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Saving the Church from the Sinner's Prayer

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abstract

The Sinner's Prayer has become part and parcel of Western evangelistic methodology. Its historical derivation can be traced to American revivalist techniques. The prayer's application in twenty-first century popular culture has added further obstacles to the process of making genuine disciples as Jesus is presented as a commodity to be consumed in order to achieve self-actualization. In this setting, the calls to count the cost of discipleship have been neglected, which has adversely affected the church. To reverse course, baptism should replace the prayer's usage as an indication of one's commitment to Christ, and disciple formation should incorporate the biblical concept of an obedient faith.

If the Sinner's Prayer is not the *sine qua non* of evangelism American-style, then it is hard to imagine what is. It is practically impossible for Americans to think of winning people to Christ apart from it. Simply ask those schooled in various evangelistic strategies popularized in the church today to consider making converts without it, and responses will range from complete disempowerment, to bewilderment, to sincerely doubting the orthodoxy of the one making the suggestion.

There are, of course, many extant versions of the prayer. Billy Graham's *Steps to Peace with God* renders it: "Dear Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name. Amen."[1] James Kennedy's *Evangelism Explosion* puts it: "Lord Jesus, thank You for Your gift of eternal life. I know I'm a sinner and do not deserve eternal life. But You loved me so [sic] You died and rose from the grave to purchase a place in Heaven for me. I now trust in You alone for eternal life and repent of my sin. Please take control as Lord of my life. Thank you so much!"[2] A more contemporary approach known as the Evangecube presents it as: "God, thank You for loving me. I confess that I have sinned against You. I believe that Your Son Jesus died on a cross to pay for my sins, and that You raised Jesus from the dead. I now put my faith only in Jesus to forgive me and save me from my sins. I confess that Jesus is Lord! Thank you for your gift of eternal life. I pray in Jesus' name, Amen."[3] The prayer at the end of the "JESUS" film, which has reportedly been shown to more than six billion people with 231,474,675 indicating decisions to accept Christ, says: "Lord Jesus, I need you. Thank You for dying on the cross for my sins. I confess and repent of 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. Make me the kind of person You want me to be, as I become one of Your followers. Amen."[4]

Besides the claim that the prayer is a form of "magic" (Koukl 2007:1), its utilization in multicultural contexts has been shown to circumvent the conversion process itself. Mark Harris reports that 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. 'I think people shouldn't use the . . . sinner's prayer in evangelism. . . .' Russians will repeat after you when nothing is happening on the inside" (2001:205).[5] In addition, Donald Meador opines,

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[1] Cf. http://www.billygraham.org/specialsections/steps-to-peace/steps-to-peace.asp. Accessed July 7, 2010.

[2] Cf. http://www.eeinternational.org/pages/page.asp?page_id=31460. Accessed July 7, 2010.

[3] Cf. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GhVldzsGEck. Accessed July 7, 2010.

[4] Cf. http://www.jesusfilm.org/film-and-media/watch-the-film and http://www.jesusfilm.org/film-and-media/statistics /quarterly-statistics. Accessed July 7, 2010. The author and his wife were involved with tabulating these statistics while showing the film in Kenya in the early 1980s.

[5] He adds, "I believe we need to consider not only the propriety of the evangelistic approaches that we use, but also what we are passing on to Russians by way of 'training' for evangelism. Are we setting them up for failure by handing them naïve, ill-conceived approaches? Will we ruin their reputation by leading them to do things that needlessly turn off the peers they are trying to reach? Will our methods give them false impressions that will carry over into other aspects of discipleship? Our classroom mentality often sends a message of detachment from life that feels unnatural to Russians—and rightly so. Increasingly we are being encouraged by Russian leaders to help them lay a foundation of proper theology, but then to let them take the lead in discerning the forms and approaches that are wisest for communicating the truth of the gospel to their own people" (2001:209).

When people come to Latin and South America with evangelism in mind, they usually do not realize the role that prayer plays in these cultures. . . . Many folks in this part of the world will pray just about any prayer that they believe will gain them a benefit.

That being the case, the "Sinner's Prayer," used in modern evangelism, is often viewed as a "get out of hell free" card. Just because a person in this part of the world prays a prayer does not mean that they have faith in Jesus, or even that they understand the Good News about Jesus. Generally speaking, if you ask someone here if they want to pray a specific prayer so they can go to heaven and not hell, they will want to pray that prayer. The problem is that they, more often than not, place their faith in the prayer rather than in Jesus. This proves to be very problematic, especially when the evangelizer proclaims that the one who prayed the Sinner's Prayer is saved. The one who prayed that prayer walks away thinking they are saved because they prayed a prayer and the person who told them the words proclaimed them to be saved. It may be that the person, placing their faith in the prayer or in the foreigner, merely received a gospel inoculation. (2009:2–3)

Also, the question as to whether this strategy is actually conducive to producing genuine disciples in the land of its origin cannot be ignored. In reality, contemporary North American Christians have been conditioned to believe that because they prayed a prayer, raised their hand, signed on the dotted line, stood in a service, or performed some other sacrosanct activity, they have been ushered into God's redeemed community and have nothing more with which to be bothered. However, David Gushee rightfully notes, "Mediocrity and hypocrisy characterize the lives of many avowed Christians, at least in part because of our default answer to the salvation question. Anyone can, and most Americans do, 'believe' in Jesus rather than some alternative savior. Anyone can, and many Americans sometimes do, say a prayer asking Jesus to save them. But not many embark on a life fully devoted to the love of God, the love of neighbor, the moral practice of God's will, and radical, costly discipleship" (2007:72). Consequently, some have felt constrained to call for a "moratorium" on saying the prayer itself (Baumann 2007:1).

scripturally sanctioned?

