

THE SINNER'S PRAYER: BIBLICAL OR EXTRA-BIBLICAL

Within the Baptist and larger Evangelical Christian community, there is a debate concerning whether or not a person must pray to receive Jesus as their Savior. Certainly no one should discourage the unsolicited prayer of someone who is genuinely converted by the power of the gospel. Authentic prayer is often an expression of faith. Any time those who believe in Christ wish to pray, they should pray—but the evangelist (or any other person sharing the gospel) should never give someone the impression that a prayer seals the deal or is essential to salvation. The continued theme of the New Testament is “believe on the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 16:31). Where *believe* is always understood as so much more than intellectual assent—for even the demons believe and shudder (James 2:19). In contrast, those who believe are trusting God to keep his Word in all that he has promised in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 13:32).

The way many tracts and web pages are written, it appears that most believe words of faith must be articulated in a prayer or that the words guarantee something. Some people seem to believe that it is necessary for one to pray a prayer in order to be saved. Invitations at the end of a sermon are frequently conducted in such a way as to give the impression that the recitation of words, led by an evangelist, is effectual unto salvation. Must people ask or articulate words of faith (<http://www.sinner-prayer.com/>) to be saved? This “Sinner’s Prayer” is often found at the end of gospel tracts and web pages. Sometimes the person who now believes in Christ is told, with the supposed authority of the Bible, that if they were sincere when they prayed that they are now Christians and have eternal life. Is this true?

IS THIS TRUE?

Is that the gospel? Read a gospel tract, pray a prayer, and instantly one can be assured of his salvation—he is born again! Most would agree that a prayer doesn’t save the person, yet their gospel presentation and methods imply the opposite. People are told, “Sincerely pray this prayer,” and then they are assured that they are saved if they were *sincere* as though sincerity can be measured. How sincere is sincere? The evangelist may say something like, “This prayer does not save you. It is your *faith* that saves you. Would you like to *pray* to receive Jesus?” If faith saves, what is the point of asking would you like to pray? The better question is: “Do you know what it means to believe that the Lord Jesus is the Christ?” Or, “Are you willing to trust that God is able and willing to do all that he has promised to do in and through the death, burial, and resurrection of His Son Jesus?”

The gospel is a *promise* of salvation to all who put repentant faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God and his redemptive work (Rom. 1:1-2; 1 Cor. 15:1-4).

In reaction to “easy believism,” internationally known Southern Baptist Evangelist Paul Washer, John MacArthur, and others have been publically opposed for their adamant position that salvation prayers do not guarantee conversion. In some fellowships, Washer and others have been accused of perverting the grace of God with a “Lordship Salvation” doctrine. Is this a fair and balanced accusation? Washer discourages people from praying to receive Jesus and argues that no one can gain assurance of his salvation from such a prayer. Is he right? Does God need us to pray a prayer? Do we have a biblical model for a “Sinner’s Prayer?” Are the Scriptures prescriptive in this matter? These are important

questions that require answers from the Christian's only authority in life—the Word. This article will show that articulating a prayer of salvation should never be presented as a necessary component of salvation. It will clarify the role of prayer in a gospel presentation, provide three reasons why people should *not* be encouraged to pray to receive Jesus, and encourage new converts to begin following Jesus.

Those in the “Sinner’s Prayer” camp use Romans 10:9-10 and 10:13 as their trump cards, insisting that the unbeliever must “confess” and “call upon the name of the Lord” for salvation and that, when they do, they are saved. Who wouldn’t argue that “prayer, confess, and calling” seem to be the same? Indeed, Rom. 10:9-10 describes the “heart believing” and the “mouth confessing.” This seems to indicate there is a need for both. Is that correct? Should we interpret what Paul is saying as two actions—that believing and confessing are two requirements? Or should we interpret one as a requirement (belief) and the other as a result (confession)? Jesus said that if we confess him before others he will profess us before His Father (Mt 10:32). Is that the same as praying, “Dear Jesus, come into my heart?” Is that the confession of faith to which Christ is referring? Certainly not. When Jesus hears those words, do unbelievers receive the gift of salvation by receiving him and then become Christians? Should one be given assurance verses of salvation because he prayed a prayer? Some suggest that because eternal life is a gift one much ask for it (Romans 6:23). Is that what the Bible teaches? Can we find the apostles teaching men to pray to God to come into their hearts? Paul makes it clear what comes first—belief—when he asks, “How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?” (Romans 10:14).

