pray in a book entitled *Evangelism of Youth*, published in 1922. Gage describes a process of reaching young people that culminates in the popular “Decision Day” service. Detailing the events of this service, Gage provides excerpts of his evangelistic invitation: “Will you heed the heavenly Father’s voice and say, ‘Yes, dear Father, I will accept Jesus as my personal Saviour and Lord and follow him all the way’? I want each one to bow your head in prayer and tell the heavenly Father just that which you have decided to do. If you have accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, thank the Father for his gift to you. If you have not accepted, but are willing to do so now, tell your heavenly Father that you do now accept Jesus. May we have a season of silent prayer in which we shall each listen to the heavenly Father and each talk with him?”¹¹⁵

While this prayer is lacking most of the components of the Sinner’s Prayer, it again illustrates a very significant shift in methodology. Not only were evangelistic invitations becoming more systematized, they had even begun to include instruction on what to pray.

L. R. Scarborough’s instruction to soul winners in his 1925 book, *A Search for Souls: A Study in the Finest of the Fine Arts—Winning the Lost to Christ*, provides yet another example of the stress on telling the sinner what to pray. Scarborough writes, “If conditions are right and you are in a private place, have the sinner kneel with you in prayer. Do not force him to his knees, but persuade him. If he seems to be under conviction, ask him to lead the prayer. If he hesitates, help him. Tell him what to say.

¹¹⁵ Albert Gage, *Evangelism of Youth* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1922), 77.

Urge him just to open his mouth and soul to God. Many a stubborn will has been broken when brought to the knees.”¹¹⁶

By 1945, Faris Dan Whitesell, in his book *Sixty-Five Ways to Give Evangelistic Invitations*, is able to assume at least some familiarity on the part of the reader with what he refers to as the “prayer of committal.” He instructs the reader,

Repeat the prayer of committal which you will ask them all to pray, each one to pray it honestly and earnestly as his own prayer. Then have them kneel and pray in unison as you direct. Give them a few words of the prayer and wait until they have prayed those words, then give the next few words, and so on until you reach the ‘Amen,’ after which you ask every one to be seated. The prayer of committal can be phrased as follows: “Lord Jesus, I now receive Thee as my personal Savior and Lord. Save me from all sin, make me Thy child, give me eternal life, write my name in Thy book of life, and receive me into Thy kingdom. Help me to confess Thee before me, and to love Thee and serve Thee as long as I live. Thank Thee, Lord, for hearing and answering my prayer, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.”¹¹⁷

Although not referred to as such, this prayer is remarkably close to the modern version of the Sinner’s Prayer. It is vitally important for this study for at least two reasons. First, it provides a sample prayer for the lost pray. Second, it represents the first known reference to what appears to be a commonly known “prayer of committal.” While the form is not identical to the Sinner’s Prayer, it can be viewed as an early example.

By the 1950s, the Sinner’s Prayer was becoming commonplace. In *The Greatest of All Journeys*, published in 1950, Minyard Merrell Barnett tells the lost person to pray: “Oh God! I am a sinner. Forgive me of all my sins, come into my heart and save me NOW; in Jesus name. Amen.”¹¹⁸ In *Soul-Winning Made Easy*, published in 1959, C. S. Lovett instructs the soul winner to lead the one who needs help in praying by having that one repeat, “Dear Lord Jesus—I know that I am a sinner—I need You as my

¹¹⁶L. R. Scarborough, *A Search for Souls: A Study in the Finest of the Fine Arts—Winning the Lost to Christ* (Nashville: Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 1925), 122.

¹¹⁷Faris D. Whitesell, *Sixty-Five Ways to Give an Evangelistic Invitation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1945), 88.

¹¹⁸Minyard Merrell Barnett, *The Greatest of All Journeys* (Fresno: CBF Press, 1950), 3.

personal Savior—I here and now open my heart to You—I invite You to come in—Amen!”¹¹⁹

As much as many present versions of the prayer, both of these examples include most of the components of the modern Sinner’s Prayer. Notably, they both include the idea of inviting Jesus into one’s heart, a concept earlier introduced and one that seems to have become the common way of expressing conversion by the mid-part of the twentieth century.

Evangelistic Tracts

American Tract Society

In addition to the training manuals and books cited above, research conducted in the area of evangelistic tracts supports the hypothesis that the Sinner’s Prayer is what could be termed a modern method in evangelism. No occurrence of a suggested prayer, and certainly not the Sinner’s Prayer, appears in evangelistic tracts published by the American Tract Society before the 1950s. Why is it important that the Sinner’s Prayer does not occur in the early tracts of the American Tract Society? Because the American Tract Society (ATS) can be seen as representative of what was taking place in the evangelical world, especially in methods of personal evangelism. In short, if the Sinner’s Prayer was in existence, we should see it in the tracts.

That the American Tract Society can be seen as representative of the methods and systems of the evangelical world is true for several reasons. First, the board of ATS is intentionally composed of representatives from the major evangelical denominations. ATS publications reflect a theology and methodology that is acceptable to each denomination. At the founding of ATS, the following instructions were included in the *Address of the Executive Committee*.

The different denominations composing the Publishing Committee come to their work with the solemn and honest stipulation to be each the protector of his own peculiarities; and in this labour of mercy to publish and distribute such tracts only as

¹¹⁹C. S. Lovett, *Soul-Winning Made Easy* (Baldwin Park, CA: Personal Christianity, 1959), 47.

shall inculcate those great doctrines in which they all harmonize. Man's native sinfulness—the purity and obligation of the law of God—the true and proper Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ—the necessity and reality of his atonement and sacrifice—the efficiency of the Holy Spirit in the work of renovation—the free and full offers of the Gospel, and the duty of men to accept it—the necessity of personal holiness—as well as an everlasting state of rewards and punishments beyond the grave—these are doctrines dear to our hearts, and constitute the basis our union.¹²⁰

These doctrines, being purely biblical and distinctly evangelical, have served to keep ATS representing the mainstream of the evangelical world since 1825.

A second reason ATS is viewed as representative of the evangelical world is that its tracts are often written by the leading evangelists of the day. Names like D. L. Moody, J. Wilbur Chapman, Billy Graham, Luis Palau, and Bill Hybels appear in the authorship column of ATS tracts. When individuals who are on the cutting edge of evangelism write and use the tracts of ATS, we can assume that those tracts well represent the successful evangelistic methodology of their time period.

A third reason ATS is viewed as representative lies in the organization's role in the printing world. Today, ATS is one of the largest tract publishers in the world, and the oldest still in existence. The society was established in 1825 as "the result of a merger between the New York Religious Tract Society and the New England Tract Society—the largest two in the United States."¹²¹ One should not get the impression, however, that ATS has been a major player on the corner of an obscure market. Rather, the observation has been made that ATS "helped to lay the foundation for mass media in America through their pioneering work in mass printing and mass distribution of the written word."¹²² For many years, ATS was more than a publishing company for tracts; the company also served as a major publisher for books. Thus, their broad horizons kept them involved in more than booklets for personal evangelism. As innovators in

¹²⁰American Tract Society, *Report of the Executive Committee*, Boston, May 31, 1825; quoted in *Twenty-fifth Annual Report* (New York: American Tract Society, 1850), 25.

¹²¹Lawrance Thompson, "The Printing and Publishing Activities of the American Tract Society from 1825 to 1850," *The Bibliographic Society of America* 35 (Second Quarter, 1941): 4.

¹²²David Paul Nord, "The Evangelical Origins of Mass Media in America, 1815-1835," *Journalism Monographs* 88 (May 1984): 2.

colportage, which is the effort to disperse Bibles and religious literature by way of the traveling salesman, ATS had a wide and early distribution of books and literature that spanned the states. With missionary zeal, ATS took the lead in experimenting with the latest mass printing methods. According to David Paul Nord, who has researched the printing history of ATS, "In 1827, the year after they had moved to steam printing, the officers of the Tract Society announced confidently that they could place at least one tract into the hand of every American in a single year."¹²³

Fourth, the work of ATS is not limited to American influence. At its height, ATS published tracts in 188 different languages and has distribution throughout the world. According to Kristen Mitrisin, ATS archivist, the society has taken measures to ensure that theirs is a "universal message" that is heard around the world.¹²⁴ Of the 1451 decisions for Christ that were reported from January through October of 1998, over 200 of these decisions resulted from foreign tracts.¹²⁵ Thus, the global involvement of ATS in evangelism further strengthens the argument that ATS can be seen as representative of what takes place in the evangelical world.

Having established the importance of ATS literature, the results of a comprehensive search of all the English tracts dating back to 1825¹²⁶ that are still in existence will be presented. The most notable finding was that no suggested prayer existed in the literature published by ATS during the first 127 years of its activity. Although many tracts made the plea for a decision on the part of the lost reader, instead of closing with a prayer for salvation, the tracts usually closed with Bible verses, popular

¹²³Ibid., 12.

¹²⁴Kristen Mitrisin, telephone interview by author, 17 November 1998.

¹²⁵Report by Ginny Thomas of ATS, "Decision Statistics for October 1998" (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, October 1998, photocopied), 1.

¹²⁶Dating ATS tracts can be done in one of two ways. First, by consulting the *Annual Reports*, one can determine the exact year a tract was published. Second, because the tracts themselves do not have dates on them, the publishing address printed on the tracts can be used for dating. ATS has changed locations several times over the years but has kept record of the years spent in each location. In dating the earliest tracts, this paper will utilize the address method of dating.

hymns, or evangelistic poetry. At times, the hymns and poetry reflect the desire of the lost for salvation, but they would not qualify as the Sinner's Prayer. In fact, in all of the tracts predating the 1950s, prayer of any sort is rare.

Often, the reader is exhorted to pray, as in *The Warning Voice*, published sometime between 1827 and 1833. At the close of the tract, the writer asks, "And is not this enough to excite your earnest desires, that you may be partakers of all this bliss? O then pray to God, for Christ's sake, to soften your hard hearts, to change your corrupt natures, and bow your stubborn wills, and to mould and form you into his own blessed image."¹²⁷ In *What is it to Believe on Christ?*, the reader is urged to "lay down this Tract; prostrate yourself before this waiting, insulted, and still compassionate Redeemer; tell him all your heart, and he will pardon, accept, and save you."¹²⁸ In *The Closet Companion; Or a Help to Self-examination*, the reader receives this plea: "for God's sake, and for your soul's sake, cry instantly and mightily to him to have mercy upon you; remembering that although your case is awful, it is not desperate; and that still you, even you, coming to Christ, shall in no wise be cast out."¹²⁹

These examples illustrate an approach that typifies evangelistic invitations of the 19th century. In true Calvinistic flavor, the sinner is made aware of the perilous state of lostness. Standing convicted before a holy God, the sinner is exhorted to take up the matter of forgiveness and salvation with the Redeemer. Whether at the mourner's bench, in the inquiry room, or alone in the woods, the sense of conviction, shame and helplessness drive the lost person to cry out to God for mercy. The repeating of a few brief words of prayer is never encouraged. Rather, pleas amidst tears are the norm. In *Come and See*, by Theodore Cuyler, the reader is told, "No pastor, no evangelist, no

¹²⁷*The Warning Voice* (144 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833).

¹²⁸*What is it to Believe on Christ?* (144 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833), 4.

¹²⁹*The Closet Companion; Or a Help to Self-examination* (144 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833), 8.

friend can be a substitute for him [Christ]; the “inquiry meeting” for you is an honest hour with your long-neglected Saviour. One honest hour of penitential prayer and decisive surrender of your heart to Christ will give you a new life here and an everlasting life up yonder.”¹³⁰

In comparing these examples to modern tracts published by ATS, not only are the tracts much shorter in length, there is also a notable shift in language and, more importantly, theology. Where sinners were once exhorted to “pray to God, for Christ’s sake, to soften your hard hearts, to change your corrupt natures, and bow your stubborn wills, and to mould and form you into his own blessed image,” they are now encouraged “to invite” Jesus into their “heart and life.” The language has obviously softened, and the Calvinistic theology has been modified. One could argue that an entire shift of focus has taken place. The sinner once was instructed to phrase the question, “Will you accept me?” The sinner is now instructed to make the statement, “I will accept Thee.” This shift is representative of the changing face of theology in the Protestant world. In general, the last century has witnessed a departure by many from strict Calvinistic theology, even among denominations that have deep roots in the Reformed tradition.

Beyond the exhortation to pray, the examples of actual prayers that appear in early ATS publishings are, as in evangelistic training manuals, in tracts that tell the story of a person who has come to Christ, with their prayer being quoted from their experience. For example, in a twenty-four-page tract entitled, *Wilkins: A True Tale from Humble Life*, John Ashworth tells in first person the conversion experience of a man referred to as Mr. Wilkins. Ashworth writes,

He begged me to kneel down and pray for him; we, all weeping, fell down before our Maker; but how different the cause of our tears! . . . Wilkins wept tears of sorrow and contrition, and before I could utter one word, he exclaimed, “O Jesus, Jesus, Lamb of God, have mercy on me! O Jesus, Jesus, how I have scorned and despised thy very name, scorned and insulted thy servants, mocked at thy sufferings and death! Yet thou wast wounded, bruised, and afflicted for me; thou didst die on the cross for me; thou didst shed thy precious blood for me, for me, for me! O

¹³⁰Theodore L. Cuyler, *Come and See* (7 West 45th Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1924-1939).

Jesus, Jesus, Lamb of God, that takest away the sin of the world, have mercy on me! Lord! I would believe; help thou my unbelief. I know I have sinned in heart and life millions of times; but is there not mercy? Is there not mercy? O Lamb of God, have mercy on a poor guilty man?"

That night was to Wilkins a night of great bitterness. He spent the most of it in strong cries and prayer. He wept and sought, and at last found the grace of God through a crucified Redeemer.¹³¹

Because of the publishing address, the earliest this tract could have been circulated was 1833. Although Wilkins' plea to God is obviously the cry of a sinner for salvation, the prayer does not fit the mold of the Sinner's Prayer. In fact, it is late in the next century before we see the dramatic introduction of sample prayers or instruction on what to pray appearing in ATS tracts.

Jumping a century ahead, in a 1953 tract entitled *High Flight*, by Harold George Martin, former chaplain of the Royal Canadian Air Force, the reader is asked to sign the following covenant: "Being convinced that I am a sinner, I NOW accept Jesus Christ as my own personal SAVIOUR, and promise to confess Him as my LORD, and I desire with my whole heart to live as His obedient servant all my life."¹³² Although called a covenant rather than a prayer, this excerpt has the distinctive ring of the Sinner's Prayer. It includes the recognition of sinfulness, acceptance of Jesus as Savior, confession, and the pledge to live a new life as evidence of repentance.

Nathanael Olson, in the 1955 tract, *Do You Know Davy Crockett*, asked readers to bow their heads and pray this prayer: "Dear Jesus, I really want to know you as my own Saviour. Forgive me my sins, and take me to Heaven when I die. In Jesus name I ask it. Amen."¹³³ This prayer constitutes, in a formal way, the first prayer for salvation lost persons are asked to pray in the literature of ATS. While not very eloquent, it is the

¹³¹John Asworth, *Wilkins: A True Tale from Humble Life* (150 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1833-1894), 18-19.

¹³²Harold George Martin, *High Flight* (21 West 46th Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1953).

¹³³Nathanael Olson, *Do You Know Davy Crockett* (21 West 46th Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1955).

prayer of a sinner for salvation. It does not very well represent the systematized version of the Sinner's Prayer that we find so common today, but its form is quite similar.

In the following year, 1956, Percy B. Crawford authored a tract that clearly fits the form of the Sinner's Prayer. In *From Newsboy to College President*, Crawford, who held the office of president at The King's College in Briarcliff Manor, New York, asked readers to pray this prayer: "Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner. I believe Thou canst save me; I'll now accept thee."¹³⁴ Crawford's prayer is a prayer that recognizes sinfulness, calls on the name of the Lord Jesus in belief, and pledges acceptance of Jesus. The idea of repentance seems to be assumed by the decision to accept Jesus. From this example forward, the wording of the Sinner's Prayer develops and slightly changes over the years, but the basic distinguishing elements of the prayer remain the same. Although this finding does not represent the earliest example of the Sinner's Prayer in the evangelical world, its late occurrence in ATS tracts suggests that the prayer was not commonly used until late into the twentieth century.

Beginning in the late 1950s, the Sinner's Prayer became commonplace in ATS tracts. Today, evangelistic tracts published by ATS almost always include the suggested prayer. The form of the prayer varies slightly from tract to tract, but the basic components remain the same.

Other Popular Tracts

The most popular tracts containing the Sinner's Prayer are Billy Graham's *Steps to Peace With God* and Bill Bright's *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Graham and Bright deserve much of the credit for the popularity of the Sinner's Prayer. This statement is true for several reasons. First, the ministries of both of these men have emphasized the training of personal workers. Second, both ministers have widespread notoriety, and their ministries have enjoyed tremendous exposure throughout the world. Third, both

¹³⁴Percy B. Crawford, *From Newsboy to College President* (21 West 46th Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1956).

ministries have been extraordinarily successful and have enjoyed an extended longevity. Fourth, and of great importance, both of these men for years have made regular use of the Sinner's Prayer in their writing and speaking.

Steps to Peace with God. William Franklin Graham (1918-) has preached the gospel to more people than anyone else in history. His website indicates that his live audiences include "over 210 million people in more than 185 countries and territories."¹³⁵ Graham is the author of eighteen books. Considering all the other ministries of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, including books and printed materials, radio programs, Internet ministries and video ministries, the number of persons exposed to Graham's ministry is astonishing.

Graham was born on a farm near Charlotte, North Carolina, on November 7, 1918. Converted at the age of sixteen under the preaching of evangelist Mordecai Fowler Ham, Graham later pursued studies at Bob Jones College, Florida Bible Institute, and Wheaton College. After a brief pastorate in Illinois, Graham accepted the offer to become the first full-time organizer and evangelist of Youth for Christ, a ministry geared towards reaching servicemen during World War II.¹³⁶ Graham's ministry with Youth for Christ soon yielded national and international evangelistic opportunities. In very little time, an incredible crusade ministry developed that has been unrivaled in the history of mass evangelism. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, founded by Graham in 1950, continues to be one of the most successful evangelistic outreach ministries in the world.

The training of laypersons and ministers in the area of personal evangelism has been a high priority for Graham. In preparation for crusades, an extensive effort is always undertaken to train counselors for those making spiritual decisions. The Christian

¹³⁵"Billy Graham Bio," accessed 25 May 2000; available from <http://www.billygraham.org/about/billygraham.asp>; Internet.

¹³⁶John Pollock, *Billy Graham: The Authorized Biography* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 33.

Life and Witness Course, designed by Charlie Riggs and Tom Phillips, is the standard training material. This material includes instruction on having respondents complete the “My Commitment” card, which includes the Sinner’s Prayer. BGEA also sponsors The Billy Graham Schools of Evangelism in several locations each year. Graham states, “The Schools of Evangelism are probably the most important ministry we have.”¹³⁷

Graham’s enormously popular tract *Steps to Peace with God* was first published in the early 1950s. While the exact date of its first publication seems to be unknown, the tract has undergone several revisions over the years.¹³⁸ The tract outlines four steps: God’s purpose of peace and life, our problem of separation, God’s remedy through the cross, and our response in receiving Christ. The tract closes with directions on how to receive Christ and then instructions on what to pray, i.e., the Sinner’s Prayer. This widely circulated tract has resulted in many coming to Christ.

Through gospel tracts, mass crusades, the media, and the training of ministers and laypersons in evangelism, Graham has become a very influential figure in the lives of countless people. Along with his obvious success, his integrity and sincere personal commitment to Christ have made him an outstanding role model. People emulate Billy Graham, especially those who have come to Christ as a result of his ministry. His use of the Sinner’s Prayer, naturally, has come to be a part of the example others follow.

Cliff Barrows, who worked with Billy Graham as a crusade song leader dating back to the earliest days of Graham’s ministry, states that Graham used the Sinner’s Prayer in the 1940s. Barrows ministered with Graham during the Youth for Christ rallies, beginning in 1945. He recalls that after Graham explained to those who responded to the invitation what it meant to be Christian, including emphasis upon the role of the Bible

¹³⁷Graham, “Billy Graham Schools of Evangelism,” accessed 25 May 2000; available from <http://www.soe.billygraham.org/>; Internet.