The riposte of those committed to this evangelistic methodology is that its use is justified on the basis of at least seven different biblical passages: 1) the command to ask, seek, and knock (Mt. 7:7; Lk. 11:9); 2) the need to confess Christ before others (Mt. 10:32; Lk. 12:8); 3) the tax collector's exemplary prayer to God (Lk.

18:13); 4) the call to receive Jesus into one's heart (Jn. 1:11–13); 5) Simon the magician being implored by Peter to pray for forgiveness (At. 8:22); 6) Jesus standing at the door, asking to be invited in (Rev. 3:20); and 7) calling on the name of the Lord (Rom. 10:13; cf. At. 2:21; 22:16).

In the first case, the three imperatives are repeated as present participles in the following verse in both the Matthean and Lukan accounts, signifying continuous action. It is therefore difficult to see how this would apply to the Sinner's Prayer, unless one envisions it being repeated over and over again. On the second, the context shows that rather than dealing with prayer, the disciples are being challenged to overcome "fear" (Mt. 10:26, 28, twice, 31; Lk. 12:5, thrice, 7) by verbally acknowledging before others their allegiance to Jesus in the face of potential persecution. With reference to the third, it must be kept in mind that Jesus told this parable because "some people . . . trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt" (v. 9). As such, the import of the story is not to establish a paradigm for prayer but to highlight the fact that one's spiritual disposition before God matters, "for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 14). In the fourth passage, the phrase "as many as received him" is qualified at the end of the same verse by the parallel "to those who believe in his name," thus indicating that belief in Jesus rather than any specific prayer is the manner in which he is welcomed into one's life. In relation to Peter's exhortation to "pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you," there is no indication that he is requesting Simon to pray for salvation, but rather that "this wickedness of yours" (v. 22), that is, his desire "to obtain the gift of God with money" (v. 20) might be forgiven. In the sixth scenario, the question is whether the Laodicean Christians were already believers or not. According to G. K. Beale, "This is an invitation not for the readers to be converted but to renew themselves in a relationship with Christ that has already begun, as is apparent from v 19" (1999:308), thereby suggesting that if prayer is denoted here, it is not one of salvation but of restored fellowship with Christ. The seventh case is similar to the fourth. Calling "on the name of the Lord" is predicated by the promise that salvation comes by believing that "God has raised [Jesus] from the dead" (v. 9). Therefore, although prayer is certainly not disallowed here, it is ultimately one's belief in what Christ has accomplished that leads to salvation. That is, prayer and belief certainly may go together, but prayer is certainly not essential for the believer to be saved.[6]

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[6] On this point, Michael Horton writes: "No one is called in the New Testament to pray 'the sinner's prayer,' asking Jesus to come into his or her heart. Especially in Acts, this is the pattern: God's judgment is announced on all people; the gospel is proclaimed as Christ's fulfillment of the Scriptures, and many, convicted of their sins and the Good News of salvation of Christ, believe, are baptized, and are thereby added to the church" (2009a:93).

Besides scant exegetical support, two additional dilemmas confront those who ardently maintain that saying the Sinner's Prayer is necessary for salvation. First, there are countless individuals who have recited the prayer without any noticeable change in their lives. Second, there are many who have never prayed the prayer but have manifested a vibrant, commendable relationship with Christ and His church. For instance, the wife of one of the strongest proponents of the prayer, Ruth Graham, was not able to mark the date of her "spiritual birthday" as a consequence of praying the prayer (Graham 1989:167). Furthermore, C. S. Lewis speaks of his conversion experience in this way:

> Of one thing I am sure. As I drew near the conclusion, I felt a resistance almost as strong as my previous resistance to Theism. As strong, but shorter-lived, for I understood it better. Every step I had taken, from the Absolute to "Spirit" and from "Spirit" to "God," had been a step toward the more concrete, the more imminent, the more compulsive. At each step one had less chance "to call one's soul one's own." To accept the Incarnation was a further step in the same direction. It brings God nearer, or near in a new way. And this, I found, was something I had not wanted. But to recognize the ground for my evasion was of course to recognize both its shame and its futility. I know very well when, but hardly how, the final step was taken. I was driven to Whipsnade one sunny morning. When we set out I did not believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and when we reached the zoo I did. (1955:237)

If then the objections of those who advocate the use of the Sinner's Prayer are unsustainable, how is it that this evangelistic practice has risen to such prominence in the mission of the church today? To answer this question, one must turn to the past.

historical derivation

American civil religion, like the society it finds itself in, has always contained a potent element of self-determination and expression. As a revitalization movement coming out of the Church of England, the "Puritan Awakening," writes historian William McLoughlin, "gave America its own core, its sense of being a differently constituted people. . . . [T]heir pietistic perfectionism, their belief in further light and a higher law, their commitment to freedom of conscience and separation of church and state, and, above all, their profound sense of individual piety made the Americans different" (1978:25). These Puritans inhabiting a New World "were concerned about that internalized faith which was bestowed on unworthy but elect individuals. . . . This faith was an inner experience, not the result of external ritual

or sacraments" (Leonard 1985:114). Even "new light" preachers such as George Whitefield during the First Great Awakening (1714–1770), in reaction to the dead formalism of "old light" Christian constructs, "emphasized the personal responsibility of the individual" (McLoughlin 1978:18, 61). As such, the American experiment from its very inception inextricably bound hardy individualism to personal preference in religion. It should not come as a surprise then that whereas the "First Awakening . . . weakened the old doctrine of predestination . . . the Second Awakening finally subverted it entirely. The key issues became the role of man and the means he might use (or that God used) to effect the regenerations of the soul" (McLoughlin 1978:114).