Before we consider what John 1:12-13 says concerning how one receives Jesus (in their heart or life), it is interesting to note that those who require confession in the form of a prayer are often the same ones who insist that, “He that believes and is baptized shall be saved” (Mk. 16:16) does not teach that baptism is a requirement for salvation. They rightly teach that baptism is the outward expression of what has already happened in the heart and does not guarantee salvation, yet they often report people as saved because they prayed a prayer of salvation. Yet early in Christ’s ministry, he warned of “many” who will describe themselves as saved but are not (Matt. 7:21-23). The evangelist needs to acknowledge that in the same way baptism doesn’t guarantee salvation neither does confession of words of faith in a prayer. John 1:12-13 says:

But as many as received him [Christ], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, *even* to them that believe on his name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

According to these two verses people (both adults and children) become children of God by believing—not praying, asking or confessing. They receive Christ and “become sons of God” through their *faith* in Christ. They are not spiritually born again because of the will of any human, but it is God that gives those who *believe* the second birth and eternal life.

SUPERFICIAL BELIEF

The Apostle John is so convinced of this theological truth and wants his reader to comprehend this important doctrine, that he provides a practical illustration of this in John 2. In chapter one, John initially packs the chapter full of descriptions of Christ as the Word, God, the Light, the Son of God, the Christ, the Rabbi, the Prophet, the King of the Jews, and the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Then in chapter two, after Jesus cleanses the temple of those who were robbing the Jews during the Passover, John writes about people who believed on the name of Jesus, but Jesus did not positively respond to their belief. When Jesus was finished cleansing the temple, the Jewish leaders insisted upon a sign of authentication for His authority to cleanse the temple. And Christ promised them a sign—the sign of the resurrection. He spoke of the temple of His body being resurrected. But the Jews didn't understand His meaning. They thought that he was making reference to the physical temple he had just cleansed. Then John speaks of a group of people whose spiritual followers still exist today. Beginning in John 2:23-25, John writes of many who profess to believe in Jesus. Although their culture was different, it could be America where 80% of Americans consider themselves to be Christians—followers of Christ (*America's Seven Faith Tribes* p.29). John writes:

Now when he was in Jerusalem at the Passover, in the feast *day*, many believed in his name, when they saw the miracles which he did. But Jesus did not commit himself unto them, because he knew all *men*, And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man.

Notice that John uses the same language he used in chapter one: “believed in his name.” In fact, he says that “*many* believed on his name.” So, from this verse alone, one could conclude these people believed. They “believed on His name” and therefore must be saved. “But Jesus did not commit himself unto them.” What?! “But they believed!” you might say. In fact, they must have articulated belief at some point because John was not a mind-reader. Yet John writes, “*but*” as a transitional word to create a strong contrast to the “*many*” and noted that Jesus “did not commit himself unto them.” An examination of the Greek words behind John 2:24 show the use of *pisteuō* (one of John's favorite words for belief) twice in this verse. Jesus did not believe (*pisteuō*) that they (the many) believed (*pisteuō*) on Him.

Jesus' response to the many that believed was one of unbelief (or non-commitment). John had already explained to his reader that spiritual birth is not of the will of man, but of God. So John says that Jesus did not believe that they believed because “He knew all”—that is, he knew what they believed. He is God. God is omniscient. God knows whose belief is authentic and whose is not. (The evangelist cannot know what God knows.) God knows who believes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (such as Peter's great confession of faith in Matthew 16) and those whose belief is not authentic. Later John would write: “They went out *from us*, but they were *not of us*; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us” (1 John 2:19). John is well aware that there are pseudo-Christians who are not born again because authentic Christians continue in the faith. Genuine conversion cannot be ascertained minutes after a profession of faith or prayer. The evangelist must be content in realizing all he can do is ask probing questions. Jesus asked: “But who do you say that I am?” (Matt. 16:15). If a

child or adult articulates faith in Christ as their Savior they should be treated as a disciple of Christ and encouraged to begin following Jesus as their Teacher, Savior and Lord.