¹³⁸The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association was unable to provide the date of publication and informed me that the date was unknown.

and the local church in the life of a believer, Graham would always lead the respondents in the Sinner's Prayer.¹³⁹

Another member of Graham's evangelistic team, Ralph Bell, first became associated with Graham during the Los Angeles Crusade in 1963. In 1965 he accepted the offer to become an Associate Evangelist with BGEA and since then has worked closely with Graham, substituting for him in crusade preaching when necessary. When asked if he could shed any light on the origin of the Sinner's Prayer, Bell suggested the possibility that the prayer may have "come from Graham's own heart."¹⁴⁰

Coupled with the results of research that indicates the Sinner's Prayer cannot be found in regular use before the 1940s, this evidence points strongly to Billy Graham as the possible originator of the prayer, but it is not conclusive. When asked whether he was responsible for creating the prayer, Graham responded that he has been using it as long as he can remember, even back in his Bible school days, but that he could not recall if the prayer came from someone else or not.¹⁴¹ What is certain, however, is that Graham has had a major role in popularizing the Sinner's Prayer.

I had the opportunity to witness an example of how Graham uses the Sinner's Prayer in conjunction with the public altar call in his most recent evangelistic campaign, the Greater Louisville Crusade, June 21-24, 2001. Beginning with the opening prayer of the Saturday evening session on June 23, everything that took place on stage was geared toward confronting the audience with the need to make a decision for Christ. In closing his message on the Prodigal Son from Luke 15, Graham pointed to the verse that states, "And he arose, and came to his father" (v. 20). He then said, "I'm going to ask you to arise tonight and come to Jesus." After hundreds of people had left their seats and gathered on the field in front of the stage to meet with trained counselors, Graham led

¹³⁹Cliff Barrows, telephone interview by author, 21 November 1998.

¹⁴⁰Ralph Bell, telephone interview by author, 22 November 1998.

¹⁴¹Stephanie Willis, letter to author, 21 December 1998.

them in the Sinner's Prayer. Those who repeated the prayer "and meant it" were assured that God had just forgiven them, that they had been born again, and that they had an eternal home in heaven. He then explained that the counselors would be distributing material that would help those who had responded to learn more about the Christian life.

The success of Graham's evangelistic ministry continues. One summary report from the four day Greater Louisville Crusade indicated a total attendance of 191,500.¹⁴² The total number of public decisions that were reported during the course of the crusade was 10,321.¹⁴³ The report of official crusade statistics groups responses in five separate categories.¹⁴⁴ The report indicated that 5,617, or 54 percent, of those responding indicated they were accepting Christ as their personal Savior. A total of 3,132, or just over 30 percent, were rededicating their lives to Christ. Other respondents included 948 (9.2 percent) who were coming for assurance of salvation and 273 (2.6 percent) who were labeled as "inquiry." The final category, totaling 351 (3.4 percent) is labeled "other." Referring to the number of decisions made during the event, crusade chairman R. Albert Mohler wrote, "Many of these people came to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ during the crusade and others were deepened in their commitment to Christ."¹⁴⁵

The Four Spiritual Laws. Bill Bright (1921-) can also be credited with the enormous popularity of the Sinner's Prayer. As is true of Graham, Bright is one who has enjoyed tremendous success in the ministry. His organization, Campus Crusade for Christ, International, boasts of more than 21,950 full time staff and 489,000 volunteer associates who serve in 186 countries of the world.¹⁴⁶ Full time staff serve on over 150

¹⁴²Trennis Henderson, "Graham Crusade Reaps 10,000-plus Decisions for Christ," *Western Recorder*, 26 June 2001, 1.

¹⁴³*Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴Oscar Hornsby, letter to author, 13 July 2001.

¹⁴⁵R. Albert Mohler, "God Blessed Crusade," *Western Recorder*, 10 July 2001, 2.

¹⁴⁶"The Official Site of Dr. Bill Bright"; accessed 24 July 2001; available from <http://www.billbright.com/whoisbill.htm>; Internet.

campuses in the United States alone and work with churches and student leaders on an additional 400 campuses.¹⁴⁷ The Campus Crusade for Christ film, “Jesus,” is the most widely viewed film ever produced. According to Bright’s organization, “The film has been translated into more than 633 languages and viewed by more than 3.9 billion people in 233 countries. More than 121 million people have indicated making salvation decisions for Christ after viewing it.”¹⁴⁸ Bright has also authored more than fifty books and booklets, as well as thousands of articles and pamphlets.¹⁴⁹ Overall, Bright claims to have “established one of the most successful evangelistic ministries in the world—resulting in more than 4 billion exposures to the Gospel of Jesus Christ since 1951.”¹⁵⁰

Bill Bright was born in Coweta, Oklahoma, on October 19, 1921. He was converted at the age of twenty-three, after graduating from Northeastern State University and moving to Los Angeles to pursue a career in business.¹⁵¹ After his conversion, Bright developed a strong interest in studying the Bible that resulted in five years of graduate work at Princeton and Fuller theological seminaries. While at Fuller, Bright sensed the Lord’s call to help fulfill the Great Commission and began sharing his faith with students on the campus of the University of California at Los Angeles.

Launching his Campus Crusade for Christ meeting at the UCLA in 1951, Bill Bright’s ministry rapidly spread to campuses throughout the United States. In the summer of 1958, during a training session at the ministry’s new headquarters in Mound, Minnesota, Bright had an experience that forever impacted his ministry. He explains, “One of our speakers for staff training that summer was a Christian layman who was an outstanding sales consultant, a man who had taught thousands of salesmen how to sell.

¹⁴⁷“The Campus Ministry”; accessed 25 May 2000; available from <http://www.uscm.org/aboutus/>; Internet.

¹⁴⁸“The Official Site of Dr. Bill Bright.”

¹⁴⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁵⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁵¹*Ibid.*

One of the main points of one of his addresses was that to be a successful salesman a man must have a pitch He compared the witnessing Christian to the secular salesman. To be effective in our ministry for Christ, we must have, in his words, ‘a spiritual pitch.’”¹⁵²

Bright immediately objected to this suggestion, but eventually came to realize the value of it. Upon reflection, Bright realized he was already using a “pitch” of sorts. Writing down his usual presentation of the gospel, he gave it the title, “God’s Plan for Your Life.” He asked his staff to memorize it as a twenty-minute presentation and it became the standard witnessing approach for everyone involved in Campus Crusade. He recalls, “Because of this one type of presentation alone, our ministry was multiplied a hundredfold during the next year.”¹⁵³

From “God’s Plan for Your Life” was born *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Bright explains the process: “Though we had found the 20-minute presentation of God’s Plan to be extremely effective, we realized that we needed a much shorter version of the gospel in order to communicate quickly, clearly and simply to those whose hearts were already prepared to receive Christ. I prepared a condensed outline of God’s Plan, complete with Scripture verses and diagrams and asked the staff to memorize it.”¹⁵⁴ This condensed version, printed in booklet form, was entitled *The Four Spiritual Laws*.

The Four Spiritual Laws was copyrighted in 1965. The laws are as follows:

- (1) God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life. (2) Man is sinful and separated from God, thus he cannot know and experience God’s love and plan for his life.
- (3) Jesus Christ is God’s only provision for man’s sin. Through Him you can know and experience God’s love and plan for your life. (4) We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God’s love and plan for our

¹⁵²Bill Bright, *Come Help Change the World* (San Bernardino: Here’s Life Publishers, 1985), 25.

¹⁵³*Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 28.

lives. After the laws are presented, the reader is encouraged to pray “a suggested prayer.” That prayer is the Sinner’s Prayer.

At last count, over two billion copies of *The Four Spiritual Laws* have been printed and distributed in well over 100 major languages.¹⁵⁵ Millions are thought to have received Christ as a result of the tracts.¹⁵⁶ Bright is one who has had tremendous influence on a countless number of people. As with Graham, his use of the Sinner’s Prayer has come to be a part of the example others follow.

Conclusion

The widespread popularity of the Sinner’s Prayer is not due to the fact that the prayer has always been around. Nor is it due to the fact that the Sinner’s Prayer is recorded in the Bible. Rather, the prayer is a relatively new practice in evangelism, not coming into use until the twentieth century. The historical roots of the prayer can be traced theologically to changes that began to take place on the frontier, primarily during the Second Great Awakening. These changes include a modification of Calvinistic theology, a greater focus upon individualistic evangelism and persuasive preaching, and a volitional approach to conversion that placed more responsibility on the sinner’s role in his/her need to respond to God’s offer of salvation in Christ. Methodologically, the practice of counseling with seekers and the rise of the altar call represent critical steps in setting the stage for the Sinner’s Prayer. The rise of methods utilized by the mass evangelists of the nineteenth century is the next important step. As personal workers were being trained to serve as counselors, a systemized approach to sharing the gospel became necessary. This systemized approach eventually came to include a standardized prayer. That prayer is popularly known today as the Sinner’s Prayer.

Bill Bright’s emphasis upon the need for a quick and easy way to introduce unsaved persons to Christ represents the key factor in the development of the Sinner’s

¹⁵⁵“The Official Site of Dr. Bill Bright.”

¹⁵⁶Bright, *Come Help Change the World*, 29.

Prayer. Dealing with large groups in a limited time frame requires an approach that is both simple and brief. Also, multiplying a ministry to trained workers requires both a reproducible method and an easy to follow presentation. The Sinner's Prayer has developed to meet these needs.

As to the specific time period during which the Sinner's Prayer originated, an extensive survey of evangelistic literature in the way of books, journals, and magazines, as well as evangelistic training manuals, and gospel witnessing tracts, yields strong evidence that the Sinner's Prayer did not exist prior to the turn of the twentieth century. This evidence is strengthened by numerous personal interviews with contemporary scholars in evangelism and church history. The list of scholars I have interviewed includes: Lyle Dorsett, Tim Beougher, Alan Streett, Jim Elliff, Robert Coleman, John Stott, J. I. Packer, Timothy Weber, David Bennett, Malcolm McDowell, Bill Leonard, Chuck Kelly, George Martin, and Lewis Drummond. Interviews have also been conducted with evangelists Cliff Barrows, Ralph Bell, and Charlie Riggs. I have also had indirect correspondence with Billy Graham.

Although nothing suggests that the Sinner's Prayer existed before the turn of the twentieth century, the practice of having sinners repeat the words of a prayer prayed by the counselor seems to have developed in the late nineteenth century. Over time, a standardized prayer developed. Today, that prayer is commonly known as the Sinner's Prayer.

From the earliest days of evangelistic ministry, the importance of prayer during the point of decision at which a gospel presentation culminates has always been recognized. On more than one occasion, the Bible instructs lost sinners to "call on the name of the Lord." Today, that time of prayer almost always sounds the same. It is the time for the Sinner's Prayer. The first person to standardize the prayer is unknown but the popularity of the Sinner's Prayer can be traced to two primary sources: Billy Graham and Bill Bright. Through the mass exposure of their ministries and the multiplication by

way of training, these men have become the models others emulate. Their approaches are closely followed. Their form of the Sinner's Prayer is repeated.

CHAPTER 3

THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

While contemporary efforts to lead lost persons to accept Jesus Christ as personal Savior are widespread and increasingly creative, an ever growing number of evangelistic encounters, as we have seen, have one step in common: leading the lost person to pray the Sinner's Prayer. Without question, this prayer has become the accepted and typical way to take the final step in becoming Christian. Once a lost person has prayed the Sinner's Prayer, little doubt remains as to whether or not the person is saved and heaven bound. Is the Sinner's Prayer the magical formula that converts the soul?

This chapter will open with a brief survey of the doctrine of prayer, giving particular attention to the prayers of the lost. It will then provide a theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer, posing answers to the following questions. First, what is the Sinner's Prayer and what changes does it represent in the theology of evangelism? Second, what theological tenets are suggested by the prayer and are these tenets biblical? Third, what theological correctives, if any, are necessary in light of the widespread usage and possible abuse of the Sinner's Prayer?

The Doctrine of Prayer

A theological discussion of the Sinner's Prayer properly begins with an understanding of the Christian doctrine of prayer. While prayer is not defined explicitly in the Bible, it is generally understood as the means by which humans communicate with God. As Oscar Cullman writes, "The essence of all prayer is that it is a conversation with

God as the partner.”¹ T. W. Hunt observes, “Prayer is as old as man, permeates all of history, and is common to all people. Scripturally, prayer is universal in time, in space, and in the scope of its content.”² The nature of Christian prayer takes many forms, including petition, adoration, thanksgiving, intercession, confession, inquiry, and complaint. The Bible provides us with much instruction on the subject of prayer, including many examples of praying believers, a great deal of exhortation to pray, and even a model prayer. Prayer receives a varying degree of emphasis in Evangelical churches. One of the greatest proponents of prayer, and one who has recently found new popularity, was Edward McKendree Bounds (1835-1913). Bounds once wrote, “Men must pray. Not to pray is not simply a privation, an omission, but a positive violation of law, of spiritual life, a crime, bringing disorder and ruin. Prayer is law worldwide and eternity-reaching.”³

In his treatment of prayer, Wayne Grudem informs us of the purpose of Christian prayer by listing four reasons that God wants us to pray. Grudem’s reasons are both sound and scripturally valid. First, we are to pray, “because prayer expresses our trust in God and is a means whereby our trust in him can increase.”⁴ Through our prayers we communicate to God that we believe in him and recognize our dependence upon him. This recognition grows proportionally according to the time spent in prayer. Jesus teaches us, “Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9).

¹Oscar Cullman, *Prayer in the New Testament: With Answers from the New Testament to Today's Questions*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1995), 17.

²T. W. Hunt, *The Doctrine of Prayer* (Nashville: Convention Press, 1997), 8.

³E. M. Bounds, *The Complete Works of E. M. Bounds on Prayer* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 246.

⁴Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 158.

Second, we pray because “prayer brings us into a deeper fellowship with God.”⁵ Just as all other human relationships are based upon communication, so it is in our fellowship with God. This fellowship, nurtured by prayer, is vital to the life of the believer and is also a source of delight to God. Jesus modeled fellowship with the Father through prayer. He also taught his disciples how to pray (Matt 6).

Third, we pray because “in prayer God allows us as creatures to be involved in activities that are eternally important.”⁶ The manner and extent to which our prayers change the will of God and circumstances of creation are issues of debate. Arminians and Calvinists would propose different answers, but both agree that prayer is effectual.⁷ Thus, Christians believe that “prayer changes things.” James writes, “The prayer of a righteous man is powerful and effective” (Jas 5:16).

Fourth, “in praying we give glory to God.”⁸ The Psalms provide a good illustration to the manner in which glory can be ascribed to God through prayer. The Psalmist writes, “I will exalt you, my God the King; I will praise your name for ever and ever. Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever” (Ps 145:1-2). He commands us, “Ascribe to the Lord, O families of nations, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name” (Ps 96:7-8). Beyond the words of adoration that are used to glorify God through prayer, if the purpose of life is to

⁵Ibid.

⁶Ibid.

⁷See Norman Pittenger, *God's Ways with Man: A Study of the Relationship Between God and Man in Providence, "Miracle," and Prayer* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1998); David Basinger, “Practical Implications,” in *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, Clark Pinnock et al. (Downers Grove: IVP/Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994), 155-66; Thomas L. Constable, “What Prayer Will and Will Not Change,” in *Essays in Honor of J. Dwight Pentecost*, ed., Stanley D. Toussaint and Charles H. Dyer (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986); John D. Hannah, “Prayer and the Sovereignty of God,” in *Vital Theological Issues*, ed. Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1994); Robert C. Sproul, “Prayer and God's Sovereignty,” in *Our Sovereign God: Addresses Presented to the Philadelphia Conference on Reformed Theology 1974-1976* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 127-36; Cullman, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 35, 132-37.

⁸ Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 158.

glorify God, that purpose is partially fulfilled in a relationship with him nurtured by prayer.

These four purposes of prayer summarize the importance of prayer in the life of a Christian. But what role does prayer have in the life of one who is lost? When we speak of those who do not acknowledge belief in God, we can assume that prayer has no role. As Cullman states, “repudiation of belief in God results in the repudiation of all prayer.”⁹ Yet, when we speak of those who acknowledge belief in God but are not Christian, prayer can certainly find a home. Other religions emphasize the role of prayer. Likewise, irreligious persons who nevertheless believe that God exists, sometimes pray. The question is often asked, “Does God hear the prayers of the lost?” That question is answered by God’s omniscience. Of course God hears the prayers of the lost. God knows, and therefore, hears everything. A better question to ask is does God *answer* the prayers of the lost? In response to this question, Thomas Constable argues that God has in fact promised to answer one and only one prayer of the lost. He writes, “The only prayer of a non-Christian that God promises to answer is a prayer calling on Him for salvation on the basis of the finished work of Christ (Acts 2:21; Rom 10:13).”¹⁰ If Constable is accurate in his statement, we can arrive at only one conclusion: God has promised to answer the Sinner’s Prayer. Is this conclusion true?

In his discussion of the doctrine of prayer, Bloesch cites Friedrich Heiler’s book, *Das Gebet*, as the “most significant work on the phenomenology of prayer.”¹¹ Heiler distinguished six types of prayer: primitive, ritual, Greek cultural, philosophical, mystical, and prophetic. Of particular interest is ritual prayer, in which “it is the form, not the content, of the prayer which brings about the answer.”¹² In ritual prayer, “prayer

⁹Cullman, *Prayer in the New Testament*, 6.

¹⁰Constable, “What Prayer Will and Will Not Change,” 100.

¹¹D. G. Bloesch, “Prayer,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 866.

¹²*Ibid.*

is reduced to litanies and repetitions that are often believed to have a magical effect.”¹³ That is to say, the form of the prayer somehow mysteriously guarantees the desired outcome. Could it be in the contemporary use of the Sinner’s Prayer, we have digressed to ritual prayer?

Tim Beougher recounts a personal experience in which he was sharing Christ with a lost person.¹⁴ That person expressed a desire to respond to the invitation to accept Christ. Beougher, in keeping with the standard modern approach to personal evangelism, began to assist the young man in repeating the words of the Sinner’s Prayer. Somewhere in the middle of the prayer, the young man stumbled over the words. With a look of terror on his face, he immediately ceased to pray. Beougher soon realized that the young man feared he had just lost his only chance at salvation because he had blundered the words of the prayer that, he assumed, was obtaining his salvation. Beougher had not intended to convey to the young man that the Sinner’s Prayer was a ritual prayer, a magical formula that if spoken correctly would result in the salvation of his soul. Yet this conclusion had been drawn.

Incidents like the one described should lead us to ask serious questions about the nature and purpose of the Sinner’s Prayer. We begin by questioning its nature.

What is the Sinner’s Prayer and What Changes Does it Represent?

As we have seen, the historical development of the Sinner’s Prayer can be traced to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As mass evangelists began to train personal workers to assist with the crowds of people responding to invitations, the need for a systemized presentation of the gospel arose. Over time, a prayer of commitment became a part of this presentation. Theologian and author J. I. Packer observes that the

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Tim Beougher, interview by author, Louisville, 12 September 1998.

Sinner's Prayer is "the American production line mentality applied to evangelism."¹⁵ It represents a quick and easy way to deal with individual seekers. It is, however, a relatively new approach in evangelism. My research indicates that the Sinner's Prayer was not popularized until late into the twentieth century, possibly as late as the 1940s or even the early 1950s.

Sample Prayers

The Sinner's Prayer is indicative not just of a methodological change in evangelism; it also indicates a dramatic theological shift. A gradual departure from strict Calvinistic or Reformed doctrine is most evident. In this discussion, it will be helpful to note a few of the many forms the prayer has taken. The samples chosen represent some of the more common forms of the prayer. These samples have also been chosen because of their widespread circulation.

In addition to Graham's version of the prayer already provided,¹⁶ the American Tract Society, one of the oldest and largest publishers of evangelistic tracts, commonly includes the following version in their tracts.

Lord Jesus, I need You. I realize I'm a sinner and I can't save myself. I believe that you died on the cross for my sins and put my faith in You alone as my Savior. Take control of my life and help me to follow You in obedience. In Jesus' name, Amen.¹⁷

Bill Bright, of Campus Crusade for Christ, popularized his version in his *Four Spiritual Laws* tract, dating back to 1965.