This environment provided fertile soil for innovative revivalistic techniques to germinate and spread rapidly. Although preceded by Eleazer Wheelock (1711–1779), who utilized the "Mourner's Seat" to "target sinners by having them sit in the front bench" of his meetings (Staten 2006:3), it was Charles Finney's (1792–1875) "new measures" that forever changed the manner in which people would come to faith in America. Finney, an ordained Presbyterian itinerant home missionary, had grown impatient with old school Calvinists whose system of conversion entailed "prescriptions of long and agonizing prayer and 'waiting on God'" which ended in "a formalized ritual [producing] hypocrisy and superficiality" (McLoughlin 1959:98; 1978:123). As a result, he advised the sinner, "instead of waiting and praying for God to change your heart, you should at once summon up your powers, put forth the effort, and change the governing preferences of your mind" (Finney 1836:37). "The fact is," he maintained, "God requires you to turn, and what he requires of you, he cannot do for you. It must be your own voluntary act. . . . Do not wait then for him to do your duty, but do it immediately yourself, on pain of eternal death" (1836:29). In order to facilitate the immediacy of conversion, he established the "Anxious Seat" which he described as "the appointment of some particular seat in the place of meeting [usually the front benches or pews] where the anxious may come and be addressed particularly and be made the subject of prayers and sometimes conversed with individually" (Finney 1835:246–47). Furthermore, he believed that baptism in the days of the apostles "held the precise place that the anxious seat does now, as a public manifestation of [one's] determination to be" Christian (1835:248), and he was convinced by experience that "the use of the anxious seats was undoubtedly philosophical and according to the laws of mind" (McLoughlin 1959:95).[7]

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[7] Finney's ministry had worldwide impact through Western missionaries who implemented his "new measures" in their contexts of service. A case in point is the Brit Joe Church whose "self-conscious model for much of his revival activity was Charles Finney. . . . In March 1939, Church conducted a two-week, 1700-mile series of meetings that took him, his wife Decima, and William Nagenda through southern Sudan, Uganda, Congo, Rwanda, then back to Kabale in Uganda.

Of course, complaints quickly arose from his detractors who attacked him on at least two grounds: 1) the "Anxious Seat" was judged as "simply a means of exerting social pressure upon individuals, a device for holding them up to the praise of friends and neighbors if they went forward, or to calumny if they did not" (McLoughlin 1959:96); and 2) his practice had itself become "stereotyped and forced ritual" reflecting the "essence of formalism and hypocrisy" being so exalted "as to be deemed influential in procuring divine favor" (McLoughlin 1959:148). Yet to those who criticized his efforts, he retorted, "Show me the fruits of your ministry; and if they so far exceed mine as to give me evidence that you have found a more excellent way, I will adopt your views. But do you expect me to abandon my own views and practices, and adopt yours, when . . . the results justify my methods?" (Finney 1876:83) In evaluating his ministry, Bill Leonard notes, "Finney's philosophy of and morphology for salvation was a major factor in turning mass evangelism from the extended period of conviction and preparation to conversion as an immediately apprehended event" (1985:119).

With Finney blazing the trail, others soon followed, but with their own modifications to the art of revivalism. Dwight L. Moody (1837–1899), believing that the "Anxious Seat" unnecessarily embarrassed those sitting in the front of the congregation, deemed it appropriate "to ask those in the audience who were anxious for their souls, or who wished to be prayed for, to stand" because "in the very act of rising" they are blessed (McLoughlin 1959:245). After his meetings, those interested were invited to come to the "Inquiry Room" in relative privacy for further interaction. With reference to these gatherings, he asserted, "In my own experience I find that where one person has been converted under the sermon, a hundred have been converted in the inquiry room" (McLoughlin 1959:246). One account of such a meeting runs:

> Moody entered briskly, marched to the front of the room, climbed up on a chair so that everyone could see him, and read briefly from the Bible some passage about the freedom of salvation for all who believed. Then he made a short, forceful exposition of the text, insisting upon the necessity for immediate surrender to Christ. He asked all who wished to find God "to get on their knees until the thing was settled." All the inquirers knelt. Moody then asked them to repeat after him, "Lord, what wilt thou have me do?" If he did

At each stop the three were able either to fan the fires of revival already underway or turn new initiates to the repentance, confessions, and serious commitment that already marked so many other places in the region. As Church drove from place to place, the revival team passed the miles with William Nagenda reading aloud from an often-reprinted book by Charles Finney that had first appeared in 1835. It was Finney's *Revivals of Religion*, a volume that set out the message and the techniques that Finney had used in his noteworthy labors in the United States" (Noll 2009:183). This adds weight to the claim that a missionary "strategy becomes a projection of the culture of the strategist" (Shenk 1993:219).

not get a hearty response, he would make them repeat it again. (McLoughlin 1959:260)

On another such occasion, he was confronted by a woman who said, "I want you to know that I do not believe your theology" at which time he responded, "My theology! I didn't know I had any. I wish you would tell me what my theology is" (McLoughlin 1959:246). For Moody, "theology meant creeds and dogma and he would have none of them" so much so that all "questions of doctrine were dismissed as irrelevant in the inquiry room" (McLoughlin 1959:246, 261). When ridiculed for his poor logic, business-like mindset, hymns, stories, vulgarity, and slang, Moody answered, "It doesn't matter how you get a man to God provided you get him there" (McLoughlin 1959:259). In the later years of Moody's career, he began to employ "decision cards" to address the concerns of pastors for better follow-up of people who were converted in his meetings (McLoughlin 1959:264).