HE KNOWS THE HEART

Moreover, John writes “and needed not that any should testify of man.” Jesus doesn’t need to hear *words* of faith to recognize a person’s faith in Him. Only God knows when words are authentic expressions of faith. He knows all men. To use Paul’s language from Romans 10, he knows who is authentic in their belief in the Person and salvific work of Christ in their heart. Yet God enjoys hearing believers pray. New converts should be encouraged to begin talking to God in prayer.

John points out that Christ didn’t believe in those who expressed faith in Him. He doesn’t say that they didn’t “pray” or “call.” Jesus doesn’t need to hear a confession or testimony; he knows. An evangelist should tell a potential convert, “God knows your heart; he knows whether your belief is authentic or not.” Everyone else will have to wait to see if the one articulating faith in Christ turned to God from idols to serve the living God—repentance (1 Thess. 1:9, John 10:27).

In John 3, John launches into Christ’s encounter with Nicodemus and reinforces that Christ knows what Nicodemus thinks and believes. Jesus interrupts Nicodemus and goes to the heart of the issue. Jesus doesn’t need men to pray to receive Him; God knows whose belief is superficial and whose belief is authentic. When belief is authentic, Jesus commits Himself to the believer—they are born again. When it isn’t genuine, then that person is not born again—regardless of what they testify, speak, articulate or call out to the Lord or to others (see Matt. 7:21-27). The evangelist may have a desire to hear one pray in an attempt to ascertain whether the person is saved or not, but the truth is the articulation of a prayer is never presented as an assurance that one is saved. What role should prayer have in securing one’s salvation? The clear, biblical answer to that question is, “It cannot secure salvation.” People are saved by grace through repentant faith in the Person and salvific work of Christ.

Evangelists should never get in the way of a person wishing to spontaneously express faith in Christ through prayer, *but* neither should they encourage or require such. This is true for both adults and children. In fact one must be even more cautious in mixing prayer and faith with children. The truth is: It is very hard to determine if a child is born again. There isn’t a single biblical example of an evangelist teaching or leading someone to articulate a prayer to get saved. Tracts should be rewritten, web pages redesigned, evangelists retrained and gospel invitations should be limited to a call to repent and believe (Acts 20:21). Evangelists must be content with the reality that a prayer said well does *not* guarantee a person believes with the heart (Roman 10:9, 10).

THE PROMISES OF GOD

“God said it and I believe it” is the testimony of one who has been converted. Abraham is the model of such faith—he trusted in both the God of the promise and the promise he received from God. Consider how Paul describes Abraham’s saving faith as “being fully persuaded [convinced] that, what God had promised, God was able also to perform” (Romans 4:21). In Romans 1:1-2, Paul communicates that the very gospel of God was promised beforehand by God’s prophets in the Holy Scriptures. By faith, the

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follower of God believes that the Father will fulfill all that he has promised to his children in and through His Son—the Savior—who is Christ the Lord (2 Cor. 1:19-20). His faith is in both the God who made the promise and the promise. He must have faith in what God promised (the gospel) and believe (trust) that God is able to do what God promised. In Acts 26:6, Paul makes it very clear that his hope is *in the promise of God*. Peter describes these promises from God as “exceedingly great and precious which are able to make people partakers of the divine nature and deliver them from the corruption in the world” (2 Peter 1:4). And John understands one aspect of this promise to be *eternal life* (1 John 2:25). Ultimately, those born again become “children of the promise” (Gal. 4:28). Finally, Peter declared: “For the *promise* is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, *even* as many as the Lord our God shall call” (Acts 2:39). The evangelist preaches and the Spirit of God convicts of sin and calls them to salvation.