Lord Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me

¹⁵J. I. Packer, telephone interview by author, 3 April 2000.

¹⁶See p. 2 of this dissertation. Graham's prayer is worded: "Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am sinful and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died to pay the penalty for my sin. I want to turn from my sin nature and follow You instead. I invite You to come into my heart and life. In Jesus' Name. Amen."

¹⁷Reggie White and Terry Hill, *Reggie White: Minister of Defense* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1995).

the kind of person You want me to be.¹⁸

The following samples from tracts published by the Tract League illustrate other variations of the prayer.

Jesus, I am sorry for the things I do and say that are wrong. Make me your child, take care of me and help me from now on to follow you. Amen.¹⁹

Jesus, I believe that you are the holy Son of God. I believe that you died on the cross for my sins and that you rose from the dead. You are my salvation. Please wash all my sins away and make me a child of God. I give my life to you today. Amen.²⁰

The North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention distributes a tract entitled, *Your Life: A New Beginning*. After explaining the need to receive “Jesus Christ into your life as Savior and acknowledge Him as Lord,” the tract offers “a prayer to receive Jesus.” The prayer is worded,

Dear Jesus, I want to follow You. I turn from my sin and place my trust in You alone and ask for Your forgiveness. Right now, I receive Your gift of eternal life and confess You as Lord. Thank You for loving me and dying for me. Thank You for giving me new life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.²¹

These examples illustrate a differing emphasis in different versions of the prayer. Some leave out important components that others include. While they represent only a fraction of the many variations of the Sinner’s Prayer, these are some of the most familiar and widely circulated versions. As such, they will be used to provide limited but sufficient material for the purpose of this theological analysis. Limiting the number of versions dealt with is necessary for practical reasons. If we were to consider all of the variations of the Sinner’s Prayer that occur in written form, numerous pages would be necessary just to list them. Furthermore, in evangelistic invitations, when the prayer is

¹⁸Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (Orlando, FL: New Life Publications, 1965), 10.

¹⁹*Here’s a Treat for You and Some Good News*, no. 123 (Grand Rapids: The Tract League, n.d.).

²⁰*What is Meant by Salvation?*, no. 44 (Grand Rapids: The Tract League, n.d.).

²¹*Your Life: A New Beginning* (Nashville: Lifeway, 2001), 9.

simply verbalized, the form of the prayer is sometimes so altered that it becomes difficult even to recognize.

A Theological Shift

The extent to which the Sinner's Prayer indicates a theological shift in evangelism can be seen by comparing these versions of the prayer to evangelistic tracts published in the nineteenth century. In nineteenth-century tracts the reader is often exhorted to pray. For example, in *The Warning Voice*, published sometime between 1827 and 1833, the tract closes as the writer asks, "And is not this enough to excite your earnest desires, that you may be partakers of all this bliss? O then pray to God, for Christ's sake, to soften your hard hearts, to change your corrupt natures, and bow your stubborn wills, and to mould and form you into his own blessed image."²² Another example can be seen in a tract entitled, *What Is It to Believe on Christ?* Toward the end of the tract, the reader is urged, "lay down this Tract; prostrate yourself before this waiting, insulted, and still compassionate Redeemer; tell him all your heart, and he will pardon, accept, and save you."²³ In *The Closet Companion; Or a Help to Self-examination*, the reader receives this plea: "For God's sake, and for your soul's sake, cry instantly and mightily to him to have mercy upon you; remembering that although your case is awful, it is not desperate; and that still you, even you, coming to Christ, shall in no wise be cast out."²⁴

These examples illustrate an approach that typifies evangelistic invitations of the nineteenth century. In true Calvinistic flavor, the sinner is made aware of the perilous state of lostness. Standing convicted before a holy God, the sinner is exhorted to take up the matter of forgiveness and salvation with the Redeemer. Whether at the mourner's

²²*The Warning Voice* (144 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833).

²³*What Is It to Believe on Christ?* (144 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833), 4.

²⁴*The Closet Companion; Or a Help to Self-examination* (144 Nassau Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1827-1833), 8.

bench, in the inquiry room, or alone in the woods, the sense of conviction, shame, and helplessness drive the lost person to cry out to God for mercy. The repeating of a few brief words of prayer is never encouraged. Rather, pleas amidst tears are the norm. In *Come and See*, by Theodore Cuyler, the reader is told, “No pastor, no evangelist, no friend can be a substitute for him [Christ]; the ‘inquiry meeting’ for you is an honest hour with your long-neglected Savior. One honest hour of penitential prayer and decisive surrender of your heart to Christ will give you a new life here and an everlasting life up yonder.”²⁵

The point is further illustrated by an eighteenth century prayer written by George Whitefield. Entitled “A Prayer for one desiring and seeking after the New-Birth,” this prayer stands in stark contrast to the modern Sinner’s Prayer.

Blessed Jesus, thou hast told us in thy gospel, that unless a man be born again of the Spirit, and his righteousness exceed the outward righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, he cannot in anywise enter into the kingdom of God. Grant me therefore, I beseech thee, this true circumcision of the heart; and send down thy blessed Spirit to work in me that inward holiness, which alone can make me meet to partake of the heavenly inheritance with the saints in light.

Create in me, I beseech thee, a new heart, and renew a right spirit within me. For of whom shall I seek for succour but of thee, O Lord, with whom alone this is possible? Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me whole! O say unto my soul, as thou didst once unto the poor leper, I will, be thou renewed. Have compassion on me, O Lord, as thou once hadst on blind Bartimeus, who sat by the way-side begging.

Lord, thou knowest all things, thou knowest what I would have thee to do. Grant, Lord, that I may receive my sight; for I am conceived and born in sin; my whole head is sick, my whole heart is faint; from the crown of my head to the sole of my feet, I am full of wounds and bruises, and purifying sores; and yet I see it not. O awaken me, though it be with thunder, to a sensible feeling of the corruptions of my fallen nature; and for thy mercies sake, suffer me no longer to sit in darkness, and the shadow of death.

O prick me, prick me to the heart! Dart down a ray of that all-quickenning light, which struck thy servant Saul to the ground; and make me cry out with the trembling jailor, “What shall I do to be saved?”

Lord, behold I pray, and blush, and am confounded that I never prayed on this wise before.

But I have looked upon myself as rich, not considering that I was poor, and blind, and naked. I have trusted to my own righteousness. I flattered myself I was whole, and therefore blindly thought I had no need of thee, O great physician of souls, to heal my sickness.

²⁵Theodore L. Cuyler, *Come and See* (7 West 45th Street, New York: American Tract Society, 1924-1939).

But being now convinced by thy free mercy, that my own righteousness is as filthy rags; and that he is only a true Christian who is one inwardly; behold with strong cryings and tears, and groanings that cannot be uttered, I beseech thee to visit me with thy free Spirit, and say unto these dry bones, Live.

I confess, O Lord, that thy grace is thy own, and that thy Spirit bloweth where he listeth. And wast thou to deal with me after my deserts, and reward me according to my wicknesses, I had long since been given over to a reprobate mind, and had my conscience seared as with a red-hot iron.

But, O Lord, since by sparing me so long, thou hast shewn that thou wouldst not the death of a sinner; and since thou hast promised, that thou wilt give thy holy Spirit to those that ask, I hope thy goodness and long-suffering is intended to lead me to repentance, and that thou wilt not turn away thy face from me.

Thou seest, O Lord, thou seest, that with the utmost earnestness and humility of soul, I ask thy holy Spirit of thee, and am resolved in confidence of thy promise, who canst not lye, to seek and knock, till I find a door of mercy opened unto me.

Lord, save me, or I perish; visit me with thy salvation. Lighten mine eyes that I sleep not in death. O let me no longer continue a stranger to myself, but quicken me, quicken me with thy free Spirit, that I may know myself, even as I am known.

Behold, here I am. Let me do or suffer what seemeth good in thy sight, only renew me by thy Spirit in my mind, and make me a partaker of the divine nature. So shall I praise thee all the days of my life, and give thee thanks for ever in the glories of thy kingdom, O most adorable Redeemer; to whom, with the Father, and the Holy Ghost, be ascribed all honour and praise, now and for evermore. Amen.²⁶

In comparing these examples to the modern version of the Sinner's Prayer, there is an unquestionable shift in language and theology. Where sinners were once exhorted to "pray to God, for Christ's sake, to soften your hard hearts, to change your corrupt natures, and bow your stubborn wills, and to mould and form you into his own blessed image," the seeker is now encouraged "to invite" Jesus into his or her "heart and life." The language has obviously softened, and the Calvinistic theology has been modified. One could argue that an entire shift of focus has taken place. The question was once phrased, "Will you accept me?" Now the statement is made, "I will accept You." This shift is representative of the changing face of theology in the Protestant world. In general, the last century has witnessed a departure by many from strict Calvinistic theology, even among denominations that have deep roots in the Reformed tradition.

²⁶George Whitefield, *The Works of the Reverend George Whitefield*, (London: Printed for Edward and Charles Dilly, in the poultry; and Messrs. Kincaid & Creech, at Edinburgh, 1771), 4: 457-59.

As can be seen in both the evangelistic tracts and in Whitefield's prayer, God's sovereignty was once at the forefront of decision counseling and prayer. Note the following phrases Whitefield employs in the prayer: "create in me,"²⁷ "Lord, if thou wilt, thou canst make me whole,"²⁸ "have compassion on me,"²⁹ "awaken me,"³⁰ "prick me to the heart,"³¹ "I beseech thee to visit me with thy free Spirit,"³² "I confess, O Lord, that thy grace is thy own, and that thy Spirit bloweth where he listeth,"³³ "Lord, save me, or I perish; visit me with thy salvation."³⁴ The prayer is a heartfelt cry for God to exercise his compassion and mercy. It reflects a total dependence upon God, and confesses no control upon the movement of God's Spirit to save a lost soul.

Moreover, a clear recognition of total depravity and sinfulness is expressed in the prayer. Consider these examples: "I am conceived and born in sin; my whole head is sick, my whole heart is faint; from the crown of my head to the sole of my feet, I am full of wounds and bruises, and purifying sores; and yet I see it not. O awaken me, though it be with thunder, to a sensible feeling of the corruptions of my fallen nature; and for thy mercies sake, suffer me no longer to sit in darkness, and the shadow of death,"³⁵ "But I have looked upon myself as rich, not considering that I was poor, and blind, and naked. I have trusted to my own righteousness,"³⁶ "my own righteousness is as filthy rags."³⁷

²⁷Ibid., 457.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

³²Ibid., 458.

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Ibid., 457.

³⁶Ibid., 458.

³⁷Ibid.

One cannot deny the differences in the theological content of these examples and versions of the modern Sinner's Prayer. Is this change in emphasis appropriate? This question can be answered best by looking at the Sinner's Prayer in light of biblical soteriology.

Are the Theological Tenets Suggested By the Sinner's Prayer Biblical?

Considering both the dramatic theological shift represented by the Sinner's Prayer and the fact the Sinner's Prayer did not become popularized until the mid-twentieth century, the question must be asked: is the Sinner's Prayer biblically and theologically sound? Although the Sinner's Prayer is not found in the Bible, the Scriptures do offer instruction on how to be saved. Is praying the Sinner's Prayer an appropriate and sufficient way to follow the Bible's instructions? Must anything else be done?

Biblical Instruction

What we find in the Bible, rather than a prayer for salvation is instruction on how to be saved. Granted, this instruction suggests prayer, but not once is a sample prayer given. Some of the most popular passages of instruction are found in Acts and Romans. These are the passages upon which the Sinner's Prayer is most likely based, and evangelists, prior to leading lost persons in the Sinner's Prayer, often refer to them.³⁸ A brief survey of these verses will lay a foundation for understanding the wording and intent of the Sinner's Prayer.

Luke records in Acts 2 the account of Peter preaching at Pentecost. Peter quotes the prophet Joel in saying "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Acts 2:21). After hearing Peter present the gospel of Christ, the people asked,

³⁸In a telephone interview with the author, Charlie Riggs, who worked with Billy Graham beginning in 1952, stated that Graham always quoted from Acts 3:19 and Rom 10:13 before leading lost persons in the Sinner's Prayer. Charlie Riggs, telephone interview by author, 21 November 1998.

“Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter responded, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:37-39). Luke continues, “With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, ‘Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.’ Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day” (2:40-41).

This account depicts the clear and simple instruction given to sinners who respond to the message of the gospel. They are told that those who call on the name of the Lord will be saved. Next, the call of God to repentance is issued. Baptism is then urged as evidence of belief.

In Acts 3, Luke records that Peter and John were in a place called Solomon’s Colonnade located in the temple area. After they healed a man crippled from birth who was begging for money, a large crowd gathered. Peter addressed the crowd, telling them about the resurrection of Jesus, whom they had crucified. He then exhorted the crowd of hearers, “Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, and that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus” (Acts 3:19-20). Once again, after presenting the truths about Christ, Peter simply calls for sinners to repent and turn to God. The instruction is clear and simple. It is issued to those who have heard the gospel presented and thus stand under the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

In Acts 16 Paul and Silas are asked by the Philippian jailer, “what must I do to be saved?” Their response is, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30-31). Luke then records that “they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all the others in his house” (Acts 16:32). The result was that he came to believe in God and was baptized (Acts 16:33-34). Like Peter, Paul shares the truths about Christ and confronts sinners with their need to believe. Luke does not mention Paul calling the jailor to repentance, but remarks that Paul “spoke the word of the Lord to him” (Acts 16:32). We

are left to assume, then, that the word Paul shared with him included the reality of sin and the need to turn from it.

In Romans 10 Paul is discussing the futile attempts of the Jews to establish their own righteousness apart from Christ. He writes, “But what does it say? ‘The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,’ that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: that if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Rom 10:8-10). Paul’s words highlight belief and confession as being necessary for salvation.

Collectively, these verses lay down the following responses expected of those who have heard the gospel: calling on the name of the Lord, belief, repentance, and confessing Jesus as Lord. Baptism is urged in Acts 2, but in light of New Testament teaching, Peter’s call for baptism should not be viewed as a necessary part of salvation. While some faith groups hold to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration, most Evangelicals view baptism as the symbol that identifies the new believer with the death and resurrection of Jesus, as well as the symbol of forgiveness. Baptism is not viewed as a requirement for salvation; rather, baptism represents what has already taken place in the life of the believer. In his comments on baptismal regeneration, Millard J. Erickson writes, “When all the implications are spelled out, this concept contradicts the principle of salvation by grace, which is so clearly taught in the New Testament. The insistence that baptism is necessary for salvation is something of a parallel to the insistence of the Judaizers that circumcision was necessary for salvation, a contention which Paul vigorously rejected in Galatians 5:1-12.”³⁹

³⁹Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), 1099.

Assessing the Sinner's Prayer

If the Bible reveals that the responses necessary from those who have heard the gospel are calling on the name of the Lord, belief, repentance, and confessing Jesus as Lord, then how does the Sinner's Prayer measure up? At least one scholar argues that it falls short. As we have seen, Jim Elliff criticizes the use of the Sinner's Prayer in evangelistic invitations because, in his opinion, it does not represent biblical evangelism. His criticism of the prayer is based upon its use in connection with public altar calls. He credits the popularization of public invitations to Finney and his mourner's bench invitations of the early nineteenth century.⁴⁰ As we have seen, Streett reaches different conclusions in his endeavor to trace the history of the altar call.⁴¹ Regardless, Elliff expresses disdain for the methods of Finney.

In his evaluation of the Sinner's Prayer in connection with the public invitation, Elliff writes, "The 'sinner's prayer,' as we have come to see it, has three elements: (1) a mere acknowledgment of sin, which is not the same as *repentance*, (2) a belief in the act of Christ's death, which is far removed from *trust* in his person and work, and (3) an 'inviting Christ into the life.' The last phrase hangs on nothing biblical (though John 1:12 and Rev. 3:20 are used, out of context, for its basis)."⁴² In an address to the 1998 Southern Baptist Founder's Conference, Elliff laments, "We have come to believe that a sinner's prayer, worded in a specific way, is absolutely sacrosanct and that nobody can be converted apart from mouthing certain words to God. Usually, this includes an acknowledgement of being sinful, which I believe is short of repentance.

⁴⁰Jim Elliff, "Closing with Christ," in *Family Letter* (Kansas City, MO: Christian Communicators Worldwide, Fall 1998), 1.

⁴¹In Chapter 2, we saw that Streett, in his work *The Effective Invitation*, traces the roots of public response back as far as Bernard of Clairvaux (1093-1153). Streett writes, "The fact that a call for a show of hands was used as a method of public invitation during the twelfth century should put to rest the theory that the public invitation first appeared in the ministry of Charles Finney!" R. Alan Streett, *The Effective Invitation: A Practical Guide for the Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1984), 84-85.

⁴²Elliff, "Closing with Christ," 1.

Secondly, there is a statement of belief in Christ's death for sinners . . . short of the trust in Jesus Christ. Isn't it amazing that we feel this wording is so important?"⁴³

Based upon these observations, Elliff concludes, "Belief in the efficacy of a prayer (and not the efficacy of Christ's work) and faith in that prayer will never save you and that prayer never died for you. I believe that people come with a prayer and not with faith that has been engendered by God and will find themselves unbelieving still until the day of judgement, resting all their hopes on something so small and insignificant as a prayer, and the rightly worded prayer, that they prayed at a time in their lives."⁴⁴

Elliff is further frustrated by the way altar call respondents who have prayed the Sinner's Prayer are then introduced as being "in Christ." He believes that to ensure persons of their salvation based upon this criterion is a grave error, going as far as to say, "So we seal people in deception."⁴⁵

As an alternative way to call lost person's to faith in Christ, Elliff suggests that the evangelist "close with Christ." Without offering a public altar call, the evangelist should emphasize the gospel message and the object of faith, Jesus Christ. Persons should then be called upon to repent and believe. Elliff writes, "Whereas the altar call method can be tacked on to just about anything, no matter how absent the gospel, the biblical method *demand*s the hearing of the Word."⁴⁶ This method, he argues, will produce true converts. In addition, the role of assurance is not that of the evangelist who has led the lost person to pray a prayer; it is the role of the Holy Spirit.⁴⁷

Are Elliff's criticisms justified? No doubt lost persons who lacked a proper understanding of the gospel message have repeated the Sinner's Prayer. Some have

⁴³Elliff, "Closing with Christ," (audiocassette of message delivered at Sixteenth Annual Southern Baptist Founders Conference, 22 July 1998).

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Ibid.

⁴⁶Elliff, "Closing with Christ," *Family Letter*, 2.

⁴⁷Ibid.

probably repeated it without being truly repentant or having any intention of surrendering their lives to Christ. Even Streett, who comes down in favor of public invitations, recognizes the danger of overemphasizing the Sinner's Prayer, saying that, oftentimes, "The prayer becomes the object of faith."⁴⁸ In such cases, persons who have prayed the prayer associate their salvation more with the act of repeating the words than with the work of Christ made manifest in their life. Without question, the Sinner's Prayer is no magic formula that ensures, just by repeating certain words, that a person is saved and bound for heaven. But despite Elliff's generalizations, we must admit that, in many invitations, lost persons are led in the prayer after they have heard the gospel message and after the teachings of Scripture have been stated and understood. Surely there are exceptions. Yet, do these exceptions alone necessitate forfeiting the use of the Sinner's Prayer? Are we to conclude that the prayer has no place in evangelistic invitations?

In answering these questions, we must return to our earlier question: To what extent do the popular versions of the Sinner's Prayer express the biblical instructions for responding to the gospel and receiving God's gift of salvation? Elliff's accusations contend that the Sinner's Prayer is, in effect, a distortion of biblical soteriology. His objections will be dealt with in turn.

Objection One: The Question of Repentance

First, Elliff argues that an acknowledgement of sin is not the same as repentance. Elliff is absolutely right. The biblical understanding of repentance is much more than a mere acknowledgement of sin. In the Old Testament, two Hebrew words express the idea of repentance. The word *nacham* occurs 108 times and is translated as "repent" thirty-eight times in the King James Version.⁴⁹ In most instances, *nacham* has God as its subject. That God repents is not to suggest that God sins. Various nuances of

⁴⁸Streett, telephone interview by author, 17 November 1998.