Although he learned from the evangelistic techniques of his predecessors, Billy Sunday (1862–1935) with his team of "experts" and "revival machinery" carried revivalism to a whole new level of efficiency. In fact, he was far more successful than Finney and Moody in terms of "conversion statistics" (McLoughlin 1978:146). Sunday dispensed with the "Inquiry Room" because, according to his wife, "He made [the gospel] so simple that there was no need for inquiry rooms." In Sunday's mind, all "that a man had to do to obtain forgiveness for sins . . . which came from 'accepting Christ' was to 'hit the sawdust trail'" (McLoughlin 1959:410). This entailed walking forward after his sermons on the sawdust covered aisles, whereupon the person would shake Sunday's hand and be given a decision card to sign. After signing the card, "the penitent was handed a booklet which stated, 'by this act of coming forward . . . you are NOW a child of God' and 'you have NOW eternal life'" (McLoughlin 1959:410). Sunday viewed himself not only as "a preacher but [a] businessman. I endeavor [to] bring: 1. System [and] organization; 2. Business principles; 3. Commonsense" into revival work (McLoughlin 1959:420). In reflecting on this *modus operandi*, one reporter for the *New York Times* in 1917 commented, "Sunday and his helpers made it clear that they were going after souls as a successful commercial corporation goes after sales" (McLoughlin 1959:420). Sunday's effectiveness as a revivalist has been attributed to his glowing personality and acrobatic antics on the platform which resulted in "making millions out of the revival business," yet his sermons were apparently "so loosely phrased as to lack any real religious content" (McLoughlin 1959:426, 434; 1978:147).

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when the Sinner's Prayer was connected to mass evangelism. Although forms of prayer were evident in the ministries of both

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Finney and Moody, and subsequently in those of A. C. Dixon (1854–1925) and R. A. Torrey (1856–1928) (cf. Torrey 1901:162ff; 1910:30–31), the Sinner's Prayer did not really come of age until the greatest evangelist of the twentieth century— Billy Graham. What makes him stand out from his forerunners is the use of the microphone, loud speakers, and documentary films in which his revival sermons were featured (McLoughlin 1959:492). Graham claimed that "the gospel of Jesus Christ" was "the greatest product in the world," much like a "miracle drug that can heal the ills of the world," and saw his organization as "a business corporation to market this drug" (McLoughlin 1959:513). One critic of his approach concluded that Graham asked the question, "Why not try God?" in a similar way that commercial advertisers asked, "Why not try Delovely soap?" (McLoughlin 1959:513). During the "Great London Crusade" of 1966, those who responded to his sermon by coming forward were led in the following prayer, "O God, I am a sinner. I am sorry for my sin. I am willing to turn from my sin. I receive Christ as Savior. I confess Him as Lord. From this moment on I want to follow Him and serve Him in the fellowship of His Church" (Murray 1967:6). Graham, who actually was not baptized until after he began his evangelistic work (cf. McLoughlin 1959:485–86), quickly rose to fame due to the "improved efficiency and thoroughness of the media of mass communications," but "his preaching did not seem very different from that of previous modern revivalists" (McLoughlin 1959:521). Nevertheless, in the ministry of Graham, the union between revivalistic event, prayer, and conversion finally came to fruition (cf. Leonard 1985:123).

Several conclusions concerning the evolution of conversion techniques can now be delineated. First, the "revival engineers had to exercise increasing ingenuity to find even more sensational means to replace those worn out by overuse" (Cross 1950:184). In this way, they were able to guarantee not only their survival but success. Second, because the methods were assumed to produce conversions, they were "accompanied in every case by apparently sincere statements that all came from God" (Cross 1950:183). Consequently, the various techniques themselves evolved to the point of taking on "sacramental" significance (cf. Leonard 1985:121). Third, the majority of people attending the revivals already had some connection with the church such that the "pious" who responded to the evangelists' directives simply "became more pious" (McLoughlin 1959:262). Even Graham's ministry was incapable of overcoming "the same weaknesses that had always plagued mass evangelism," namely, "the crowds were made up overwhelmingly of persons already in church or attending church regularly" (McLoughlin 1959:515; cf. Terry 1994:170). Fourth, the question as to whether long-term behavioral change has occurred in the lives of those who responded to God through these

methods cannot be avoided. Richard Peace points out that the "statistics indicate that on average only 10 percent of those who respond at an evangelistic meeting become active disciples of Jesus" (1999:305). By any standard of measurement, this is a meager return on the investment in time, energy, and finance. Fifth, when the evangelist becomes a salesperson, there is an "unfortunate mixing of means and ends. . . . Such a process insinuates that though salvation is free and comes by grace through faith, the presentation of the gospel is dependent upon clever and costly propaganda devices and techniques. In order to help the gospel 'sell' it must be sugarcoated. As a result, the truth, precision, and authenticity of the Christian message is abased" (Morris 1981:23). Moreover, to evangelize with this paradigm "is to seek out potential customers. Once they are located, then you manipulate the situation by means of clever questions and strong emotions so that you get to deliver your sales pitch on behalf of Jesus. The aim in all of this is to close the deal. . . . Then it is off to the next customer" (Peace 1999:345).[8] In such a scenario, the audience instead of the author of salvation is sovereign. Hence, whereas "Jonathan Edwards placed shiners [sic] in the hands of an angry God . . . without realizing it . . . revivalists created techniques which reversed that process" to the point that "God now sits in the hands of sinners who, if not angry, are certainly demanding" (Leonard 1985:123). Last, in a very real sense going forward to the "Anxious Seat," attending the "Inquiry Room," walking the "sawdust trail," and reciting the "Sinner's Prayer," have usurped Christian baptism as the scripturally sanctioned means of testifying to one's faith in public [e.g. the Jews (At. 2:38, 41); the Samaritans (At. 8:12); the Ethiopian (At. 8:38); Paul (At. 9:18; 22:16); Cornelius and his relatives (At. 10:24, 48); Lydia and her household (At. 16:15); the Philippian jailor and his family (At. 16:33); Crispus and the Corinthians (At. 18:8); and John's disciples (At. 19:5)]. The ramifications of this phenomenon in attempting to form committed disciples of Christ continue to place stumbling blocks in the church's mission to the world.