THE INVITATION

One can conclude that there isn’t any value in teaching men to articulate a Sinner’s Prayer to be saved for three reasons. First, the one desiring to be saved knows his own heart—he doesn’t need to articulate a prayer to tell himself what he believes. He knows if he believes. Second, in a similar way, God does not need to hear a prayer that articulates faith—he knows who believes. Third, the evangelist doesn’t know the prospect’s heart—therefore; the evangelist gains nothing from encouraging a prayer that may or may not reflect an authentic belief in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. If the evangelist wants to determine if the person understands the gospel presentation, he should ask specific questions about the gospel. For example, “do you understand what it means to trust in the promises God has made through the gospel of the Lord Jesus?” Or “Is there anything keeping you from trusting in the Savior God promised for your salvation?” If a person who believes desires to pray—he should pray—but he should never be encouraged to pray to receive salvation. He should be encouraged to repent and believe the gospel. When a person is regenerated (born again) they may sometimes pray. But such a prayer by the newly regenerated person is simply a confession of what they believe.

In Matthew 16, Jesus told Peter that his great confession came from the Father; his flesh and blood (brain or heart) did not come up with it. It was revealed to him. This reinforces the ridiculousness of encouraging a prayer to receive Christ when the Father is the one who reveals the truth that Jesus is the Christ (Matthew 16:13-17). Praying to God doesn’t prove that one believes. It is absurd to suggest that the Father needs to be told (via prayer) who he is drawing to the Son (John 6:44). Twenty-first century evangelists should follow the example of the Apostles. They testified to everyone that a person is saved through repentance toward God and faith (belief) in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38, 16:31, 17:30 and 20:21). Those who profess to believe (trust in the promises) on the Lord for their salvation should be encouraged to begin following Jesus in worship, Bible study, professions, prayer, baptism, and church membership.

A FINAL WORD ON PRAYING

None of this is meant to discourage anyone from praying. “Men ought to always pray” (Luke 18:1). “God be merciful to me a sinner” and “Remember me when you come into your Kingdom” are

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examples of prayers expressing faith in the Lord (Luke 18:13, 23:42). When the Spirit leads men to pray, they should pray. However, such genuine prayer is substantially different from prayer prompted by the evangelist. Such prayer may produce a false sense of one's assurance of salvation. In Luke 23:39-42, the heart of the thief on the cross had already been changed—this can be seen when he began to rebuke his fellow thief dying with him. His prayer was a reflection of what he believed, and he didn't need someone leading or encouraging him to petition God. He said what he already believed—Christ was a King who was able to save him.

Certainly, there have been thousands upon thousands of people who have been saved and subsequently prayed to receive Jesus. However, the problem with praying to receive Jesus is that it has filled churches with multitudes of unsaved church members—people who are fully convinced they are saved because they “asked Jesus in their heart” but are *not* believers. Many more are not in any church today despite previously praying to receive Jesus because they were never born again yet have a false assurance of salvation. Paul wrote, “No man can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor. 12:3). Certainly Paul is not writing about the articulation of the words “Jesus is Lord.” Anyone can pray a prayer. This is a reminder that it is the Spirit who gives new birth and the Spirit's work is invisible (John 3:8). Articulating a prayer doesn't obligate God to save a person. If a person doubts his salvation, praying to receive Jesus again is not the solution. Instead, an admonishment to seek the Lord while he may be found and call upon Him while he is near would be more appropriate with the promise that he will never cast out anyone who comes to Him (Is. 55:6; John 6:37). At some point, the evangelist has said all he can say and must trust that it is God who saves—the evangelist can't get the person saved. His responsibility is to “preach the gospel” (Mk. 16:15) and trust in the grace of God to give “the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6-7, Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 2:11).

What seems most appropriate at the end of a gospel presentation, or a post-sermon invitation, is for evangelist to close the time with the person in prayer. He or she should express thanksgiving to God for an opportunity to share the gospel and to pray that the Spirit will convict, give faith and strength to follow Jesus (Mk. 8:34). The person who declares the gospel could certainly do well to pray for converts and petition the Sovereign God of the Universe to “grant repentance” and “give the increase” (Acts 11:18; 1 Cor. 3:7). Praying for the conversion of a soul is always appropriate—but no one should ever be told, or allowed to infer from a method or additional requirement, that a prayer saves. Believing (not intellectual assent or empty prayers) on the Lord saves. This is the biblical demand.

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