⁴⁹Robert N. Wilkin, "The Doctrine of Repentance in the Old Testament," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 2 (Spring 1989): 26.

meaning include, “be sorry, moved to pity, have compassion for others.”⁵⁰ The original root of the word carries the meaning, “breathe pantingly.”⁵¹ In the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, Marvin Wilson suggests that the original root refers to “the physical display of one’s feelings, usually sorrow, compassion, or comfort.”⁵² As C. G. Kromminga explains, the term “is usually used to signify a contemplated change in God’s dealings with men for good or ill according to his just judgement.”⁵³ God’s compassion or sorrow resulting in change may seem to contradict his immutability. But the prophets assure us that a change in human conduct can change God’s judgment. For example, the king of Ninevah stated, “Who knows? God may yet relent and with compassion turn from his fierce anger so that we will not perish” (Jonah 3:9). Then we read, “When God saw what they did and how they turned from their evil ways, he had compassion and did not bring upon them the destruction he had threatened” (Jonah 3:10). This change should not be seen as contradicting God’s purpose; rather, it should be seen as a fulfillment of God’s purpose. As Wilson notes, when God changes his dealings with humanity, he does so “according to his sovereign purposes.”⁵⁴

A second Hebrew word, *shuv*, always has man as its subject. The word literally means “turn back” or “return.”⁵⁵ Various forms of *shuv* are common in the Old Testament, where the word occurs over one thousand times and is, in fact, the twelfth most frequently used verb in the Old Testament.⁵⁶ While the verb has numerous nuances

⁵⁰Francis Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gensenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1979), s.v. “nacham.”

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²R. Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), s.v. “nacham,” by Marvin Wilson.

⁵³C. G. Kromminga, “Repentance,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 936.

⁵⁴Harris, *Theological Wordbook*, s.v. “nacham,” by Marvin Wilson.

⁵⁵Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gensenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “shuv.”

⁵⁶Harris, *Theological Wordbook*, s.v. “shuv,” by Victor Hamilton.

of meaning, when used in reference to spiritual relations, the term can refer to *turning back from* God or *turning back to* God, as well as turning back from evil.⁵⁷ In turning back to God and turning back from evil, the word is often translated as “repent.” Victor Hamilton observes, “Better than any other verb it combines in itself the two requisites of repentance: to turn from evil and to turn to the good.”⁵⁸ Erickson explains that, in this sense, *shuv* “stresses the importance of a conscious moral separation, the necessity of forsaking sin and entering into fellowship with God.”⁵⁹ As such, *shuv* “is used extensively in the prophets’ calls to Israel to return to the Lord.”⁶⁰ For example, the prophet Isaiah declared, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn [*shuv*] to the Lord, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon” (Isa 55:6-7). Hamilton’s comments help us understand the Old Testament position on repentance as expressed by *shuv*. He writes, “To be sure, there is not systematic spelling out of the doctrine of repentance in the OT. It is illustrated (Ps 51) more than anything else. Yet the fact that people are called ‘to turn’ either ‘to’ or ‘away from’ implies that sin is not an ineradicable stain, but by turning, a God-given power, a sinner can redirect his destiny.”⁶¹

In the New Testament the Greek verb *metanoeo* is often translated as “repent.”⁶² The word is a conjunction of the preposition *meta*, meaning “with, together with, to, towards,”⁶³ and the verbal form of *noeo*, meaning “to perceive, observe,

⁵⁷Brown, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gensenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, s.v. “*shuv*.”

⁵⁸Harris, *Theological Wordbook*, s.v. “*shuv*,” by Victor Hamilton.

⁵⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 936.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹Harris, *Theological Wordbook*, s.v. “*shuv*,” by Victor Hamilton.

⁶²Harold K. Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), s.v. “*metanoeo*.”

⁶³Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, s.v. “*meta*.”

understand.”⁶⁴ *Noeo* is derived from *nous*, meaning “mind” or “intellect.”⁶⁵ Occurring thirty-four times, the word literally means “to think differently about something or to have a change of mind.”⁶⁶ In its noun form (*metanoia*), occurring twenty-three times, the word “is used to signify the whole process of change” that takes place when one comes to faith.⁶⁷ Kromminga observes that *metanoia* “can be said to denote that inward change of mind, affections, convictions, and commitment rooted in the fear of God and sorrow for offenses committed against him, which, when accompanied by faith in Jesus Christ, results in an outward turning from sin to God and his service in all of life.”⁶⁸ John the Baptist preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4), and Jesus proclaimed, “The Kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15).

Therefore, by its biblical definition, repentance is much more than an acknowledgement of sin. It is a change of mind about sin, a turning away from sin. Furthermore, this turning from sin is an essential part of what we have seen as the biblical requirements for salvation. Without genuine repentance, the gospel has not been fully accepted. As Erickson states, “There is no doubt . . . that repentance is an ineradicable part of the gospel message.”⁶⁹

Is only a mere acknowledgement of sin expressed in the Sinner’s Prayer? In some versions, an explicit statement about the decision to turn from sin accompanies the acknowledgement of sin. For example, in the North American Mission Board tract, *Your Life: A New Beginning*, the prayer begins, “Dear Jesus, I want to follow You. I turn

⁶⁴Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, s.v. “*noeo*.”

⁶⁵Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, s.v. “*nous*.”

⁶⁶Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 937.

⁶⁷C. G. Kromminga, “Repentance,” 936.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*

⁶⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 937.

from my sin and place my trust in You alone and ask for Your forgiveness.” If, as we have seen, New Testament repentance consists of turning from sin, then this prayer would seem to fulfill that requirement. That some form of the word “repent” is not used should not trouble us because that word is probably little understood in our time, whereas practical anyone would grasp the idea of turning away from something.

The wording concerning repentance is slightly different in the Sinner’s Prayer provided in *Steps to Peace With God*. In Graham’s tract, the person is instructed to pray to the Lord, “I know that I am sinful and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died to pay the penalty for my sin. I want to turn from my sin nature and follow You instead.” Graham’s prayer clearly acknowledges sin. Does it express repentance? The phrase, “I want to turn from my sin nature” may be intended to do so. Yet, theologically, a vast gulf exists between the terms *sin* and *sin nature*.

A sin is an act of transgression and, by definition, is always performed against God who has, by way of the law, revealed to us *both* how we are to live in order to please God *and* our inability to do so. Moses declared to Israel, “These are the commands, decrees and laws the Lord your God directed me to teach you to observe” (Deut 6:1). To break one of God’s laws is to commit a sin against God. The deeper purpose of the law was to reveal to us our need for Christ. Paul writes, “through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20), and “the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ” (Gal 3:24). Rod Rosenblatt captures the essence of this deeper purpose of the law when he remarks, “The law comes, not to reform the sinner nor to show him or her the ‘narrow way’ to life, but to crush the sinner’s hopes of escaping God’s wrath through personal effort or even cooperation.”⁷⁰

Orthodox Christianity historically teaches that the sin nature, conversely, is the state of sinfulness into which every human being is born. As D. G. Bloesch observes, “Biblical faith . . . confesses that sin is inherent in the human condition. We are not

⁷⁰Rod Rosenblatt, “Christ Died for the Sins of Christians, Too,” in *Christ the Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, ed. Michael Horton (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1992), 196.

simply born into a sinful world, but we are born with a propensity toward sin.”⁷¹ The doctrine of original sin, explained by Paul in Romans 5, holds that all descendants of Adam have inherited a spiritual plight of sinfulness.

Historically, this doctrine has been interpreted in different ways. Pelagius, a British monk who lived during the late fourth and early fifth centuries, dismissed the notion of original sin altogether. He taught that human beings are “free of any determining influence from the fall. Holding to a creationist view of the soul, Pelagius maintained that the soul, created by God specially for every person, is not tainted by any supposed corruption or guilt. The influence, if any, of Adam’s sin upon his descendants is merely that of a bad example. Other than this there is no direct connection between Adam’s sin and the rest of the human race.”⁷² Furthermore, as Bruce Demarest explains, “The Pelagians concluded that all humans are able to live sinlessly and obtain salvation by their own powers apart from any special grace from God.”⁷³

James Arminius, the Dutch Reformed pastor and theologian, rather than dismissing the doctrine of original sin, chose to dilute it. Arminianism affirms that Adam’s descendants inherit a corrupted nature, but the judicial consequences of Adam’s sin have been nullified by the universal benefit of the atoning work of Christ.⁷⁴ Later Arminianism would refer to this benefit as “prevenient grace.” Prevenient grace, extended to all through the atonement, sets us free from our state of total depravity and thus our guilt, giving us the ability to volitionally choose to be saved. As Demarest explains, “The liberating work of prevenient grace enables the unconverted to cooperate

⁷¹D. G. Bloesch, “Sin,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), 1013.

⁷²Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 632.

⁷³Bruce Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 51.

⁷⁴Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 634.

with God (synergism) and respond to the Gospel. By virtue of prevenient grace all people *de facto* exist in a preliminary state of grace.”⁷⁵

John Calvin, a second-generation Protestant Reformer, embraced the biblical teachings on original sin and argued that human beings are the recipients of both Adam’s corrupted nature and his guilt. Thus, all human beings are born into a literal state of sinfulness. Even before our individual acts of sin, we have inherited a sin nature. As such, we are totally depraved and do not possess the moral ability to volitionally respond to God’s grace made available through Christ. Only by God’s gift of “special grace” are sinners saved. This special grace, Demarest explains, “represents God’s saving mercy, particularly the imputation of undeserved righteousness to the elect Special grace efficiently illumines the mind and frees the will as the first step toward saving faith, remission of sins, and reconciliation with God.”⁷⁶

Concerning the difference between our sin nature and individual acts of sin, Erickson explains the modern confusion that accompanies these terms when he writes, “The idea of *sin* as an inner force, an inherent condition, a controlling power, is largely unknown. People today think more in terms of *sins*, that is, individual wrong acts. Sins are something external and concrete; they are logically separable from the person.”⁷⁷

A dilemma is posed when applying an understanding of these differing concepts to Graham’s phrase, “I want to turn from my sin nature.” We certainly can at times refrain from or even turn from individual acts of sin. Yet, do human beings possess the capability to turn from their sin nature? To answer this question, we must consider the Bible’s teaching on regeneration and conversion.

Concerning the Bible’s teaching on regeneration, B. B. Warfield eloquently stated, “In one word the capacity for faith and the inevitable emergence in the heart of

⁷⁵Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation*, 56.

⁷⁶*Ibid.*, 68.

⁷⁷Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 564.

faith are attributed by the Christian revelation to that great act of God the Holy Spirit which has come in Christian theology to be called by the significant name of Regeneration.”⁷⁸ The Bible states clearly the fact that regeneration, or spiritual rebirth, is entirely God’s doing. Jesus told Nicodemus, “Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit,” before explaining to him, “You must be born again” (John 3:6-7). Erickson defines regeneration as “God’s transformation of individual believers, his giving a new spiritual vitality and direction to their lives when they accept Christ.”⁷⁹ In the order of salvation, Reformed theology teaches that regeneration comes before saving faith. Referring to regeneration, Grudem writes, “It is in fact this work of God that gives us the spiritual ability to *respond* to God in faith.”⁸⁰ J. I. Packer explains the monergism of regeneration when he writes,

Infants do not induce, or cooperate in, their own procreation and birth; no more can those who are ‘dead in trespasses and sins’ prompt the quickening operation of God’s Spirit with them (see Eph. 2:1-10). Spiritual vivification is a free, and to man mysterious, exercise of divine power (John 3:8), not explicable in terms of the combination or cultivation of existing human resources (John 3:6), not caused or induced by any human efforts (John 1:12-13) or merits (Titus 3:3-7), and not, therefore, to be equated with, or attributed to, any of the experiences, decisions, and acts to which it gives rise and by which it may be known to have taken place.⁸¹

Regeneration, then, is the act of God the Holy Spirit in giving new life. In regeneration we are totally dependent upon God.

Conversion has been defined as “the act of turning from one’s sin in repentance and turning to Christ in faith.”⁸² Another definition states that conversion “is uniquely a drastic reorientation of human life to a holy God through Jesus Christ by the

⁷⁸Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1952), 399.

⁷⁹Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 942.

⁸⁰Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 302.

⁸¹J. I. Packer, “Regeneration,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 925.

⁸²Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 933.

Holy Spirit.”⁸³ E. Stanley Jones, in his significant work entitled, *Conversion*, stated, “conversion is God’s answer to man’s need.”⁸⁴ R. T. France distinguishes between “insider” and “outsider” conversion.⁸⁵ He derives this distinction based upon the biblical examples of those members of the community of faith who “turned back” to God versus those who were outside of the community of faith who “turned to” God. Old Testament examples apply to Israel as the community of faith. In the New Testament, Jews who turned to Christ exhibit insider conversion, whereas Gentiles exhibit outsider conversion. As the Christian community became established and distinguished itself from Judaism, all conversion was outsider conversion. France suggests that the possibility for insider conversion resurged as the Christian community endured over multiple generations. Today, for example, France suggests that “within evangelical Christian circles . . . conversion is used also for the situation of adherents of a religious group (normally ‘nominal Christians’) whose experience of the personal dimension of their religious affiliation undergoes a radical transformation, so that, while there has been no ‘change of religion’ in the sense of the repudiation of a previous affiliation and the entry to a new religious community, they now regard themselves as ‘true Christians’ in a way that they previously were not.”⁸⁶

Whether the terms insider or outsider would apply, the need for conversion exists for all. While many have used the words conversion and regeneration interchangeably, the terms, although interdependent, can be distinguished. Peter Toon explains, “Conversion is not a synonym for new birth; however, there can be no

⁸³David L. Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate: Recovering the Centrality of Gospel Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992), 25.

⁸⁴E. Stanley Jones, *Conversion* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1959), 12.

⁸⁵R. T. France, “Conversion in the Bible,” *The Evangelical Quarterly* 65 (1993): 291-310.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 291-92.

conversion without God's granting new life to the soul."⁸⁷ In its biblical etymology, a form of the word conversion occurs only once in most English versions (Acts 15:3) and not at all in some. In this single occurrence, it is a translation of the Greek noun *epistrophe*, meaning, "a turning towards" or "a turning about."⁸⁸ But rather than limiting the biblical concept of conversion to a single term, the full meaning of conversion is grasped when we see that it encompasses numerous words, including faith, repentance, turn, and believe. As such, conversion is best understood as process and event. David Larsen observes, "What may be years of preparation in which God brings innumerable influences to bear upon a human life culminate in a decision to receive Christ, a commitment involving repentance toward God and faith in Christ. This point-in-time experience is *conversion*."⁸⁹

While conversion is a process that culminates in a point-in-time experience, conversion as an experience is not uniform. The conversion experience of the Apostle Paul was drastically different from that of the Ethiopian eunuch. Jonathan Edwards observed, "In some, converting light is like a glorious brightness suddenly shining upon a person, and all around him: they are in a remarkable manner brought out of darkness into marvellous light. In many others it has been like the dawning of the day, when at first but a little light appears, and it may be is presently hid with a cloud; and then it appears again, and shines a little brighter, and gradually increases, with intervening darkness, till at length it breaks forth more clearly from behind the clouds."⁹⁰

Whereas we are passive in regeneration, we are active in conversion. Our activity does not suggest, however, that we convert ourselves. Conversion is the human

⁸⁷Peter Toon, *Born Again: A Biblical and Theological Study of Regeneration* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 63.

⁸⁸Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised*, s.v. "*epistrophe*."

⁸⁹Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate*, 37.

⁹⁰Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God, in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls, in Northampton, and the Neighboring Towns and Villages of New Hampshire, in New England; in a Letter to the Rev. Dr. Colman, of Boston* (Suffolk, England: J. M. Morris, 1823), 53.

response to what God has accomplished through His grace. Concerning the human role in conversion, Bloesch explains, “We are active only on the basis of grace, only through the power grace. We do not procure salvation, but we decide for salvation once our inward eyes are opened to its reality. Conversion is the sign but not the condition of our justification, whose sole source is the free, unconditional grace of God.”⁹¹ He continues, “We cannot be converted through our own power, but we can repent and turn to Christ through the power of his Spirit.”⁹² Jones wrote of conversion, “it comes from God directly or not at all.”⁹³ Warfield stated well the nature of conversion when he wrote, “Man repents, makes amendment, and turns to God. But it is by God that men are renewed, brought forth, born again into newness of life.”⁹⁴ Thus, in conversion, as in regeneration, we remain dependent upon God.

Considering the difference between sin and sin nature, along with our total dependence upon God for regeneration and even conversion, we must conclude that it is impossible for sinners to turn from their sin nature. The wording of Graham’s prayer not only confuses the process of salvation, it diminishes the role of God in salvation. Maybe the wording is unintentional, or maybe the term “sin nature” is understood to carry a totally different definition than the one we have assigned to it. Yet, as it stands, Graham’s prayer does not seem to express the biblical requirement for repentance because it simply goes too far in suggesting that we not only turn from sin, we somehow possess the ability to turn from our depravity. As previously noted, Graham’s tract has been revised over the years and the wording of the prayer varies in different versions of the tract. The version that we are considering represents one of the most recent.

⁹¹D. G. Bloesch, “Conversion,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 273.

⁹²*Ibid.*

⁹³Jones, *Conversion*, 38.

⁹⁴Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 363.

Of the five examples provided at the beginning of this chapter, other versions of the Sinner's Prayer also stand indicted by Elliff's criticism that they merely acknowledge sin, rather than express repentance. The ATS version, Bill Bright's prayer, and one of the sample prayers from the Tract League, all include no mention of repentance or turning from sin. Only an acknowledgment and, in most cases, an explicit request for forgiveness are stated. One of the sample prayers from the Tract League states, "Jesus, I am sorry for the things I do and say that are wrong." The extent to which an apology for sin reflects biblical repentance is questionable. As we have seen, biblical repentance involves a turning away from sin.

One element that all of the versions we have seen include is an explicit statement about the sinner's desire to follow the Lord. This desire is expressed in various ways. The ATS prayer states, "Take control of my life and help me to follow You in obedience." Bright's prayer says, "Take control of the throne of my life." The Tract League prayers state, "help me from now on to follow you," and "I give my life to you today." The North American Mission Board prayer begins, "Dear Jesus, I want to follow You." And Graham's prayer includes the phrase, "I want to turn from my sin nature and follow You instead." One could argue in each case that to turn toward God is to turn away from ungodliness; it is to turn away from sin. Thus, all of the prayers express repentance. While that argument is a stretch, especially in the prayers that make no reference whatsoever to turning or repenting, even to grant it for the sake of discussion does not resolve the problem in the heart of the sinner because it makes the assumption that the sinner, who is just being introduced to Christ for the first time, realizes that following the Lord means repenting from sin. Not knowing the demands of the gospel the sinner could assume that following Christ Jesus means a million things without ever assuming that it means turning from sin. Sinners could (and in all probability have) state a desire to follow Christ without ever feeling the least bit sorry for their sin, not to mention making a willful decision to turn from it. When it comes to a matter as important as one's salvation, a proper understanding of what it means to embrace the

gospel should not be assumed. It should be explicitly stated. Embracing the gospel means, at least in part, turning from sin to Christ.

We must be careful, of course, not to make the same mistake that Elliff warns is being made by those who put their trust for salvation in the saying of the rightly worded prayer. The point being made here is that most versions of the prayer that some have come to put their trust in do not even express the biblical requirements for salvation.

Objection Two: The Question of Belief

Elliff protests that belief in the act of Christ's death, as the Sinner's Prayer expresses, is far removed from trust in his person and work. The word "trust," in reference to the person and work of Christ, appears only once in the Gospels, and less than ten times in the entire New Testament. Rather than trust, the words used in reference to accepting the person and work of Christ are various forms of the Greek verb, *pisteuo* (the noun form is *pistis*), translated usually as "believe." In its many forms, this word occurs over five hundred times in the New Testament.