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past meets present

Enter twenty-first century American Christianity which has taken the revivalist baton from the past and has run to unprecedented levels of cultural

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8 In this connection, one thinks of Bill Bright, founder of Campus Crusade for Christ, who has been depicted as "a businessman. His business acumen has emboldened him to lurch ahead where many evangelicals fear to tread: He has wedded spirituality and marketing principles. J. I. Packer calls Bright 'God's entrepreneur to middle America.' He says, 'Some brilliant people can see their way to a formula that fits almost everybody. Henry Ford did it with the Model T; Bill Bright did it with the Four Spiritual Laws.' Bright understands America's appetite for a simple message with straightforward appeal. So the gospel presentation he has fashioned can be mass produced, expeditiously disseminated, and proficiently advanced" (Zoba 1997).

accommodation to the spirit of the age. When forty percent of Americans identify themselves as born again Christians but "live in ways that are statistically indistinguishable from the 60 percent who make no such claims" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:101), what is the source of the variance? It is "Corporate Constantinianism" (2007:165), says Tyler Wigg Stevenson, in which the church has not been wedded to the state but to the power of consumerist ideology whereby Jesus is marketed as a brand. Not only does the branding of Jesus incorporate "a number of disparate economic, technological, political, philosophical, and . . . theological movements over the past several centuries," but it has regrettably duped the church to embrace "the idolatrous notion that we are what we buy. Our answer to consumerism has not been a vigorous counterinsistence that we are who God has given us to be. No, we have agreed to Mammon's terms, consented to be what we consume, and then happily gone about manufacturing Brand Jesus, the god of a Christianity that is a commodity for consumption" (2007:103). Indeed, "faced with a competitive

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market, we have done our best to brand Christianity as the most attractive product available" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:108, 117). "Like brand Mercedes or brand Nike . . . Brand Jesus carries a host of transcendent values provided by the imaginations of the consumers in the spiritual marketplace. Instead of financial or athletic success, however, Brand Jesus provides the consumer with a sense of spiritual privilege" and the typical way to determine whether people have actually attained such a privilege is to query, "When did you accept him as your personal savior?" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:104). Given the fact that the greatest selling book in American publishing history, *The Purpose Driven Life*, addresses the American appetite for self-actualization ought to clue the church into what is transpiring. In reality, Americans approach Jesus as full-fledged consumers who presume that when "it is just you and Jesus, you (the consumer) 'invite him' (the product) 'into your heart' (brand adoption) and 'get saved' (consumer satisfaction)" (Wigg Stevenson 2010:2).

The obvious conundrum with all of this is that Jesus is not a product to be consumed, not an idol to achieve personal realization, and not a guarantor of a life happily ever after. In other words, "Jesus Christ cannot be a brand because he forbids the presence of any competitors" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:118). Therefore, at a time when "the church in America . . . is so obsessed with being practical, relevant, helpful, successful, and perhaps even well-liked that it nearly mirrors the world itself," it must reevaluate its "commitment to the revivalistic paradigm," and resolutely work toward the formation of "a genuine covenantal community defined by the gospel rather than a service provider defined by laws of the market, political ideologies, ethnic distinctives, or other alternatives to the catholic community that

the Father is creating by his Spirit in his Son" (Horton 2009b:16, 227, 256). The first step along this path must be the recovery of a biblical theology of both conversion and discipleship (cf. Leonard 1985:124; Wigg Stevenson 2007:221).

converts and/or disciples?

It is hard to admit but the "vast majority of American churches [have made] becoming a Christian . . . as painless as adding a new brand to the repertoire that already forms [one's] identity" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:118). Moreover, the church has presented the call to discipleship as one option "among many, when it ought to stand separate, as different from other ways of living as Christ was from the world" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:103). This has lead to what Dallas Willard describes as the "Great Omission" in the "Great Commission" resulting in the "Great Disparity" between belief and behavior on the part of the average American Christian (2006:xii).

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But what could have possibly laid the groundwork for such a plight? Wigg Stevenson points to the "Sinner's Prayer," but that is probably too simplistic of an answer (2007:114). Rather the cause has much deeper theological roots. Although there is a complex array of issues involved, one critical element leading to the present state of affairs dates back to Lewis Sperry Chafer. In his *Systematic Theology*, he contended with reference to the means of salvation that repentance is one of "the more common features of human responsibility which are too often erroneously added to the one requirement of *faith* or *belief*" (1948:372). He later qualified himself by stating that "repentance is essential to salvation and that none could be saved apart from repentance," but it must be noted that his concept of repentance was synonymous with "*belief*" (1948:373, 377). That is, in Chafer's mind, calling people to repent was equivalent to calling them to believe, because it involved "a change of mind" regarding the salvific work of Christ (1948:374). From within the dispensational school, Charles Ryrie went on to affirm the same: repentance "is a valid condition for salvation when it is understood as a synonym for faith" (1986:2073). In addition, J. Dwight Pentecost, working from within this same framework, made the assertion that there "is a vast difference between being saved and being a disciple. Not all men who are saved are disciples although all who are disciples are saved. In discussing the question of discipleship, we are not dealing with a man's salvation. We are dealing with a man's relationship to Jesus Christ as his Teacher, his Master, and his Lord" (1971:14). In Pentecost's view, then, there are two categories of Christians: 1) ordinary believers in whose lives repentance of sin is not essential; and 2) disciples who have made a deeper

commitment to Christ by, among other things, repenting from sin (cf. 1971:38, 40). However, the foremost difficulty with this hypothesis is its misreading of the spiritual condition of the audiences to whom Jesus directs His discipleship calls. For instance, when He announced to the Galileans, "repent and believe in the gospel" for the "kingdom of God was at hand" (Lk. 1:15), when He advised the "crowds" to count the cost before following Him (Lk. 14:25–33), or when He directed the rich young ruler to sell all he possessed and "give it to the poor" in order to gain "eternal life" (Mt. 19:16–22), Jesus is clearly not addressing people who were already believers. This reveals that He applied His radical summons to join His band of disciples to not-yet believers. Thus, as Michael Wilkins observes, in contradiction to Pentecost, "We should call all believers disciples and those with advanced commitment something like 'mature disciples'" (1992:44).