At issue is not the word but how the word is defined. As R. Larry Moyer observes, "the biblical use of 'believe' is often confused with different common uses of the English word 'believe.' . . . For that reason, to mention 'believing' in connection with Christ may convey little more than 'speculation.' However, the biblical use of the word 'believe' deals with certainty."⁹⁵ Not only does the biblical word deal with certainty, it also communicates much more than the contemporary understanding of belief as the mere acceptance of something as being true. A complete definition of the biblical term must include the ideas of trust and dependence. More than intellectual understanding, biblical belief entails personal acceptance. Thus, Warfield explained the three elements of faith, *notitia*, *assensus*, *fiducia*, by stating, "no true faith has arisen unless there has been a perception of the object to be believed or believed in [*notitia*], an assent to its worthiness

⁹⁵R. Larry Moyer, *Free and Clear: Understanding & Communicating God's Offer of Eternal Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 34.

to be believed or believed in [*assensus*], and a commitment of ourselves to it as true and trustworthy [*fiducia*].”⁹⁶ Concurrently, Packer notes that *pistis* and *pisteuo* are both “technical terms . . . to express the complex thought of unqualified acceptance of, and exclusive dependence on, the mediation of the Son as alone securing the mercy of the Father. Both normally bear this whole weight of meaning.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, Packer concludes, “The nature of faith, according to the NT, is to live by the truth it receives.”⁹⁸

Therefore, the evangelist must ask: when the lost person expresses belief in the act of Christ’s death, does the person recognize belief as intellectual understanding or as personal acceptance of and trust in Christ’s death for the forgiveness of sin? The obligation to clarify this matter lies not as much upon the wording of a prayer of commitment as upon the evangelist’s explanation of what it means to be Christian. Yet, in the prayer of commitment, should the evangelist choose to lead it or provide a written example, the word belief is still problematic. Because it is the biblical word of choice, it may seem to be an appropriate word for the Sinner’s Prayer. Yet, for the same reason that we would accept “turn” in place of “repent” in that it communicates the same meaning to the contemporary mind, we must reject the word “belief” because it does not communicate to the contemporary mind the biblical concept of trusting in Christ.

Objection Three: The Invitation Question

Eliff attacks the form and wording of the Sinner’s Prayer upon the basis that the idea of a person inviting Christ into his/her life is not biblical. The proof texts for this concept, explicitly stated in the prayers of Graham and Bright, are John 1:12 and Revelation 3:20. John 1:12 reads, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” In Revelation 3:20, Jesus is addressing the church in Laodicea when he states, “Here I am! I stand at the door and

⁹⁶Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, 402.

⁹⁷J. I. Packer, “Faith,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 400.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*

knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Elliff argues that to draw from these references the understanding that Christ should be invited into a person’s heart or life is to take them out of context. Rather, he believes the passages are about accepting or rejecting Christ for who He is, i.e., Savior and Lord.

Regarding Revelation 3:20, scholars disagree as to whether Jesus is addressing believers or unbelievers. Those who argue that Jesus is addressing believers suggest that it is entirely inappropriate to use this verse in evangelism. For example, G. Michael Cocoris states, “The point of Revelation 3:20 is that those lukewarm, self-sufficient, spiritually deceived believers had pushed God aside; and they needed fellowship and faithfulness. It is not teaching that a person is saved by asking Jesus into his heart. It is not even talking about salvation!”⁹⁹ On the other hand, Walter Steitz, who makes a convincingly strong case that Jesus primarily is addressing unbelievers in the church, argues that this passage is most appropriate for evangelism. The practice of an unbeliever inviting Christ into his/her heart, Steitz observes, “is a figurative expression of the choice one makes to depend or rely on Christ and His payment for sin.”¹⁰⁰

The notion of inviting Christ into one’s heart or life can be a symbolic way of showing one’s acceptance of Him for who He is. When a person truly accepts Christ as Savior and Lord, that person makes Christ a part of his/her life. For Christ to be Lord means that He occupies the ultimate position of authority in the believer’s life. Moreover, the idea of having a personal relationship with Christ, so often emphasized in Evangelical churches, is also an expression of Christ being a part of a person’s life.

At the same time, explaining the concept of inviting Christ into your heart is not always an easy thing to do. For children, who have not yet developing abstract thinking skills and struggle to understand symbolism, the idea can be most confusing.

⁹⁹G. Michael Cocoris, *Evangelism: A Biblical Approach* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 83.

¹⁰⁰Walter Richard Steitz, “The Proper Use of Revelation 3:20 in Evangelism” (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1983), 57.

Even for adults the notion may seem obscure, even unintelligible. What does it really mean to ask Jesus into your heart? By simply staying true to the biblical requirements for salvation (calling on the name of the Lord, belief/trust, repentance, and confessing Jesus as Lord) this confusion can be avoided.

On the issue of the public altar call in general, Elliff's criticisms are well taken and long over due. Yet, his suggestion to abandon it is extreme. Reform should be called for, but to remove the public altar call will not solve the problem of unregenerate church members. Lost persons who meet privately in the minister's office, as Elliff suggests they do, can leave that office just as lost as any person who ever walked the aisle in public. In short, what we find among unregenerate church members is not an invitation problem; it is a soul problem. Conversion of the soul depends upon the work of the Holy Spirit. Whether or not that work has been done is left for God to judge. Certainly there are acceptable and unacceptable methods, but no matter how human beings extend the invitation of Christ, some will inevitably respond outwardly but not inwardly.

Two Critical Issues

From a theological standpoint, at the heart of this entire discussion are two very critical issues: the relationship of Divine sovereignty and human free will, and the lordship salvation issue. To raise these issues is to delve into a set of seemingly endless controversies. While it is not the intention of this study to rehash the various positions taken over the centuries of Christian history, the theological nature of this study insists that the issues be discussed.

Sovereignty Versus Free Will in the Sinner's Prayer

Bill Leonard both adeptly and creatively describes the dilemma created by the Sinner's Prayer when he writes; "the process of getting saved in America has changed considerably since Jonathan Edwards placed sinners in the hand of an angry God. Indeed, without realizing it, later revivalists created techniques which reversed that

process. For many conversionists, God now sits in the hands of sinners who, if not angry, are certainly demanding.”¹⁰¹ That is to say, conversion, once defined as a work of the sovereign God endowed on sinners is now seen by many as an act of the will of sinners participated in by God at the demand of sinners.

How did this change take place? We have previously made note of the theological shift from Calvinism to Arminianism. Yet, what are the reasons for this shift? William McLoughlin credits the challenges presented by deistic rationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with responsibility for the change. According to McLoughlin, deistic rationalism rejected the conceptions of God and humanity as presented by Calvinistic theology, proposing instead the principles of moral philosophy. Moral philosophy was based on “the conviction that God had implanted in man a sense of self-love or the capacity for pleasure and pain by which man learned to pursue happiness and avoid misery.”¹⁰² God was the Great Architect who had shown His benevolence to humanity by granting the gifts of social affections, moral sense, and the power of reasoning. Humanity could choose to use or misuse these gifts for good or ill. God, as Designer but not Sovereign Ruler, exercised little influence.

While “common sense piety” eventually won the day over deistic rationalism, the predominant theology of evangelicalism paid a heavy price. McLoughlin explains,

In winning this battle the Calvinists had to make considerable concessions to the rationalists’ arguments. They had, for example, to concede that God was benevolent and not wrathful, merciful not stern, reasonable not mysterious; that he worked by means and not by miracles, that man was active not passive in his salvation, that grace was not arbitrarily or capriciously dispensed like the royal prerogative of a sovereign but offered freely to all men as the gift of a loving Father to his children; that God wants men to help themselves not to wait on Him, and that He is a God of love not a God to be feared. In short, the clergy of America virtually had to abandon the Calvinistic conception of God’s relationship to man, which had dominated American thought through the Colonial era, and to supplant it with

¹⁰¹Bill Leonard, “Getting Saved in America: Conversion Event in a Pluralistic Culture,” *Review and Expositor* 82 (Winter 1985):123.

¹⁰²William G. McLoughlin, *The American Evangelicals, 1800-1900, An Anthology* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), 3.

Arminian conception.¹⁰³

Although the challenges of liberal philosophies did not conquer “the faith once for all delivered to the saints,” many of the faithful were persuaded to compromise.

One of the many unforeseen results of this theological compromise was an approach to conversion that in both practice and theory views conversion as nothing more than a decision of the human will. Bennett traces the origin of this concept of conversion to the Christian (Plymouth) Brethren of the nineteenth century. The Brethren were known for their reaction against the emotionalism that accompanied the revivalist movements. Rather than heart feelings, the Brethren emphasized intellectual belief in conversion. Bennett remarks, “It is . . . said that the Brethren stressed the concept of ‘receiving’ Christ, thought of feelings as being irrelevant in conversion, and downplayed repentance.”¹⁰⁴ Phyllis Airhart observes, “as for the practical instructions given to those seeking conversion, the Brethren evangelists taught that to repent or pray before being born again was unnecessary.”¹⁰⁵ While Bennett shows that these characterizations were not universally true of the Brethren, they did typify a large enough portion of the group to result in recognition and criticism from their Evangelical peers. The stress on mere intellectual acceptance of the gospel naturally yielded an evangelistic appeal that sought an instant “decision” for Christ. Bennett explains, “Often in the counseling room, the inquirer was just asked, ‘Do you accept Jesus as your Savior?’, and when the person said ‘Yes!’, as most did, that individual was immediately regarded as converted.”¹⁰⁶

The “decisionism” concept of conversion was epitomized in the evangelism of Finney. Hulse explains that for Finney “the sovereignty of God in salvation exercised no

¹⁰³Ibid., 4.

¹⁰⁴David Bennett, *The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 2000), 135.

¹⁰⁵Phyllis Airhart, “‘What Must I Do To Be Saved?’ Two Paths to Evangelical Conversion in Late Victorian Canada,” *Church History* 59 (September 1990): 376.

¹⁰⁶Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 135-36.

power or influence on his theology.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, Finney’s evangelistic approach was based upon his belief in the natural ability of human beings to believe and repent. The result was “a tremendous emphasis upon the need to press for immediate decisions.”¹⁰⁸ In short, conversion according to Finney “was the direct result of moral persuasion by the appropriate use of means.”¹⁰⁹

Leonard notes the effects of revivalism upon the evangelical understanding of conversion. He writes, “Revivals shortened the conversion process substantially. The lengthy struggles with sin and self that characterized earlier Regular and Separate Baptist conversions were reduced to sign posts on the way to instantaneous regeneration. Conversion became a simple matter of praying the ‘sinner’s prayer’ and inviting Jesus into your heart. One sincere prayer brought immediate salvation.”¹¹⁰

While most contemporary Evangelicals would express our theological understanding of conversion as being more than a mere intellectual decision, our methods in evangelism may suggest otherwise. The decision-type conversion process that usually culminates in repeating the words of the Sinner’s Prayer asks for little more than intellectual assent to the gospel. “Do you believe these things?” the evangelist might ask. “Yes,” the sinner would say. “Then if you are ready to accept Christ as your savior, repeat after me the words of this prayer.” After the prayer comes a hug or handshake, and then the sinner is introduced as a convert, based upon his/her decision for Christ.

Concerning this approach, Bennett warns, “if becoming a Christian cannot be biblically defined as simply making a decision, nor even primarily so, then this method is faulty at its root. Though the method is fairly simple to use, it does not seem to go far

¹⁰⁷Erroll Hulse, *The Great Invitation: Examining the Use of the Invitation System in Evangelism* (London: Evangelical Press, 1986), 95.

¹⁰⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹*Ibid.*, 94.

¹¹⁰Bill Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 87.

enough in establishing an individual's spiritual condition, nor does it teach adequately the doctrines of the nature of God, sin and salvation, particularly in the case of those unfamiliar with biblical concepts."¹¹¹ Furthermore, there is often insufficient recognition of what God is doing in the decisionism approach to the conversion process. The emphasis, rather, is upon what the sinner will do. There is no plea for God to have mercy on the sinner or accept the sinner. Rather, the sinner is "accepting" or "receiving" Jesus, stating his/her belief, and making a pledge to follow. So Leonard writes, "In many current evangelical communions, the sovereignty of God has been replaced by the sovereignty of the individual. Conversion is less a process of waiting on God to provide the grace for salvation than of convincing the sinner to ask God for that grace which is immediately available. Potential converts are often urged to pray a prayer, 'invite Jesus into your heart,' and are assured that the moment human will is activated, God responds. Grace is less the mysterious gift of God than the terms of a transaction which is dependent on the free will of the new believer."¹¹²

Is decisionism biblical? As we have already seen, the Bible teaches that God is the One who initiates salvation for the sinner. Repentance and faith are both gifts from God. Paul wrote, "God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Rom 2:4). The Apostles preached, "The God of our fathers raised Jesus from the dead—whom you had killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might give repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel" (Acts 5:30-31). Likewise, Jesus taught that conviction is the work of the Holy Spirit: "Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:7-8). He also stated, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). Concerning faith, Paul wrote, "For it is by grace you have been saved,

¹¹¹Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 198.

¹¹²Bill Leonard, "Evangelism and Contemporary American Life," *Review and Expositor* 77 (Fall 1980): 497.

through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s workmanship” (Eph 2:8-10). The book of Hebrews refers to Jesus as “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Heb 12:2).

To understand God as the Originator of repentance and faith, as well as the Initiator of conversion, is to recognize His sovereignty in the saving of souls. This understanding also embraces the mystery of salvation. Becoming Christian certainly involves a response on the part of the lost sinner, but this response is more than believing a set of facts about Christ. As James reminds us, “even the demons believe” (Jas 2:19). Rather than being the result of mere intellectual assent, the Bible teaches that salvation comes by grace through faith as a gift from a sovereign God.

When the Sinner’s Prayer is used as part of an evangelistic approach that stresses human sovereignty while ignoring God’s role in salvation, the evangelist does a great disservice to lost persons and to the testimony of Scripture concerning salvation. If we lead people to believe that salvation has everything to do with them and nothing to do with God, then they stand in danger of beginning the Christian life, if they are genuinely converted, with an errant concept of who God is and what involvement God is to have in their lives. Furthermore, when salvation is reduced to a mere decision of the human will, security for the believer becomes less certain. This point has been proved experientially time and again. Leonard explains the dilemma that many face and how it is resolved when he writes, “At the slightest doubt, simply pray *the prayer* again and settle it. Lots of people repudiated earlier events—childhood professions dimmed by age, aisle walking without understanding, praying *the prayer* without meaning it, or praying the wrong prayer.”¹¹³ As long as salvation is totally about what the sinner has done and not about what has been done to and for the sinner, security will remain contingent and fleeting for those who seek it.

Lordship Salvation and

¹¹³Leonard, “Getting Saved in America,” 112.

the Sinner's Prayer

The second critical issue, directly related to the first, is what has been termed the "lordship salvation controversy." Lordship salvation affirms that in order to trust Christ as Savior, one must also follow him as Lord. This position stresses that obedience to the ethical and moral imperatives of the Bible is a necessity for those who are truly saved. Michael Horton explains this position when he writes, "Jesus is both Savior from sin and sovereign Lord of life for all Christians."¹¹⁴ John MacArthur is a name often associated with the lordship position. Based on his discussion of the results of regeneration, Grudem could also be seen as a proponent of this position. In addition to the result of "saving faith," Grudem includes "a life free of continual sin," "a genuine Christlike love," and "protection from Satan."¹¹⁵ Citing passages in the book of 1 John, Grudem remarks, "We should realize that John emphasizes these as *necessary* results in the lives of those who are born again. If there is genuine regeneration in a person's life, he or she *will* believe that Jesus is the Christ, and *will* refrain from a life pattern of continual sin, and *will* love his or her brother and sister, and *will* overcome the temptations of the world, and *will* be kept safe from ultimate harm by the evil one."¹¹⁶

No-lordship salvation, on the other hand, proposes that Christ can be Savior but not Lord for an individual and that individual still be genuinely Christian. Zane Hodges is one prominent proponent of this view.¹¹⁷ Some have used the term "carnal Christian" to describe this position. The carnal Christian is a believer but one who has not yet come to show evidence of his/her walk with the Lord. Bennett traces this position back to George Soltau, a Brethren teacher, noting that Soltau "seems to have been an

¹¹⁴Michael Horton, "Don't Judge a Book by Its Cover," in *Christ the Lord*, 15.

¹¹⁵Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 304.

¹¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹¹⁷See Zane C. Hodges, *Absolutely Free!: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).

early advocate of the ‘carnal Christian’ idea.”¹¹⁸ He remarks, “In Soltau’s terms such a person is an ‘ungrown Christian’ who exhibits ‘carnal’ features, such as ‘acting as human beings who have not Divine life.’ This teaching devalues repentance, suggesting, as it does, that a conversion experience (of which repentance is an integral part) may do little or nothing to change a person’s life.”¹¹⁹ Adherents of no-lordship salvation charge their opponents with promoting a doctrine of salvation based upon works.

What relation does the lordship salvation controversy have to the Sinner’s Prayer? As we have already noted, the Sinner’s Prayer often characterizes a theology of conversion in evangelism that suggests conversion is nothing more than a willful decision that instantaneously secures salvation. Leonard refers to this approach as a “transactional” view of evangelism, where evangelism is seen “not as a process but as single event.”¹²⁰ He writes, “Once the prayer is prayed and the invitation accepted, then the transaction is over—salvation is secured and heaven achieved. Discipleship, growth, process are obscured for a one-time-does-all transaction. Thus the biblical concerns for repentance, faith, discipleship, and sanctification are minimized for an evangelism of cheap grace, easy belief, and promises of success.”¹²¹ Armstrong’s comments on the lack of conservation in evangelism echo Leonard’s concern. Armstrong contends, “The appeal has been too much for a ‘decision’ for Christ rather than for a life-commitment to Christ. Much evangelistic preaching has left out the challenge of the Lordship of Christ with the subsequent demands upon the convert. Rather than demanding supreme loyalty to Christ, the matter of following him has been made cheap and easy.”¹²²

¹¹⁸Bennett, *The Altar Call*, 137.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

¹²⁰Leonard, “Evangelism and Contemporary American Life,” 504.

¹²¹*Ibid.*

¹²²Daniel Armstrong, “An Examination of Evangelism in America Beginning with the Eighteenth Century in the Light of New Testament Principles of Evangelism” (Th.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955), 258.

The problem of supposedly converted souls who have never made their way into the church, or have been there and left, is well documented. Lewis Drummond estimates that “in America fifty percent of church members show no real sign of genuine conversion.”¹²³ In a book entitled, *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity*, Eddie Gibbs uses the term “nominal Christian” to describe such persons.¹²⁴ According to Gibbs, the term “refers to all those who, for whatever reason, want to be known as Christians, even though they may have lost contact with the church, have serious doubts concerning beliefs basic to Christianity, be living lifestyles which are incompatible with the values of the kingdom of God, or be failing to maintain an ongoing relationship with the Lord due to neglect of the means of grace which He has provided for our spiritual sustenance.”¹²⁵

Gibbs’ definition seems to obscure the issue of salvation in the life of a nominal Christian by failing to state, outright, whether or not the so-called nominal Christian is saved. He includes, as a part of the definition, “failing to maintain an ongoing relationship with the Lord,” but never clearly communicates if that relationship ever began. Based upon comments that precede the definition, Gibbs seems to leave room for the lost and the saved within the nominal realm. He writes, “Within the nominality zone are people who are at the point of abandoning the church or being ejected by it. There are those who have become disoriented and are wandering around not knowing what to believe or where to go for help. There are those who have been deceived by the enemy and are in the process of being enticed to the other side. There are those from the enemy’s side who became disillusioned and wanted to transfer over,

¹²³Lewis Drummond, telephone interview by author, 24 July 2001.

¹²⁴Eddie Gibbs, *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity* (Wheaton: Bridgepoint, 1994), 15.

¹²⁵*Ibid.*

but never quite made it. Lastly, there are those who have opted to take up permanent residence in the nominality zone in order to keep open their options.”¹²⁶

The definition for nominality offered by the 1980 Lausanne Congress draws a more distinct line on the issue. The Lausanne definition reads, “A nominal Protestant Christian is one who, within the Protestant tradition, would call himself a Christian, or be so regarded by others, but who has no authentic commitment to Christ based upon personal faith. Such commitment involves a transforming personal relationship with Christ, characterized by such qualities as love, joy, peace, a desire to study the Bible, prayer, fellowship with other Christians, a determination to witness faithfully, a deep concern for God’s will to be done on earth, and a living hope of heaven to come.”¹²⁷ By this definition, a nominal Christian is a lost person because salvation, as understood by Evangelicals, necessitates what the nominal Christian is lacking, i.e., an “authentic commitment to Christ based upon personal faith.” At the same time, the second sentence of the definition begs the question, “Of the qualities listed that characterize a transforming personal relationship with Christ, what qualities must be evident and to what extent must they be evident in order for one to be considered as saved?”

This question cuts to the heart of the lordship salvation controversy. Can a person be a Christian who professes Christ as Savior but does not follow Him as Lord? Or, to apply this question to the current discussion, is the person saved who has “prayed the prayer” but not lived as a Christian? The magnitude of this question for contemporary Evangelicalism is difficult to overstate because it applies to countless thousands of souls. “Uncle Bob prayed the prayer when he was ten but lived like the devil and didn’t darken the church doors after he was twelve. Reckon he’s in heaven?” Or, “Sue always said she didn’t believe in God but the preacher did get her to say the prayer right before she died. I guess she’s okay.”

¹²⁶Ibid., 14-15.

¹²⁷Ibid., 21.

By applying the lordship salvation question to the Sinner's Prayer, we cast it in a whole new light. While most versions of the prayer do express the sinner's desire to "follow the Lord," exactly what that phrase means and how it relates to one's salvation is open for interpretation. It could go either way. Many versions of the prayer could be interpreted as making following the Lord a requirement for salvation. Yet, if explained as something the sinner needs to do after making this instantaneous decision and "getting saved," following the Lord can be seen as an option yet to be decided upon. The question of lordship salvation is left for the evangelist to answer. If the evangelist who uses the Sinner's Prayer does not address the issue, then the question is left for the new believer to answer.

As we have seen from Elliff's critique, some view the prayer, itself, as a means of works salvation. Leonard refers to it as "the centerpiece of evangelical sacramentalism."¹²⁸ Packer also assesses the "abuse" of the Sinner's Prayer as a form of sacramentalism. He argues that, just as some traditions require baptism or even communion as a part of the process of securing salvation, some Evangelicals have come to view the Sinner's Prayer as a part of the process. As such it is necessary to say certain words, endowed with magical powers, in order to be saved. Packer remarks that this "magic word mentality is carnal, a perversion of everyone's awareness of general revelation."¹²⁹

In addition to concerns about the genuine nature of a person's salvation, a concern for genuine church growth is also important for this discussion. In *The Book of Church Growth*, Thom Rainer states, "True church growth takes place when 'Great Commission' disciples are added and are evidenced by responsible church membership."¹³⁰ Church growth, by this definition, entails evangelism. Yet, by most

¹²⁸Leonard, telephone interview by author, 24 July 2001.

¹²⁹Packer, telephone interview by author, 3 April 2000.

¹³⁰Thom S. Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth: History, Theology, and Principles* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 21.

definitions of evangelism,¹³¹ church growth represents more than evangelism because it includes the new convert becoming a “responsible” member of a local church. Scripture sets forth genuine church growth as the goal of the Church. Jesus commissioned the Church to make disciples and teach them to obey (Mt 28:19-20). God is looking for more than professions of faith. God is looking for church growth. The evangelist must, therefore, approach his/her task with this directive in mind. As Charles Kelly observes, “Jesus intended for his disciples to make disciples, not just register converts. Those who responded to the gospel were to be baptized and taught. The proper intent for biblical evangelism is the conversion of the lost and the development of spiritually mature believers. The results of biblical evangelism will include the salvation of the lost and the growth of the church.”¹³²

While Kelly is correct in his observation, we should not make the mistake of equating conversion to discipleship. As Larson explains, “becoming a Christian occurs at a point in time when one crosses the line and passes from death to life; becoming a disciple, however, is a lifelong process of pilgrimage and growth.”¹³³ We must guard against a theology of conversion that lends itself to works righteousness for “should reference to what we do become in sense a basis of our acceptance before God, we have abandoned our soteriological center—i.e., the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross.”¹³⁴ Still, having the sinner repeat the words of a prayer is often treated as the

¹³¹Rainer cites Lewis Drummond’s definition of evangelism to show that some do include church growth as a facet of evangelism. Drummond defines evangelism as “a concerted effort to confront the unbeliever with the truth about and claims of Jesus Christ and to challenge him with the view of leading him into repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and, thus, into the fellowship of the church.” Rainer, *The Book of Church Growth*, 24.

¹³²Charles Kelly, Jr., “Ethical Issues in Evangelism: A Pyramid of Concerns,” *Theological Educator* 46 (Fall 1992): 35.

¹³³Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate*, 92.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 93.

ultimate goal of the witnessing encounter. It is not. A genuine conversion is the ultimate goal. A new disciple in the church is the penultimate goal.

What Theological Correctives Are Necessary for the Sinner's Prayer?

Having evaluated the Sinner's Prayer in light of biblical soteriology, can we, in good conscience, continue to utilize it? Grudem responds to this question in the following excerpt from his book, *Bible Doctrine*:

What shall we say about the common practice of asking people to pray to receive Christ as their personal Savior and Lord? Since personal faith in Christ must involve an actual decision of the will, it is often very helpful to express that decision in spoken words, and this could very naturally take the form of a prayer to Christ in which we tell him of our sorrow for sin, our commitment to forsake it, and our decision actually to put our trust in him. Such a spoken prayer does not in itself save us, but the attitude of heart that it represents does constitute true conversion, and the decision to speak that prayer can often be the point at which a person truly comes to faith in Christ.¹³⁵

While Grudem's point is well taken, I argue that the Sinner's Prayer cannot be used in good conscience until the limitations revealed in this study are addressed. Therefore, the following suggestions are offered as theological correctives, where needed, for those who will continue to use the prayer in evangelism.

First, theological terms must be clearly defined for the sinner. Lost sinners in our contemporary world come a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. Exposure to the gospel may range from zero, to an occasional viewing of religious programming while surfing the channels on their televisions sets, to a life-long pew-warming assignment in a local church, synagogue, mosque, Kingdom Hall, or spiritual channeling group. Religious pluralism, and even evangelical pluralism, is the order of the day. As Leonard suggests in his article, getting saved in America is not necessarily what it used to be.¹³⁶ While explaining the plan of salvation may seem simple enough to the evangelist, understanding it correctly may be a significant task for the sinner. As Johnson remarks,

¹³⁵Grudem, *Bible Doctrine*, 312.

¹³⁶Leonard, "Getting Saved in America."

“This model then, loaded with words that we take for granted as Christians, may be as foreign to the lost, non-religiously oriented person as most software programming jargon is to the layperson trying to use his lap-top.”¹³⁷

To say that we should make no assumptions would be to understate the case. Rather, we should make at least two assumptions. We should assume, first, that we will use some theological terms unfamiliar to the sinner, and those terms must be explained. We should assume, second, that we will use some theological terms with which the sinner is familiar, but clearly misunderstands, and those terms need to be redefined. Although this practice may take considerable more time and effort, only by clarifying our language can we avoid some very serious and costly theological pitfalls associated with using the Sinner’s Prayer as a tool in evangelism.

Second, the evangelist who will continue to use the Sinner’s Prayer must understand the biblical theology of evangelism. Much modern evangelism exhibits an extreme concern for human sovereignty to the point that there is no room for the sovereignty of God. Yet, the Bible teaches that salvation, at the very least, begins with God. In addition to understanding the sovereignty of God in salvation, the evangelist would do well to be familiar with the biblical concepts of sin, repentance, faith, regeneration, and conversion. A degree in theology is not necessary. Rather, a potential evangelist can understand these concepts in terms of the experience that he/she had personally, and in terms of what the Bible teaches. These concepts must not be taken for granted by churches training laypersons to do evangelism. The biblical theology of evangelism should be taught as a tool in discipling new converts and in preparing them to be witnesses for Christ.

Third, the evangelist must adhere to the biblical theology of evangelism during the witnessing encounter. Understanding the theology of evangelism is not enough. That theology must undergird, inform, and guide the actual practice of evangelism. It is oft

¹³⁷Ronald W. Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 48.

suggested that the Calvinist in the study becomes an Arminian in the pulpit. While any change in theology along the way from the study to the pulpit may be reason for concern, a loss of any and all theology along that same journey, which so often seems the case, is cause for greater concern. If theological understanding does not dictate practice then it has no benefit. Until theological understanding informs our use of the Sinner's Prayer, we would do well to abandon it for the sake of lost souls searching but not yet prepared to trust Christ alone for salvation.

Conclusion

The Sinner's Prayer represents an unmistakable and dramatic shift in the theology of evangelism. A theological critique of some of the common versions of the prayer reveals that the prayer has taken various forms, each with differing emphases. It also reveals that each version represents the biblical directives for salvation to varying, and often disappointing, degrees. Most versions are weak in the area of repentance, fail to distinguish between intellectual belief and personal trust, and use symbolic language that may lead to confusion. Further, the prayer represents an approach to evangelism that heavily emphasizes human sovereignty and pays very little regard to Divine sovereignty, even bordering at times on sacramentalism. It is also part of an evangelistic approach that has resulted in a tremendous number of "conversions" but proportionally few disciples. If Evangelicals will continue to use the prayer, theological terms must be clearly defined for the sinner, and the evangelist must understand and adhere to the biblical theology of evangelism.

CHAPTER 4

METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

As the salesman's success is judged by his/her ability to "close" the deal, so evangelistic efforts are often deemed successful to the degree that they produce "decisions" for Christ. In our day, a decision is indicated by the willingness of a lost individual to repeat the Sinner's Prayer. In that regard, most contemporary evangelists "close the deal" by getting sinners to pray. But is the Sinner's Prayer an appropriate method for evangelism?

We have seen that the Sinner's Prayer as an evangelistic tool has come under criticism from scholars who question its theological validity. But scholars are not the only ones questioning the validity of the prayer. In a recent article appearing in *Evangelical Missions Quarterly*, Mark Harris reveals the results of research among young Russian Christians. The article details suggestions made by the Russian believers concerning how to improve evangelistic efforts directed toward their lost peers. One of the four suggestions about the content and delivery of the gospel message is to "free your message of foreign elements." One of the foreign elements specifically mentioned is the Sinner's Prayer. Harris writes, "The gospel should be taught in its purity, unadulterated by debated dogmas, emphases, and formulations that were born in a foreign context. One adulteration is the enthronement of the "sinner's prayer" as a means of conversion (something not found in the New Testament). Perhaps born of a desire to lead people away from cultural Christianity to definite conversion points, it has often degenerated into an empty ritual, especially when exported to a completely different context such as that of Russia. Young Russian leaders are beginning to understand that this approach

leads to empty responses among Russians.”¹ As an example, Harris quotes one young Russian as saying, “I think people shouldn’t use the bridge-type diagram and sinner’s prayer in evangelism. They just draw the diagram and say, ‘Let’s pray a sinner’s prayer.’ Russians will repeat after you when nothing is happening on the inside.”²

Because even new believers in a foreign country bear testimony to the problematic manner in which the Sinner’s Prayer is being used as a method in evangelism, we must deduce the methodological implications of our historical and theological analysis of the prayer. My approach will be to discuss the place of methods in evangelism, to delineate the inherent dangers and ethical considerations associated with using the Sinner’s Prayer as a method in evangelism, and then to provide suggestions for reforming our use of the prayer.

The Use of Methods in Evangelism

The current state of straying “sheep” in the evangelical world is a crisis of epidemic proportions. In his book *High Expectations: the Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, Thom Rainer observes, “I have spoken with leaders of numerous denominations and independent churches, and the problem seems to be alarmingly common in American churches. People are leaving our churches by the thousands each day, and others are quietly becoming less and less active.”³

Because the Sinner’s Prayer is such an integral part of contemporary evangelistic methodology, any indictment on this methodology will also be an indictment on the prayer. When Lewis Drummond estimates that in America fifty percent of church

¹Mark Harris, “Russian Youth Talk about Evangelism,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 37 (April 2001): 205.

²Ibid.

³Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: the Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 1.

members show no real sign of genuine conversion, he assigns blame to “superficial evangelism” and the methods it employs.⁴

Methods are nothing new to evangelism. Jesus prescribed certain methods when he appointed and sent out the seventy-two followers on their mission journey (Luke 10). Paul exhibited methods in his missionary travels.⁵ Likewise, the ancient church utilized certain methods in an effort to evangelize the lost.⁶ In chapter two, we traced the rise of methods in revivalism such as the camp meeting and altar call. In short, methods have always been used because they are useful. They are the product of reflection on successful endeavors and the gleaning and reproduction of those principles that generated the success.

Limitations

At the same time, we must recognize that methods have limitations. For example, pastors who desire to implement church growth methods and programs that have proven successful in other churches are warned not to attempt to adopt the methods and programs without adapting them to the new context. Just because a method has proven successful in one location or during one point in time does not ensure the same results for any location at any point in time.

The same as methods in any other realm, methods in evangelism have limitations. Thomas McAlpine provides a list of some of the limitations on methods of evangelism in an article entitled, “Truth, Method and Evangelism.” First, McAlpine notes, “the relationship between the work of God . . . and our work is always subject to

⁴Lewis Drummond, telephone interview by author, 24 July 2001.

⁵See J. Herbert Kane, *Christian Missions in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1976), 73-85.

⁶See John Mark Terry, *Evangelism: A Concise History* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 29-44.

God's decision."⁷ Methods in evangelism are forever dependent upon the One who issues the call to lost sinners. The biblical theology of evangelism, as we have seen, recognizes the role of God's sovereignty and the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in saving souls. Methods cannot substitute for God's movement; and even the best methods will fail miserably without that movement. Thus, methods in evangelism are always limited to the degree that God limits them. Unfortunately, this limitation does not prevent the evangelist from using tactics to get results without God's participation, what Drummond has referred to as "superficial evangelism." Such action brings forth very serious ethical questions, questions that we will address later in this chapter. G. S. Dobbins summarizes the dangers involved with failing to recognize this limitation. He writes,

We who seek to make disciples may take ourselves too seriously. We may assume that it all depends on our human wisdom and effort, our shrewd planning and eloquent preaching, our skillful approach and persistent persuasion, our attractive message and effective method. True, we are to do our part and our best; but Jesus makes it clear that it is not within our power alone to convict of sin, to turn to righteousness, to save from the judgment. The most eloquent sermon ever preached never saved a soul. The most skillful personal worker who ever practiced the art never by himself turned a sinner to righteousness. No church, however perfected its ceremonies and sacraments, ever enabled a guilty sinner to escape the judgment. We are human instruments which he needs, but the first and the last word in the experience of salvation must be spoken by the Holy Spirit. We may win followers of ourselves, members of our churches, believers in our creeds; but the Holy Spirit must convince of sin and of righteousness and of judgment.⁸

Second, McAlpine argues, "Methods can't be used to finesse weaknesses elsewhere."⁹ That is to say, recognizing that methods are not all that is required for successful evangelism, we should not assume that methods could atone for other critical elements that may be missing in our evangelistic efforts. Methods, in that sense, are limited. For example, good methods in evangelism should not be expected to

⁷Thomas H. McAlpine, "Truth, Method and Evangelism," *Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 4 (1988-1989): 66.

⁸Gaines S. Dobbins, *Evangelism According to Christ* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1949), 147.

⁹McAlpine, "Truth, Method and Evangelism," 67.

compensate for insufficient planning, poor training, or bad theology. Put simply, methods are not the only factor in the equation.

Third, McAlpine contends, “evangelism probably happens more outside than inside of planned events or programs.”¹⁰ Whether or not McAlpine’s contention is accurate, there is here an important point to be made concerning the limitations of methods in evangelism. Just as methods are not the only factor in evangelism, evangelism by the use of methods is not the only way evangelism can be done. Furthermore, if we rely so heavily on methods that we practice evangelism only when methods can be utilized, then we will miss many opportunities to share a witness for Christ. Put another way, one of the great limitations on methods in evangelism is failing to recognize that there are limitations on methods in evangelism.

Fourth, McAlpine observes, “A method is often an apotheosis of something which worked well somewhere sometime somehow.”¹¹ The previous example of pastors utilizing church growth methods illustrates this point. McAlpine offers helpful advice concerning this limitation when he writes, “The most useful—and necessary—use of any method will probably be to deapotheosize it and treat it as a model: something which worked well in another context and may be relevant to our situation as we (1) draw selected elements from it or (2) draw inspiration from it in developing our own response.”¹² The concept of models instead of deified methods is one that we should embrace in our efforts to do evangelism. While methods have their place, we must be careful not to over exalt them.

What should be clear at this point is that the Sinner’s Prayer is a method for personal evangelism. But we must recognize that it is not an exclusive method. It does not represent the only manner by which we can help people who desire to express their

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ibid., 68.

¹²Ibid.

commitment to and acceptance of Christ Jesus as their personal savior. Moreover, as a method, the Sinner's Prayer has limitations. When we apply McAlpine's points, and we should, we will realize, first, that use of the Sinner's Prayer requires the role of the Holy Spirit. Second, the Sinner's Prayer cannot sufficiently compensate for our weaknesses in other areas related to the task of evangelism, especially our lack of understanding of the biblical requirements for salvation. Third, to think that we cannot lead a person to Christ without the prayer is a mistaken assumption. Fourth, the Sinner's Prayer should be viewed as a model for helping people who desire to express their commitment to and acceptance of Christ Jesus as their personal Savior, but it may not be appropriate in all places, times, and approaches.

Dangers

Given these limitations on methods, along with the theological issues discussed in chapter three, it is appropriate to ask the question: should the Sinner's Prayer be used in evangelism? Before a response to that question is attempted, we should consider the practical dangers that accompany using the Sinner's Prayer as a method in evangelism.

In an article entitled, "The Dangers of the Invitation System," Jim Ehrhard expounds upon five dangers of the public invitation.¹³ Although the public invitation and the Sinner's Prayer are often used together, they are obviously not the same thing. Nevertheless, the Sinner's Prayer as a method in evangelism is very much related to the public invitation as a method in evangelism. Likewise, Ehrhard's discussion is as applicable to one as the other, so, with some minor adjustments, it will be applied in the context of our treatment of the Sinner's Prayer.

The potential problems of the public invitation system are well documented. Even those who come down in favor of the system have recognized the potential for

¹³Jim Ehrhard, "The Dangers of the Invitation System," *Reformation and Revival* 2 (1993): 75-94.

abuse and have warned against misuse. The dangers as registered by Ehrhard are: (1) The danger of promoting something that is not promoted in Scripture, (2) The danger of eliciting an emotional response based upon the personality of the speaker or the persuasion of the appeal, (3) The danger of confusing the “coming forward” with salvation, (4) The danger of counting great numbers who only discredit their profession by their lives, (5) The danger of giving assurance to those who are unconverted.

First, Ehrhard lists “the danger of promoting something that is not promoted in Scripture.”¹⁴ When applied to the Sinner’s Prayer, as we did to some extent in chapter three, we find that, in a manner of speaking, this shoe fits. At issue is not only promoting something that is not promoted in Scripture, but even promoting something that is often unscriptural in terms of what it expresses, for, as we have seen, most versions of the Sinner’s Prayer are severely lacking even in their attempts to express the biblical requirements for salvation. Considering the charge of “enthronement of the Sinner’s Prayer” as stated by Harris, this danger seems most imminent. We must exercise great caution in giving such widespread acceptance to a method that cannot be found in the Bible.

Second, Ehrhard notes “the danger of eliciting as emotional response based upon the personality of the speaker or the persuasion of the appeal.”¹⁵ How does this danger apply to the Sinner’s Prayer? If Billy Graham says, “Repeat the words of this prayer,” it might be that many unconverted souls who have tremendous respect for Billy Graham will be willing to repeat the prayer. It is very likely that many who have responded to an emotionally charged invitation, and are sincerely seeking, but not yet ready to embrace the gospel, have repeated the words of the prayer at the request of a pastor, youth minister, or evangelist. There may have been very little, if any, thought

¹⁴Ibid., 76.

¹⁵Ibid., 77.

given to the words or what they mean. Yet, with tears flowing, they have recited the magical formula because someone they admire and trust has so instructed them.