It is precisely at this point where contemporary presentations of the gospel fail to measure up to Jesus' model of making disciples. Unfortunately, the "call to repentance, the certainty of final judgment, and the reality of hell are seldom mentioned lest it lead to a decline in our 'market share'" (Tennett 2007:18). "In addition, easy believism fails to tell the people that faith cannot be understood apart from faithfulness; that conversion leads to costly obedience, radical discipleship. It means a total reorientation of one's life. . . . To omit any mention of this costly discipleship is dishonest. If Jesus felt it was necessary to point out the cost of discipleship (Luke 14:25–35), can we do less?" (Morris 1981:148) The fact is that Scripture links saving faith to obedience (cf. Mt. 7:20; Jn. 3:36; At. 20:21; Rom. 1:5; 15:18; 16:26; 1 Thes. 1:9; 2 Thes. 1:8), so much so that after his exhaustive study on πίστις (faith) in the New Testament, Rudolf Bultmann surmised, "'to believe' is 'to obey'" (1964:205). In other words, Christian conversion entails a "dialectic of denial and affirmation" (McKnight 1999:166), where a person in repentance "looks back and decides to leave behind (turn away from) certain errant ways and false gods"[9] and in faith "looks ahead in trust and confidence to Jesus" (Peace 1999:352). Hence, any evangelism that omits repentance cannot be an accurate reflection of the gospel, any invitation to salvation that divorces the call to and cost of discipleship cannot be supported by

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[9] On all-encompassing nature of repentance, Geerhardus Vos states: "Our Lord's idea of repentance is as profound and comprehensive as his conception of righteousness. Of the three words that are used in the Greek Gospels to describe the process, one emphasizes the emotional element of regret, sorrow over the past evil course of life, *metaméloma*, Matt. 21:29–32; a second expresses reversal of the entire mental attitude, *metanoéo*, Matt. 12:41; Luke 11:32; 15:1, 10; the third denotes a change in the direction of life, one goal being substituted for another, *epistréphomai*, Matt. 13:15 (and parallels); Luke 17:4; 22:32. Repentance is not limited to any single faculty of the mind: it engages the entire man, intellect, will and affections . . . in the new life which follows repentance the absolute supremacy of God is the controlling principle" (1972:92–93).

the example of Jesus, and any person claiming to be a believer who feels s/he is not obligated to obey cannot turn to Scripture for support.

Perhaps the hesitancy that comes from connecting repentance too closely to faith is a carryover from the Reformation in which Protestants rightfully sought to filter out works from faith as the only legitimate requirement for salvation. But this has regrettably resulted in the widespread evangelical assumption that "Faith = Salvation + Works" (cf. Martindale 2010:69). As Edmund Neufeld explains, this equation derives from a forced dualism upon Scripture:

"Saved by faith not by works" does not represent the Synoptic Gospels, and so does not summarize the NT soteriology . . . rather than separating faith and works one should separate grace and merit, for the Synoptics affirm grace not merit, and gift not payment.

I have been speaking of "works" as if it were a uniform NT category, with a correspondingly uniform relationship to faith, but that is not accurate. If we take "works" to mean "acts of obedience" or "a life of obedience," we find that the NT distinguishes between different works, depending on whom one obeys, Christ or Moses' Law. These two different obediences, to Christ or to the Law, have contrasting relationships to faith. Works of obedience to the Law of Moses cannot justify, and where the NT compares Christ to the Law, we read that one is saved by faith in Christ not by the works of the Law (Acts 15; Romans 3; Galatians 3; Philippians 3; and Ephesians 2). But the NT urges works of obedience to the call of Christ (which is his messianic reinterpretation of the Law and the will of the Father). The NT never says or suggests that one is saved by believing in Christ rather than by obeying him. Instead, as we have seen, the Synoptics normally attach eternal life to obeying Jesus. . . . Accordingly, we may not speak of the relationship between faith and "works" of obedience until we specify whom one obeys.

The way out: no more dualism. . . . Contemporary thinking wrongly distinguishes right faith from right actions, our inner selves from our outer selves, "being" from "doing." We must recognize how completely this ancient dualism contradicts Scripture. Jesus declared carefully and emphatically that a good tree, by definition, is one that produces good fruit. James says that faith is no better than its obedience, and a faith without obedience will not save. First John says that when people claim to know God but do not obey God, they are lying. Paul says repeatedly that those who live in sin will not inherit the kingdom of God, and warns in these contexts not to be deceived (1 Cor 6:9; Eph 5:6). Scripture everywhere assumes, and often teaches, that a person's true self inevitably displays itself in actions. If we live unfaithfully, it is because we

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have not entrusted ourselves to God's view of things. But if our essential
beliefs and loyalties change, our behavior and practices in the world invariably
change. If there is no saving obedience, there is no saving faith. Jesus calls for
faith by calling for actions that require faith. . . . Faith versus works comes
from an imported dualism. The Synoptic Jesus was content to attach eternal
life to an obedience that by its nature required great faith. "Faith is only real
when there is obedience, never without it, and faith only becomes faith in the
act of obedience." This inseparability of faith and obedience needs to inform
both evangelism and pastoral teaching. (2008:292–96)

Therefore, a better rendition of the above formula would be not, "Faith + Works
(as merit) = Salvation" but rather, "Faith + Works (as manifestation) = Salvation."
It is just this type of theological foundation that disciple formation must proceed
upon in the twenty-first century.