Third, Ehrhard notes “the danger of confusing the ‘coming forward’ with salvation.”¹⁶ This point obviously needs to be reworded to apply it to the present discussion. It is better stated, “The danger of confusing ‘saying the prayer’ with salvation.” It would be impossible to estimate the number of persons who are convinced that simply because they have prayed the Sinner’s Prayer they are Christians and, therefore, bound for heaven. While there is no evidence of genuine conversion in their lives, they rest on the “assurance” of their accurate recitation of the words of the Sinner’s Prayer. Many ministers of the gospel will have to accept blame for promoting this notion. As a case in point, George Martin, a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, recounts an incident he witnessed during an invitation given in a Southern Baptist church in South Carolina.¹⁷ A young boy came forward to request membership in the church he had attended all his life. The pastor explained that “little Johnny” had walked the aisle during a revival service at a local Pentecostal church. To avail any fears of the congregation, the pastor kindly explained that, to be sure little Johnny was saved, he had asked little Johnny to say the prayer again in his office. Was it saying the prayer that had saved the boy? No doubt that was the message conveyed by the well-meaning pastor both to the congregation and the little Johnny. Dobbins addressed the problem appropriately when he warned, “The peril of method is that it may become identified with the vital purpose which it is intended to accomplish. The method itself may thus come to be thought of as having saving power.”¹⁸

¹⁶Ibid., 80.

¹⁷George Martin, interview by author, 22 May 2001.

¹⁸Dobbins, *Evangelism According to Christ*, 201.

Fourth, Ehrhard mentions, “the danger of counting great numbers who only discredit their profession by their lives.”¹⁹ This danger really needs no explanation as we apply it to the Sinner’s Prayer. Spurgeon once wrote, “Some of the most glaring sinners known to me were once members of a church; and were, as I believe, led to make a profession by undue pressure, well-meant but ill-judged.”²⁰ Public professions and the repetitions of prayers do not make one a Christian. Many lives have proven that point. While we record “decisions,” we must exercise caution.

Finally, Ehrhard includes “the danger of giving assurance to those who are unconverted.”²¹ We come now to one of the greatest dangers of all. Whitefield recognized it long ago when he wrote, “I am glad you know when persons are justified. It is a lesson I have not yet learnt. There are so many stony ground hearers, that receive the Word with joy, that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits. . . . That makes me so cautious now, which I was not thirty years ago, of dubbing converts so soon. I love now to wait a little, and see if people bring forth fruit; for there are so many blossoms which March winds you know blow away, that I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.”²² On the other hand, assuring the insincere soul that she is a Christian will surely do eternal harm.

Applying these practical dangers to the Sinner’s Prayer will surely cause us to exercise greater caution in our utilization of it as a method in evangelism. The dangers are grave indeed. Without both recognizing them and guarding against them, we run the risk of leading sinners not closer to Christ but further from Him.

¹⁹Ehrhard, “The Dangers of the Invitation System,” 81.

²⁰C. H. Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner, or, How to Lead Sinners to the Savior* (London: Marshall Brothers, 1893), 19.

²¹Ehrhard, “The Dangers of the Invitation System,” 83.

²²Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (London: The Banner of Truth, 1967), 32-33.

Ethical Considerations

Objections raised to the manner in which the Sinner's Prayer is utilized as a tool in evangelism are more than theological and methodological in nature; they entail ethical considerations. For not only do these objections question the clarity of beliefs and appropriateness of methods, they also question the legitimacy of intent. We must admit that people who engage in evangelism do so with a variety of intentions. Some, sadly but undeniably, practice evangelism for prestige and/or personal material gain. The lifestyle of televangelists who enjoy popularity may be viewed by some as glamorous and desirable. Some have and will attempt to build successful evangelistic ministries to enjoy that lifestyle. Others will practice evangelism in order merely to gain the prestige associated with serving on staff or being a member of a large, growing church. Then there are those who attempt and often succeed at profiting financially, in some cases amassing incredible wealth, through evangelistic ministries. On a different level, there are those who simply enjoy the pride associated with "winning another soul for the Lord." In each of these instances, the question of intent becomes an ethical question. To these "evangelists," evangelism is not engaged in out of obedience to Christ or out of concern for the lost. Rather, evangelism has become a means of self-betterment, self-promotion, and self-gratification.

Ethical concerns in evangelism have growing importance in our pluralistic society. From the evangelical viewpoint the challenges of postmodernity to Christian particularism do not require capitulation, but they do require an apologetic that is supported by ethical methods and conduct. While postmodernists do not accept the objective truth of the gospel, we must not add fuel to their fire by discrediting our testimony on the grounds of unethical behavior. That we fail to be politically correct requires that we must guard all the more against being ethically corrupt.

The Scriptures teach us that ethical concerns are appropriate for evangelism. In an article on ethical issues in evangelism, Charles Kelly points to Paul's writings in 1 Corinthians for a delineation of ethical methods. Paul writes, "Though I am free and

belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law. To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some" (1 Cor 9:19-22). While it may seem in this passage that Paul is endorsing every means available to win the lost, a closer look reveals two very important ethical guidelines for evangelism.

First, while Paul's method attempts to reach everyone, it allows for some to reject the gospel. Paul states, "I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some." Paul recognizes that everyone will not accept the gospel and thus, grants freedom for the hearers to make their own decision. In the words of Kelly, "ethical evangelistic methods are those methods which allow people the freedom to say no and walk away."²³ He also remarks, "any approach to evangelism that always succeeds is questionable. If all who are approached with an evangelistic method or presentation say yes to Jesus, they either do not understand the message or they are not allowed to say no. Neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor Peter, nor any New Testament witness saw total success with their methods of evangelism. If there is not resistance to and rejection of the gospel, there is manipulation and coercion in the method."²⁴

Allowing hearers the freedom to reject the gospel as an ethic for evangelism has important consequences for any evangelistic method that includes the Sinner's Prayer. Through the "magic word mentality," to use Packer's phrase, we can mistakenly communicate that all we want people to do is repeat the words of a prayer. I refer back to the comments of the young Russian, "They just draw the diagram and say, 'Let's pray a

²³Charles Kelly, Jr., "Ethical Issues in Evangelism: A Pyramid of Concerns," *Theological Educator* 46 (Fall 1992): 38.

²⁴*Ibid.*

sinner's prayer.' Russians will repeat after you when nothing is happening on the inside."²⁵ The hearers, Russian or otherwise, may repeat the words of the prayer because they think that is what you want them to do and all they need to do, even though they have little or no understanding of the gospel. When our method, intentionally or unintentionally, communicates this message, we have done a great injustice to the hearer. We have made the process so simple that few may refuse it. In so doing, we may fail the test of granting hearers sufficient freedom to reject the gospel.

This discussion should not result in the assumption that we are to make it difficult to become Christian, or that we should erect barriers where there are none. Rather, we simply have an ethical obligation to present the full truth of the gospel and make certain that it is understood and embraced in its entirety before we suggest that a person repeat a prayer of commitment.

Another application to Kelly's point that "ethical evangelistic methods are those methods which allow people the freedom to say no and walk away" applies to people who find it easier to "play along" than to reject the offer of the evangelist. Ronald Johnson describes an incident that well illustrates this application:

I was in a restaurant with several pastor friends. We were at a round table and the waitress was working hard to keep the lot of us served. We were laughing and having a good time of fellowship. I noticed that the waitress was not very conversational. She was absorbed in her work.

At the end of the meal, the waitress came to present the check to the group. One of the pastors began to talk to her. She was standing there with a tray in one hand on her way to another table. The pastor asked her if she was saved. She said, "No." He presented the plan of salvation and asked her if she would be willing to ask Christ into her heart right then and there. She agreed, and with the waitress standing over the table, the pastors at the table all bowed their heads and the person doing the witnessing led in a prayer that he asked her to repeat.

When the prayer began, I peeked at the waitress and watched her through the whole prayer. She had her head bowed slightly and was repeating the prayer that she was being led to pray. But one thing struck me. While everyone else had heads bowed and eyes closed and were listening to her pray, she was looking up, glancing at her tables and customers while she was repeating the prayer she was being led to pray. I wondered if she would be like so many who claim to be saved. At some point they overhear the gospel, pray a prayer, but may never really receive Christ.

²⁵Harris, "Russian Youth Talk about Evangelism," 205.

Hans Kasdorf is probably right. "A man convinced against his will is of the same opinion still."²⁶

While many genuine conversions have probably taken place in a restaurant, the situation Johnson describes exhibits an insincere response on the part of the waitress. But it also exhibits an insensitive approach on the part of the evangelist. Both bear ethical responsibility.

Second, Kelly notes that Paul's ethic of evangelism ensures that the gospel, not the method of presenting the gospel, is the stumbling block for those who refuse to believe. Kelly writes, "Paul presented the gospel differently to Jews and to Gentiles (cf. Acts 13:14-43 and 17:22-33). In both cases some believed and some did not, but the stumbling block for his hearers was the message of the gospel, not the manner of presentation."²⁷

This ethical consideration for evangelism applies to usage of the Sinner's Prayer in much the same manner as the first. When a prayer is the supreme goal of a witnessing encounter and based upon that prayer we determine our success or failure in leading lost souls to conversion, we run the risk of allowing that prayer to become a stumbling block. On the one hand, we may, as Elliff charges, bring people to "belief in the efficacy of a prayer and not the efficacy of Christ's work."²⁸ When we do so, the prayer becomes a stumbling block to that person's salvation, the chief stumbling block indeed. On the other hand, we may communicate to people who have not prayed the prayer that they are lost and without praying the prayer they cannot be saved. I refer back to the incident recounted by George Martin in which a pastor had a young boy repeat the prayer again to be certain he had done it correctly so the church family could, in good conscience, acknowledge the boy's salvation. We also recall Leonard's comments, "At

²⁶Ronald W. Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don't Listen?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 38.

²⁷Kelly, "Ethical Issues in Evangelism," 38.

²⁸Jim Elliff, "Closing with Christ," (audiocassette of message delivered at Sixteenth Annual Southern Baptist Founders Conference, 22 July 1998).

the slightest doubt, simply pray *the prayer* again and settle it. Lots of people repudiated earlier events—childhood professions dimmed by age, aisle walking without understanding, praying *the prayer* without meaning it, or praying the wrong prayer.”²⁹ It may very well be that we have indeed “enthroned” the Sinner’s Prayer to the point that it has become a stumbling block instead of a stepping-stone as a method in evangelism.

The Sinner’s Prayer: For or Against?

Given the limitations, dangers, and ethical concerns surrounding utilizing the Sinner’s Prayer as a method in evangelism, what conclusions will we draw? Should the prayer be forfeited? Moreover, if the Sinner’s Prayer is forfeited, with what shall we replace it? First, we should consider what reply could be given to the lost person who has heard the gospel and asked the age-old question, “What must I do to be saved?” To be true to the Bible’s instruction, the response to those who have heard the gospel and seem ready to respond is: “Call upon the name of the Lord, believe and repent; then confess, ‘Jesus is Lord.’” What immediately occurs is that carrying out these instructions may necessitate prayer. Further, that prayer would be the prayer of a sinner. While that prayer may not take the specific form of the Sinner’s Prayer, it might be similar. Regardless of how the prayer is worded, Elliff is correct in saying that the prayer will not save the lost. The magical formula for salvation is not found in the words of a prayer; it is found in the cross of Christ. The power of God to save is for those who believe the foolishness of what is preached and then call upon the name of the Lord.

The question is, as we call upon the name of the Lord, why should we avoid using a form of the Sinner’s Prayer that expresses what God has informed us He desires that we do? The important matter is not the specific wording of the prayer; it is the specific state of the heart. Is the heart truly believing and repentant? If so, the Sinner’s Prayer is an acceptable expression of faith in Christ for salvation. The critical issue at

²⁹Leonard, “Getting Saved in America,” 112.

stake is not whether the Sinner's Prayer is used, but how it is used. Therein lies the need for reform.

Reforming the Sinner's Prayer as a Method for Evangelism

As a basis for reforming the way the Sinner's Prayer is often used, remarks of Spurgeon in his classic work, *The Soul Winner*, provide a good starting point. Spurgeon calls us to express serious concern for the lost. The soul winner is not an assembly line worker whose task is to get through a systemized presentation of the gospel, lead in a prayer of commitment, and then start over with the next candidate. Effective work can be conducted through mass crusades, but the priority of authentic evangelism is not time efficiency but conversion effectiveness.

In his book, Spurgeon, a great soul winner himself, writes about the process of leading a soul to God. He notes three important considerations in soul winning. First, he remarks, "one of its main operations consists in instructing a man that he may know the truth of God. Instruction by the gospel is the commencement of all real work upon men's minds."³⁰ Instruction is much more than telling a person what to pray. It includes presenting the whole gospel to the seeker. Proper instruction may take time, but it will ensure learning. Decisions must not be rushed. We should not attempt to harvest fruit that has not ripened. As the Holy Spirit deals with the seeker and the seeker comes to the point of commitment, time taken for good instruction will also help dispel misunderstanding about the role of the prayer of commitment. The prayer of commitment is not a magical formula. Rather, it is simply a tool that can be used as one means of expressing our total surrender to the Lordship of Christ.

Second, Spurgeon observes, "to win a soul, it is necessary, not only to instruct our hearer, and make him know the truth, but to impress him so that he may feel it."³¹ The evangelist appeals not simply to the intellect, for the gospel appeals not simply to the

³⁰Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner*, 17.

³¹*Ibid.*, 21.

intellect. When Peter preached at Pentecost, those who heard the message “were cut to the heart.” They believed, but they also felt. More than a time to give intellectual assent to the message of the gospel and affirm that assent by repeating the words of the Sinner’s Prayer, the time of decision is to be a time when the gospel is felt, a time when the Holy Spirit convicts, deep emotions are stirred, and a deep, life changing commitment is made. Tears may not accompany every conversion, but if the seeker seems not to have any feelings about being saved from eternal damnation and adopted as God’s child, then the evangelist must question whether the seeker has really experienced conversion.

Third, Spurgeon recognizes that “the Holy Ghost must work regeneration in the objects of our love, or they can never become possessors of eternal happiness.”³² The role of the Holy Spirit in evangelism is central and irreplaceable for both the evangelist and the sinner. Armstrong explains, “The sustaining dynamic in New Testament evangelism was the Holy Spirit whose central purpose is that of guiding and empowering the believer for a witness filled with boldness, love, and compassion, and that of convincing the lost concerning Christ and of regenerating them in Christ.”³³ Because He is the Sovereign Lord, regeneration in the life of a sinner is dependent upon the work of God. Human efforts are never sufficient. Therefore, the Sinner’s Prayer must not be understood as the means by which a person is saved. The regenerating work of the Holy Spirit should be recognized and must be depended upon by the evangelist and the sinner.

For evidence that true conversion has taken place, Spurgeon points not to a single prayer. Rather, he lists six practical effects that can be witnessed. First, “regeneration will be shown in conviction of sin.”³⁴ Conviction of sin is both an awareness of sin and a genuine sorrow for it. Spurgeon believes that “the preacher must

³²Ibid., 24-25.

³³Daniel Armstrong, “An Examination of Evangelism in America Beginning with the Eighteenth Century in the Light of New Testament Principles of Evangelism” (Th.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955), 77.

³⁴Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner*, 28.

labor to produce”³⁵ this conviction. By emphasizing the holiness of God, the universality and the penalty of sin, as well as the great price that God has paid for our sin through Christ’s cross, the evangelist will share truths that will produce in the heart of one whom the Holy Spirit is convicting, a true sense of conviction. For some, Spurgeon observes, this conviction “may be very acute and alarming.”³⁶ For others, it may be less intense, but still very real.

Second, there will be an “exhibition of a simple faith in Jesus Christ.”³⁷ Simple faith is total trust. As Spurgeon remarks, “The proof to you that you have won the man’s soul for Jesus is never before you till he has done with himself and his own merits, and has closed in with Christ. Great care must be taken that this faith is exercised upon Christ for a complete salvation, and not for a part of it.”³⁸ Thus, salvation is not based upon a prayer, upon words spoken, or deeds performed. Salvation is found in Christ. The evidence that a person properly understands this truth is that that they point not to a prayer as proof of their salvation, but to the cross. The evangelist must clarify the need for genuine faith, as opposed to the need for words.

The third practical effect of conversion is that there will be “unfeigned repentance of sin.”³⁹ As Elliff argues, awareness of sin is not enough. Spurgeon communicates what is needed when he writes, “True conversion is in all men attended by a sense of sin, which we have spoken of under the head of conviction; by a sorrow for sin, or holy grief at having committed it; by a hatred of sin, which proves that its dominion is ended; and by a practical turning from sin, which shows that the life within the soul is operating upon the life without. True belief and true repentance are twins: it

³⁵Ibid., 29.

³⁶Ibid., 28.

³⁷Ibid., 29.

³⁸Ibid.

³⁹Ibid., 31.

would be idle to attempt to say which is born first.”⁴⁰ To the evangelist, Spurgeon states, “Aim, therefore, at heart-breaking, at bringing home condemnation to the conscience, and weaning the mind from sin, and be not content till the whole mind is deeply and vitally changed in reference to sin.”⁴¹

The importance of this point for contemporary evangelism cannot be overstated. While few would claim to be perfect, or argue that they have lived a life free from sin, the general consensus seems to be, “Yes, I have sinned. But so what? Hasn’t everybody else? I am only human.” Nonbelievers, and far too many who claim to be believers, are convinced that living a good moral life is sufficient cause for God to overlook our failures and shortcomings. The gravity of sin being disregarded, one could hardly envision God sending anyone to hell. This conviction is expressed in one of the prominent criticisms that postmodernists make of Christian particularism. William Craig explains, “The problem seen by postmodernists is that if the Christian religion is objectively true, then multitudes of people belonging to other religious traditions find themselves excluded from salvation, often through no fault of their own but due simply to historical and geographical accident, and therefore destined to hell.”⁴² Because people in other religious traditions are basically moral people surely God, the argument goes, will have mercy on them. This argument and the beliefs that accompany it are rooted in a misunderstanding of the seriousness of sin. By human standards, an acceptable level of morality may not be very difficult to achieve. But by God’s standards, an acceptable level is humanly impossible to achieve. Thus, until the seriousness of sin is recognized, genuine sorrow and true repentance will never be experienced. As Spurgeon notes, the evangelist has the responsibility of “bringing home condemnation to the conscience.”

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid., 32.

⁴²William Lane Craig, “Politically Incorrect Salvation,” in *Christian Apologetics in the Postmodern World*, ed. Timothy R. Phillips and Dennis L. Okholm (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 82.

With the help of the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, the evangelist can confront the strongholds of Satan by revealing sin and its consequences. When sorrow and repentance have been experienced, the evangelist who uses the Sinner's Prayer will have greater assurance that the prayer is simply the verbal expression of a converted heart.

Fourth, Spurgeon points out that a practical effect of conversion is "a real change of life."⁴³ Persons must be willing to live differently than they did before they met Christ. The evangelist must emphasize the call of Christ to take up the cross and follow. When such is done, the seeker will understand that salvation is not as much about praying a prayer as it is about committing a life.

Here, again, is an important point for contemporary evangelism. To a would-be follower, Jesus pointed out the fact that he was homeless, thus encouraging the seeker to count the cost before following. To another, he declined permission to go back and bury his father, showing him that answering the call to follow must be first priority. To yet another, he refused the request to return home and bid farewell to his family, illustrating that the call must be answered on God's terms, not ours.

In his book, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church*, Thom S. Rainer observes, "the early Christians would have trouble imagining the plight of the American church today. But it comes as no shock to us two thousand years later that less is expected of church members today than civic organizations expect of their members."⁴⁴ Although Rainer is referring to local church membership, his words are also suitable for Kingdom membership. Contemporary evangelism focuses upon what we stand to gain from Christ. It says little about what we must give up. But as Moyer explains, "The Gospel is concerned not only with what God

⁴³Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner*, 32.

⁴⁴Thom S. Rainer, *High Expectations: The Remarkable Secret for Keeping People in Your Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999), 12.

has done for a man but also with what God asks man to do.”⁴⁵ Stated more directly by Dieterich Bonhoeffer, “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”⁴⁶ In Jesus’ own words, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it” (Matt 16:24-25).

The words of a prayer may or may not represent a life that has been changed by Christ. The question for the contemporary evangelist is: does the seeker even know that her life is supposed to be changed? We share Christ’s invitation to heaven, but do we share his invitation to Calvary? As we have seen, these questions are not to suggest that we promote a salvation by works. At the same time, current conditions in the church and in the world suggest that even those who profess belief have no concept of the life-changing nature of the gospel. Thus, David Wells has remarked, “Those who assure the pollsters of their belief in God’s existence may nonetheless consider him less interesting than television, his commands less authoritative than their appetites for affluence and influence, his judgment no more awe-inspiring than the evening news, and his truth less compelling than the advertisers’ sweet fog of flattery and lies.”⁴⁷ The time has come to buttress righteousness by faith with a faith that produces righteousness.