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shedding the status quo

Americans have been unquestionably "quite good at creating *converts* (i.e., those
who respond at the conclusion of an evangelistic presentation) but not nearly as
good at generating *disciples* (i.e., those who actively pursue a life given over to
following Jesus)" (Peace 1999:304).[10] In order to rectify this predicament, the
following recommendations seem only apropos. First of all, the offer of salvation
needs to be reconnected to the call to discipleship. That is, the church can no
longer afford to detach evangelism from discipleship, but see the former as a subset
of the latter. Just like the person "coming to faith in the biblical context was one
who began to follow the way of the disciple" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:125), so today
the proclamation of the gospel must begin with the formation of Christ-committed
ones. Indeed, the "future of our evangelism hinges upon the integrity of our
discipleship" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:221).

Second, conversion to Christ, being differentiated from regeneration, should be
understood as a process rather than a single event. Regeneration is an
"instantaneous event" which happens only once whereby a person is saved and

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[10] The ramifications of this fact carry unknown global repercussions. Because "American believers naturally assume that
normative Christian practice in other parts of the world must look like normative Christian practice 'at home'" (Noll
2009:128), American missionaries have undoubtedly trained non-Westerners to likewise be more effective at making
converts than disciples. As a result, the recent statistics for the rapid increase in Christian populations outside the West
may be greatly exaggerated. As Siga Arles notes in relation to the World Religion Database, "If we deal only with
numbers, we end up grouping the nominal, the abnormal, the problematic, and the abominably back-slidden with all
others in the faith community. In this way, we ignore the quality of the Christian community" (2010:20). This has caused
Mark Noll to encourage the Korean church, for one, "to pause with caution and ask which aspects of Christianity's
American indigenization have been more faithful, and which have been least faithful, to the character of Christianity itself"
(2009:168).

brought by the Spirit of God from death to life (cf. Grudem 1994:701).
Conversion, however, occurs throughout the life of one who submits to God
through Christ (e.g., Peter in Mt.16:13–16; Jn. 21:15–17; At. 10:9–16 with 11:1–
18). This signifies that the salvation experience is just one step along the
"continuum of conversion" (Leonard 1985:125) which comprises three phases:
quest, commitment, and formation (cf. Peace 1999:311ff). Also, Peace notes, "*How
we conceive of conversion determines how we do evangelism. . . . [I]f you conceive of*
conversion as an event . . . then . . . in your evangelism [you will] confront people
with the question, 'Will you receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior?' . . . If, however,
you understand conversion to be a process that unfolds over time . . . then your
question to others is apt to be 'Where are you in your spiritual pilgrimage and with
what issue are you wrestling when it comes to God' " (1999:286). Yet, even the
conversion of the apostle Paul, which has been labeled an "event" (Peace
1999:286), shows telltale signs of progression in light of Jesus' statement, "It is
hard for you [Paul] to kick against the goads" (Acts 26:14; cf. Robertson 1909:49–
50; Gilliland 1983:80–81).[11] Furthermore, as Scot McKnight comments, Jesus
himself "gives absolutely no attention . . . to a single-event conversion. Instead, he
continues to call the same group of followers to renew their commitment to
following him in love, service, and obedience. . . . He did not permit then, and his
followers should not permit now, an over-emphasis on a single moment as an event
so big everything about day-to-day faith shrinks to the trivial or unnecessary"
(2002:13). Consequently, conversion "is not about repeating a formula, or
belonging to a church, or praying a prayer; it is about following Jesus as the
shaping core of one's identity" (McKnight 2002:181). When this is not
acknowledged, evangelism is reduced to a "one size fits all approach" which results
"too often in immunizing people against Christianity" (Peace 2004:9). Jesus'
approach, on the other hand, "was suited to the specific needs of persons with
different backgrounds. . . . [He] had no stereotyped methods, no elaborate creedal
requirements. . . . Anyone who imagines that a certain formula or method must be
adhered to before a Christian conversion can take place ought to study afresh the
life of Jesus" (Morris 1981:146). Thankfully, "God has a secret stairway into every
heart. . . . Conversion happens to different people in different ways and on
different levels, and it is more than a static, once-in-a-lifetime experience" (Morris
1981:170). C. K. Chesterton said it best, "The Church is a house with a hundred
gates; and no two men enter at exactly the same angle" (1950:38).

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[11] With regard to the Philippian jailer who came to Christ rather abruptly (cf. At. 16:30–31), Luke records Paul and Silas
speaking "the word of the Lord to him together with all those who were in his house" (At. 16:32), indicating that they
provided instruction in order to ensure the continuation of the conversion process.

Third, in developing disciples, the content of the Christian *kerygma* should at a minimum incorporate the six conceptual categories of Jesus as Teacher, Prophet, Messiah, Son of Man, Son of David, and Son of God. After his detailed analysis, Peace concludes that "Mark's Gospel is the account of how the disciples came, step-by-step, to know him as such. With this information they become able to respond to him in repentance and faith and so experience conversion" (1999:215). He then discusses how each of the six titles can serve as "a focal point for evangelism, particularly in contemporary American culture" (1999:319):

> Mark helps us understand that the evangelistic mandate is wider and deeper than we often make it out to be. To change our minds about Jesus; to move from our cultural assumptions about who he is; to move beyond what is easy and comfortable to believe about him—all this is a challenge. . . . To do the work of evangelism is to urge others to follow this way of conversion so that they discover the true Jesus. . . . Mark's schema offers a way of conceptualizing how to go about the work of evangelism. It defines the path that people need to follow (slowly or rapidly) as they move to full commitment to Jesus.
>
> Mark also tells us how to turn to Jesus once a person has discovered who he is. With the language of repentance, faith, and discipleship, we understand how we are to respond to Jesus.
>
> We are tempted to say that this paradigm describes how outsiders are converted to Jesus, but I would assert that this is the same path that many who are already in the church need to walk. It is quite possible to be a faithful church member of long standing and know Jesus only as teacher or prophet (or even Messiah) and never take all the steps necessary for full understanding. . . . As was true in Old Testament times, so too today insiders in the church are also called to conversion. I would go one step further. Not just nominal Christians need to walk the path to full commitment, but all Christians at all times need to walk the path to fuller commitment to Jesus. . . . Part of the stigma of evangelism has to do with the supposed dichotomy between insiders and outsiders: those who have "got it" and those who have not. With this more holistic view of evangelism everyone is challenged always to respond to God: insider-outsider; nominal-committed; seeker-evangelist. Those who evangelize may have made progress in their pilgrimages, but no one has yet arrived at a full knowledge of or commitment to Jesus. Church member, skeptic, believer, clergy, seeker, agnostic—all are called to respond to Jesus, and Mark identifies issues that each needs to face. (1999:328–29)

These are wise words for anyone concerned with the present day health of the American church.

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Fourth, the nexus of "conversion, church, and community" must be articulated and advanced far and wide (Tennett 2005:174). In the American context, one finds not only "missionless churches" and "churchless mission[s]" (Peters 1972:232), but now anonymous "churchless Christians" which, in biblical categories, is an oxymoron. This situation is symptomatic of "media evangelism and mass evangelism techniques" which "emphasize personal freedom, individual decisions, and private religious experiences. For these people faith has become so privatized that the church has become optional equipment" (Morris 1981:154). Of course, this problem has only grown exponentially with the dawning of the internet age, and although it may seem "counterintuitive to make the process of joining the church more difficult . . . we ought to be more counterintuitive, given that our intuition is shaped by consumer habits" (Wigg Stevenson 2007:218). There is therefore "a dire need for a holistic witness which seeks a proper balance between Word and sacrament as well as between individual and the community" (Gritsch 1982:97). It was Cyprian of Carthage in the third century who said that "He can no longer have God for his Father, who has not the Church for his mother" (*On the Unity of the Church*, Section 6). Lesslie Newbigin put it this way: the "New Testament knows nothing of a relationship with Christ which is purely mental and spiritual, unembodied in any of the structures of human relationship" (1969:106). More recently, Darrell Guder has very perceptively stated, a "personal encounter with Christ is always and immediately linked with incorporation into his body, the Church. The purpose of personal calling is the formation of the witnessing community. . . . The apostolic strategy was not only to 'save souls' but to form witnessing communities whose members' testimony to God's salvation formed the center of their gospel proclamation" (2010:54–55). Hence, it behooves all those involved with the holy calling of Christian conversion to commit themselves to reuniting what should have never been rent asunder.

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Last, after all that has been said, it is the conclusion here that Americans need a functional substitute for the Sinner's Prayer and that it ought to be none other than the biblically sanctioned ritual of Christian baptism. Ultimately, the question regarding the use of the many versions of this prayer "is not whether it is wrong or right" but whether this technique "is shaped more by American culture than by biblical imperative" and "does more harm . . . than good" (Leonard 1985:125). Given the fact that American Christians have had "difficulty in telling the difference between beliefs and practices that are treasured because they are Christian and beliefs and practices that are treasured because they are American" (Noll 2009:167), the burden of proof for justifying the continual employment of the Sinner's Prayer lies with those who do not feel obliged to abandon it. Yet the

fact is that all Christians at all times in all places have believed "baptism marks the beginning of the Christian life" (Horton 2009a:201). If Christians in past eras could have foreseen how the sacrament of baptism is treated in the typical American church today, the accusation of heterodoxy would have been forthcoming. For instance, *The Apostolic Tradition* written by the Roman theologian Hippolytus dated in the third century, provided specific instructions for candidates for baptism. They were required to wash on Thursday, fast on Friday, be exorcised by the bishop on Saturday, keep an all night vigil in which they received instruction, and then on Sunday were anointed with oil and baptized with a time of confession, prayers, and communion thereafter (cf. Sections 20 and 21). In doing so, the baptismal ceremony where people were confirmed by their ecclesial overseas as genuine converts was held in much greater esteem in the post-apostolic church and thereby serves as a heuristic model for twenty-first American Christianity. This rite of passage "*is not only God's appointed way of . . . confirming the gift of the Holy Spirit (i.e., the grace of regeneration) and of our entering into the church of Christ, but is also the means by which the new Christian testifies to having been born from above and converted to the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Toon 1987:188). Of course, baptism "is not . . . the means of initiating the work of grace in the heart, but . . . a means for the strengthening of it" (Berkhof 1939:641), and since Christ commanded it, one can expect "a measure of blessing connected" to it (Grudem 1994:953). By far, "most of the church's members over the last two millennia have been converted not through mass evangelism or revivals but through the ordinary means of grace in the church's public ministry. . . . [These include] baptizing, catechizing, preaching, receiving the Supper, praying, singing, caring and comforting, admonishing and encouraging in fellowship, and finally, burying the dead in the hope of the resurrection" (Horton 2009a:212–13). Thus, the only reasonable path ahead is to entreat American church leaders to significantly upgrade the importance of the baptismal ceremony both in the life of the new believer and in the congregation as a whole. If this is realized, perhaps Christ will be pleased to grant a brighter future for His bride in America.

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