Fifth, Spurgeon believes that genuine conversion will mean “true prayer.”⁴⁸ Spurgeon remarks that, “If there is no prayer, you may be quite sure that soul is dead.”⁴⁹ Interestingly, Spurgeon holds that “We are not to urge men to pray as though it were the great gospel duty, and the one prescribed way of salvation; for our chief message is,

⁴⁵R. Larry Moyer, *Free and Clear: Understanding & Communicating God’s Offer of Eternal Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1997), 33.

⁴⁶Dieterich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1963), 99.

⁴⁷David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 88.

⁴⁸Spurgeon, *The Soul-Winner*, 33.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*

‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.’ It is easy to put prayer into its wrong place, and make it out to be a kind of work by which men are to live, but this you will, I trust, most carefully avoid. Faith is the great gospel grace, but still we cannot forget that true faith always prays, and when a man professes faith in the Lord Jesus, and yet does not cry to the Lord daily, we dare not believe in his faith or his conversion.”⁵⁰ Spurgeon, of course, lived, ministered, and wrote long before the Sinner’s Prayer was popularized. His words seem to be somewhat prophetic of the present time when praying a particular prayer has become the great work of salvation. At the same time, Spurgeon recognizes the place of prayer, even including it in his list of evidence that a person is truly saved. That is not to say, however, that a prayer is what saves.

Finally, Spurgeon lists as the practical effects of genuine salvation, “a willingness to obey the Lord in all His commandments.”⁵¹ Along with a real change of life, obedience to the Lord’s will signifies that true salvation has been found. As the evangelist presents the case for obediently following God’s will, the seeker will understand that the Sinner’s Prayer is a way of obediently expressing belief, repentance, and confession, but that genuine conversion and the call for obedience go far beyond one prayer.

Along with Spurgeon’s comments, Moyer’s remarks are helpful as he points out the need for a clear explanation to be made to the seeker concerning the role of the Sinner’s Prayer. He writes,

When people come to see their need to trust Christ, many who evangelize have found it helpful to have them verbalize that to God. In simple prayer, they can tell God that they now understand that they are sinners for whom Christ died and arose and are now trusting Jesus Christ to save them. The previous study [a discussion about salvation by faith alone] would remind us to explain to an individual that saying such a prayer has never saved anyone; trusting Christ saves. Prayer is simply the way to confess to God what one has done. For that reason, many who utter such a prayer are actually saved seconds or minutes before they pray, because they have

⁵⁰Ibid., 33-34.

⁵¹Ibid, 34.

already transferred their trust to the person of Christ as their only way to heaven.⁵² In these lines Moyer addresses what is surely the most critical point in the practice of using the Sinner's Prayer. The great danger is that seekers will fail to understand that salvation is found in Christ, not in a prayer. His comment that "many who utter such a prayer are actually saved seconds or minutes before they pray" precludes the possibility of the Sinner's Prayer being seen as a magical formula or as the source of salvation. Yet, the evangelist cannot make assumptions about the state of a person's soul, or even about their level of understanding about saving faith. Therefore, the evangelist must be clear in communicating the purpose of the prayer, lest the prayer become a barrier to their faith. As Moyer observes, "The saying of particular words, phrases, or prayers . . . contributes to difficulty in understanding saving faith. People often have the impression that one is saved by saying something."⁵³ He continues, "one does not need to *say* anything in order to be saved. Although particular words or phrases may be used to express to God what one has done, saying a prayer has never saved anyone!"⁵⁴

To prevent the Sinner's Prayer from becoming a barrier to saving faith, a few simple words of explanation about what the prayer is and what it is not may make the matter clear. Yet, regardless of what it takes, the matter must be made clear. Too much is at stake. We cannot continue to send away individuals who have had an evangelistic encounter with a false sense of security that, because they uttered the "sacramental" words of a prayer, they are now right with God.

Conclusion

Proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ is the most important undertaking in all times and places. No matter is more vital, urgent, or determining. God has chosen to use the witness of his disciples as the means by which He moves upon the lost. An

⁵²Moyer, *Free and Clear*, 43.

⁵³Ibid., 34.

⁵⁴Ibid.

integral and imperative part of the proclamation of the gospel is the invitation of the gospel. As God's Spirit moves upon the lost, God wills their response by way of commitment. Thus, as Larsen argues, "we have not only the right but the solemn duty to press carefully and sensitively (through the Holy Spirit) for commitment to Christ."⁵⁵ Streett is correct in his contention that the biblical witness teaches us that this response of commitment is not just inward. It often entails an element that is both external and public. The external element of response appropriately includes prayer.

Yet, the Sinner's Prayer is a tool in evangelism that is often misunderstood and misused. It has come to be seen by many as the end goal of evangelism. The assumption is made that if a lost person is willing to verbalize the prayer, we can rest assured they have found acceptance before God. When understood in these terms, the Sinner's Prayer is merely another form of sacramentalism that has found its way into the church. But it is sacramentalism of a most dangerous nature, for those who claim freedom from sacramentalism use it. Furthermore, it is yet another form of false security for lost persons who need a personal relationship with the Savior that is based upon faith.

In the same manner that there are limitations on any methods, there are limitations on the Sinner's Prayer as a method in evangelism. These limitations include the facts that the relationship between the work of God and our work is always subject to God's decision, methods cannot be used to finesse weaknesses elsewhere, a heavy reliance on methods can cause us to miss many opportunities to share a witness for Christ, and a method is often an apotheosis of something which worked well somewhere sometime somehow.

Just as there are dangers associated with the public invitation system, there are also dangers associated with utilizing the Sinner's Prayer as a method in evangelism. These dangers include that of promoting something that is not promoted in Scripture, eliciting an emotional response based upon the personality of the speaker or the

⁵⁵David L. Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate: Recovering the Centrality of Gospel Preaching* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1992), 100.

persuasion of the appeal, confusing praying the prayer with salvation, counting great numbers who only discredit their profession by their lives, and giving assurance to those who are unconverted.

At least two ethical considerations also come into play in utilizing the Sinner's Prayer as a method in evangelism. First, the prayer must not be used in a way that intentionally or unintentionally disregards the freedom of the hearer to refuse God's offer of grace. Second, the prayer must not replace the message of the gospel as a stumbling block for those who refuse to believe.

Given these findings, the Sinner's Prayer as it is often used has possibly become a more valuable tool in service to the Enemy than it is in service to Christ. If we will continue to use the Sinner's Prayer, we must use it differently. We must use it not as a fast and convenient method for being able to count a person as having been won to the Lord, but as a practical tool that allows persons to express the genuine faith with which God has gifted them. The prayer must be seen as a means to an end, not as the end itself. As with all human efforts to find acceptance before God, the prayer must be placed at the foot of the cross with the recognition that salvation is found in the cross and in the cross alone.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Many in the church today decry the predicaments of unrepentant absenteeism and unregenerate membership. These are but the symptoms. What is the cause? Johnson alleges that it is a “kind of easy believism” where people look to Christ only for “release from the guilt of sin, with no real commitment.”¹ If this type of salvation is what people desire, they can easily find it in the Sinner’s Prayer. “If you want to go to heaven, just repeat after me.” Sounds easy enough. But is it truly effective? Does it invariably lead to genuine conversion? The conclusions of this study will help us answer that question.

First, the Sinner’s Prayer does not come to us from Scripture. Rather, it developed out of a need for reproducible methods to assist in efficient evangelism. But efficiency entails more than time. Efficiency also entails effectiveness. In that regard, the Sinner’s Prayer, rather than leading to efficiency in evangelism, may be leading to a deficiency in disciples. As it is often used in evangelism, the gospel is not adequately explained or understood. The prayer, rather than Christ, seems to take center stage. In such cases, the Sinner’s Prayer represents no more than an impotent magical formula and no less than a new sacrament for evangelism.

Second, most versions of the Sinner’s Prayer fail to express the biblical instructions regarding the appropriate response for those who have heard the gospel. The concept of repentance, or turning from sin, is sometimes absent. When it does occur, it is often understated. In addition, the emphasis upon belief is not sufficient for the manner

¹Ronald W. Johnson, *How Will They Hear If We Don’t Listen?* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 3.

in which that term is defined today because the idea of trust is not adequately communicated. Furthermore, the prayer elevates human sovereignty and disregards Divine sovereignty and the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. For these reasons, the prayer is theologically weak.

Third, dependence upon the Sinner's Prayer opens the way to grave dangers and ethical pitfalls. Armstrong observes, "Methods change according to time, personalities, and environment; but principles remain the same."² Maybe principles *should* remain the same, but that does not mean that they do remain the same. While the Sinner's Prayer clearly represents a change in methods in evangelism, it may also indicate an abrogation of principles. To what extent will we go to increase decision statistics? "Soul-Winning Made Easy" may be a catchy title for a book, but I am afraid we have taken the concept to an extreme end.

The Sinner's Prayer, therefore, has become a vulnerable tool in evangelism primarily because its limitations are being ignored. In order to be useful in the growth of the kingdom, we must rethink our approach. Repeating the words of a prayer does not ensure salvation.

Areas for Further Study

As noted in my introductory remarks, one of the manners in which this study is limited is that it is a historical endeavor. Historical research can never guarantee to be exhaustive. Therefore, the effort to state the origin of the Sinner's Prayer more specifically is ongoing. Future research in this area may reveal exciting new discoveries that will increase our understanding of contemporary methods in evangelism. I sincerely hope that is the case.

A response to my assessment of the theological and methodological implications of the Sinner's Prayer would also be welcome. That response may serve to

²Daniel Armstrong, "An Examination of Evangelism in America Beginning with the Eighteenth Century in the Light of New Testament Principles of Evangelism" (Th.D. thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1955), 231.

complement this work by buttressing some of its weaker points. On the other hand, some who read this work may not share the same theological viewpoint of its author. Differing presuppositions about the nature and theology of evangelism will surely result in contrasting conclusions. Once stated, those conclusions could be beneficial to those who would compare the two works, as well as to the respective authors.

Lastly, in the larger context, this dissertation is concerned with methods in evangelism. In the process of study and research, it occurred to me that while much has been written to promote particular methods in evangelism, not enough has been written in the areas of evaluating and critiquing methods in evangelism. More critical reflection on evangelistic methods could surely pay great dividends to the kingdom.

Conclusion

The Sinner's Prayer in the service of biblical evangelism is not dead. It is very much alive. Like a spreading cancer not yet detected, however, the prayer as it is often used has a poisoning effect that few seem to have diagnosed. Many may be noticing the symptoms, but the cause goes undetermined. When more of us begin to realize that our approach to conversion, including the Sinner's Prayer, is directly responsible for the predicaments of unrepentant absenteeism and unregenerate membership, we will be one significant step closer to a cure.

APPENDIX
VERSIONS OF THE SINNER'S PRAYER

“Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am sinful and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died to pay the penalty for my sin. I want to turn from my sin and follow You instead. I invite You to come into my heart and life. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”¹

“Dear God: Forgive me and forgive our nation for trying to live without You. I accept and believe that your Son, Jesus Christ, came to earth to pay the penalty for all our sins. I repent of my sins and ask that you will help our nation to also repent. Please make me a member of your family in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.”²

“Lord Jesus, I need You. I realize I’m a sinner and I can’t save myself. I believe that You died on the cross for my sins and rose from the dead. I repent of my sins and put my faith in You alone as my Savior. Take control of my life and help me to follow You in obedience. In Jesus’ name, Amen.”³

“Lord, I’ve been running my own life, but I resign as of today. I was made by You . . . I was made for You, but I’ve been living for me. I’m sorry for that self-rule You call sin. But I believe Your Son Jesus Christ paid my death penalty when He died on the cross. And right now I am turning from a life of my way and I am putting all my trust in Jesus

¹*In Loving Memory . . . Diana, Princess of Wells* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1997).

²*In God We Trust* (Grand Rapids: Tract League, n.d.).

³Reggie White, *Reggie White, Minister of Defense* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1995).

Christ to erase my sin from Your book, to give me a relationship with You, and to get me to heaven. Lord, from today on, I'm Yours."⁴

"Lord, Jesus, I know I'm a sinner. I believe you died on the cross for my sins, and I ask you to forgive my sins and let me belong to your family. I thank you for helping me to be a Christian and I want to live to please you all the rest of my life. Amen."⁵

Dear God, I know I'm a sinner. I know my sin deserves to be punished. I believe Christ died for me and rose from the grave. I trust Jesus alone as my Savior. Thank You for the forgiveness and everlasting life I now have. In Jesus' name, amen."⁶

"Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am sinful and I need your forgiveness. I believe you died to pay the penalty for my sin. I want to turn from my sin nature and follow you instead. I invite you to come into my heart and life. In Jesus' name. Amen."⁷

"God, I'm convinced I am a sinner, and that Christ alone can save me. I willingly repent of my sinful life and believe Jesus Christ died for me. I want to receive Him as my personal Savior."⁸

"'God be merciful to me a sinner,' and save me in Jesus name. Amen."⁹

"Dear God, I come to you now. I know I am a sinner. Nothing I am or do makes me deserving of heaven. I believe Jesus Christ, the one born in a manger, died for me on a cross and rose again. Right now I place my trust in Jesus Christ as my only way to

⁴Ron Hutchcraft, *Relationships . . . Yours for Life* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998).

⁵Ruth Osterhus, *Tricks or Treats?* (Minneapolis: Osterhus Publishing House, n.d.).

⁶*May I Ask You a Question?* (Dallas: EvanTell, 1996).

⁷Billy Graham, *Steps to Peace with God* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1997).

⁸*What Must I Do To Be Saved?* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, n.d.).

⁹Allen Jones, *Your Charisma Gift* (Lebanon, OH: Fellowship Tract League, n.d.).

heaven. Thank you for the free gift of eternal life I have just received. In Jesus' name, Amen."¹⁰

"Jesus, I believe that you are the holy Son of God. I believe that you died on the cross for my sins and that you rose from the dead. You are my salvation. Please wash all my sins away and make me a child of God. I give my life to you today. Amen"¹¹

"Heavenly Father, I confess that the only way I can be reconciled to you is through the atoning sacrifice of your only Son, Jesus Christ. I now accept the free gift of everlasting life and put my trust in Christ's complete payment for all my sins. In response to your love toward me, I now make the commitment to turn away from my sins, and to begin a new life of love and obedience to you, with the help of your Holy Spirit. This I pray in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen."¹²

"O God, I know that I am a sinner and deserve hell. I know that Jesus Christ died on the cross and rose again for me. I ask you to forgive me of my sin. I want you to come into my heart and take control of my life. In Jesus' name, amen."¹³

"Dear Jesus, I need You. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. Thank You for forgiving my sins and making me part of God's family. Take control of my life and make me the kind of person You want me to be. Amen."¹⁴

"Lord Jesus, I want to know You personally. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Savior and Lord. Thank You for

¹⁰R. Larry Moyer, *If Jesus Christ Had Only Five Minutes to Talk to You This Christmas Season, What Would He Like to Tell You?* (Dallas: EvanTell, 1999).

¹¹*What Is Meant by Salvation?* (Grand Rapids: Tract League, n.d.).

¹²*Who Is Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Tract League, n.d.).

¹³Tom Johnston, *There Is Hope . . . in Jesus* (Louisville: Evangelism Unlimited, n.d.).

¹⁴*Would You Like to Belong to God's Family?* (Orlando: NewLife Publications, 1998), 12.

forgiving me of my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.”¹⁵

“Lord, thank You for sending Your Son to die for me. I am turning from my sin and rebellion to receive Him as my Savior and Lord.”¹⁶

“Dear God, I know I fall short of Your perfect will every day. I have tried to do my best, but I realize that is not good enough to repair my problem and get me to heaven. I trust in Jesus’ death on the cross to delete the penalty for all my sins. I believe His resurrection gives me eternal life. Thank You for giving me this free and wonderful gift. Amen.”¹⁷

“Jesus, I am sorry for the things I do and say that are wrong. Make me your child, take care of me and help me from now on to follow you. Amen.”¹⁸

“Oh, God, I know I am a sinner. I believe Jesus was my substitute when He died on the cross. I believe His shed blood, death, burial, and resurrection were for me. I now receive Him as my Savior. I thank You for the forgiveness of my sins, the gift of salvation and everlasting life, because of Your merciful grace. Amen.”¹⁹

“Dear God, I believe in You, and I believe everything You say in the Bible is true. I believe the earth’s last days are close, and that the only way anyone can be saved is to trust in Your Son, Jesus Christ. I believe Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for my sin. I believe He rose again to new life and ascended into heaven. I believe He gives

¹⁵*Would You Like to Know God Personally* (Orlando: NewLife Publications, 1968), 10.

¹⁶*God So Loved* (Wheaton: Good News Publishers, 1990).

¹⁷*Y2K: Are You Ready?* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998)

¹⁸*Here’s a Treat for You and Some Good News* (Grand Rapids: Tract League, n.d.).

¹⁹Fred Porter, *God’s Simple Plan of Salvation: A Matter of Life or Death* (Monrovia, IN: Lifegate, 1991).

eternal life to all His people, that He will come back for them one day, and I want to be among them. I believe that by placing my faith in Christ alone I will never be left behind. Amen.”²⁰

“Dear God, I know that I am a sinner and that I need Your forgiveness. I believe that Jesus died in *my* place to pay the penalty for *my* sin and that He rose from the dead. I now invite Jesus to come into my life as my Savior. Thank You for making me Your child. Help me learn to please You in every part of my life.”²¹

“Dear God, thank You for sending Jesus to earth to die in my place. Thank you that He rose from the dead. I realize that I’m a sinner, and I need Your forgiveness. Please forgive my sins as I put my faith in Jesus and His sacrifice. Thank You for solving my sin problem.”²²

“Dear Jesus, I know I’ve lived a life that’s gone against everything You stand for. I am a sinner, and I am sorry. I want a fresh start. I believe You died to pay the penalty for my sins, and that You rose again to give me a new and eternal life. Thank You for forgiving me. Take charge of my life today. Amen.”²³

“God, I am willing to repent of my sins and receive Jesus as my Savior. I do believe He died for me and was raised again to give me new, spiritual life. Thank you, God, for saving me.”²⁴

²⁰Tim LaHaye, *Left Behind* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2000).

²¹Billy Graham, *The Time Is Now* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1995).

²²Dave Branon, *Football and the Post-game Kneel* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998).

²³Bruce Wilkinson, *The Prayer of Jabez* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 2001).

²⁴Art DeMoss, *How To Be Born Again!* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998).

“Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died in my place to pay the penalty for my sin and that You rose from the dead. I now turn from my sin and turn to You, trusting in You alone as my Savior and receiving Your gift of eternal life.”²⁵

²⁵Ed Cheek, *Titanic* (Garland, TX: American Tract Society, 1998).

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ABSTRACT

THE SINNER'S PRAYER: AN HISTORICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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This dissertation is an historical and theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, provides an example of the Sinner's Prayer, and proposes the importance of this study. The methodology and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Chapter 2 traces the history of evangelism from New Testament times. Significant movements and persons are discussed as they have importance for the development of a theology and methodology of evangelism that lead the way to the introduction of the Sinner's Prayer. Gospel tracts receive attention because they are representative of the popular approaches to evangelism. The case presented is that the Sinner's Prayer originated in the early twentieth century as a result of efforts to simplify and reproduce methods in evangelism. Billy Graham is given primary credit for popularizing the prayer.

Chapter 3 provides a theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer. The doctrine of prayer is discussed. Biblical soteriology receives significant attention. Theological objections that have been raised regarding the Sinner's Prayer are also discussed. Theological correctives are offered to those who will continue to use the prayer as a tool in evangelism.

Chapter 4 discusses the use of methods in evangelism, noting limitations,

dangers, and ethical considerations. This chapter stresses the need for reform in the way the Sinner's Prayer is typically used.

This work contends that the Sinner's Prayer is of recent origin. It reflects the theological and methodological shift in evangelism that occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theologically, most versions of the Sinner's Prayer fail to reflect the biblical directives for salvation. In the manner in which it is typically used, the prayer has become a barrier to effective evangelism. If evangelists will continue to make use of the prayer, reform is critical.

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