

The Confusion of Many Gospel Clichés: *Preaching the Gospel With Clarity*
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Introduction:

1. In the May 2016 statistical study performed by the Johns Hopkins patient safety experts, they found that the third leading cause of death in the United States is due to preventable medical error, following only heart disease and cancer. They calculated that more than 250,000 deaths occur per year in hospitals that are caused by medical staff who have the patients' best interest and health in mind. Even though no one would question the medical staff's sincerity, the outcome of their actions had tremendously negative consequences.¹

2. "This Was Your Life" by Jack Chick states in response to the question "What must I do to be saved?" the following: (1) Repent of your sins and be willing to turn from sin, (2) Surrender your life to Christ, (3) Acknowledge that He did for your sins, (4) Receive Him as your Savior, (5) Pray the following prayer: "Lord, I know I'm a sinner – I repent of my sins and I acknowledge Jesus Christ as my Lord and personal Savior!", (6) Invite Jesus into your heart to become your personal Savior, (7) Admit you are a sinner, (8) Believe that Jesus Christ died for you, was buried and rose from the dead. - The verses used to communicate all of these instructions are: Romans 3:10, Acts 17:30, Romans 10:9-10, Romans 10:13, John 14:6

Where Did These Cliches Come From? An Overview of the Origins of Two Clichés:

1. "*Praying the Sinner's Prayer*" with the "*Altar Call*"

Opening quote - Paul Chitwood states:

"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...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."²

a. **ALTAR CALL**

- 1) Many believe that the practice developed as a "tag along" to the altar call, which developed in the 18th and 19th centuries. Other early names for them was the "anxious seat" and "the mourner's bench".

- b. **PUBLISHED TRACTS:** The top three selling tracts of all time are *The Four Spiritual Laws* by Campus Crusade for Christ, *Steps to Peace With God* by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and *This Was Your Life!* by Jack T. Chick.³ All three of these tracts contain a form of the sinner's prayer.

¹ Vanessa McMains, "Johns Hopkins Study Suggests Medical Errors Are Third-Leading Cause of Death in U.S.," *HUB*, last modified May 3, 2016, accessed October 11, 2017, <https://hub.jhu.edu/2016/05/03/medical-errors-third-leading-cause-of-death/>.

² Paul Harrison Chitwood, "The Sinner's Prayer: An Historical and Theological Analysis" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001), 3-4.

³ David Lynn Bell, "Tracts to Christ: An Evaluation of American Gospel Tracts" (Ph.D. dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 10.

- 1) *The Four Spiritual Laws* verbalizes it this way: “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 the kind of person You want me to be.”⁴
 - 2) *Steps to Peace With God* verbalizes the prayer this way: “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.”⁵
 - 3) Finally, *This Was Your Life* verbalizes the prayer this way: “Dear God, I am a sinner and need forgiveness. I believe that Jesus Christ shed His precious blood and died for my sin. I am willing to turn from sin. I now invite Christ to come into my heart and life as my personal Saviour.”⁶
 - 4) Now, if a sinner’s prayer was found in the Bible, one would expect the prayer to exhibit uniformity in message and in content. However, when comparing these three tracts, each tract clearly has unique and different emphases.
 - 5) Some other examples of the sinner’s prayer in present-day tracts by well-known authors, which also illustrate the range of inconsistencies, are as follows:
 - “Father, I believe you love me. You gave your one and only Son so I can live forever with you. Apart from you, I die. With you, I live. I choose life. I choose you.”⁷
 - “O God, I know I have sinned. I have not obeyed your Word. I have tried to run my own life, ignoring you and your will for me. I have tried to decide for myself what is right and wrong. I know I deserve your wrath and punishment, and that I am lost unless you save me. I thank you for sending the Lord Jesus Christ to pay for my sin and guilt. I thank you for raising Him from the dead and giving Him authority over my life. I receive Him as my Savior and Lord. I receive your free gift of eternal life in Christ. I will turn from my sinful life to serve you, my Creator and Redeemer.”⁸
 - “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 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!”⁹
 - “O God, I am a sinner. I’m sorry for my sin. Forgive me. I want to turn from my sin. I receive Jesus Christ as my Savior; I confess Him as my Lord. From now on I want to follow Him. In Jesus’ Name. Amen.”¹⁰
- c. **THE RESULT:** Many people who have prayed the sinner’s prayer over the years have given testimony that: (1) They did not really realize what they were doing

⁴ Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (San Bernardino, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1965).

⁵ Billy Graham, *Steps to Peace with God* (Charlotte, NC: Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, 2016).

⁶ Jack T. Chick, *This Was Your Life!* (Ontario, CA: Chick Publications, 1972).

⁷ Max Lucado, *3:16 The Numbers of Hope* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007).

⁸ *Steps to Assurance: Regarding Your Relationship to Jesus Christ* (San Antonio, TX: Bible Study Fellowship International, 2007).

⁹ D. James Kennedy, *Do You Know?* (Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Evangelism Explosion International, 2006).

¹⁰ Billy Graham, “The Only Way,” *Decision*, April 2012.

when they did it, and (2) They have prayed the sinner’s prayer on more than one occasion for fear it did not take the first time.

- 1) Many who pray “the sinner’s prayer” are trusting in the prayer to save them. This is illustrated when you ask them the question “Why would God let you into heaven?” OR “Why are you sure you are going to heaven?” – The answer is “Because I prayed the sinner’s prayer.”
- 2) Another concern is that some ministries who are relatively clear on the gospel, in an effort to appeal to a broader base (I assume), are leaving a sinner’s prayer in their evangelistic materials and tracts.
 - Larry Moyer’s “Can I Ask You A Question?” includes the following: “Remember! It is not a prayer that saves you. It is trusting Jesus Christ that saves you. Prayer is simply how you tell God what you are doing. *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 Christ alone as my Savior. Thank You for the forgiveness and everlasting life I now have. In Jesus’ name, amen.*”
 - Andy Stanley’s “How Good Is Good Enough?” includes the following: “If, during our brief time together, a light came on for you, I want to encourage you to do something to mark this moment. Would you say a simple prayer expressing your gratitude to God for sending His Son to be your personal savior? Saying a prayer won’t make you a Christian. Placing your faith in Christ as your savior makes you a Christian. Prayer is just a way of expressing to God that you have come to the conclusion that Jesus is in fact his son and your savior. The following is a sample prayer. You can ignore it or repeat it verbatim. What matters is that you believe Jesus is who he claimed to be and that you are no longer trusting in what you have done, or will do, to get you to heaven. *Heavenly Father, thank You for not being fair. Thank You for instead being merciful. I believe true fairness would have separated me from You forever, because that’s what I deserve. Thank You for sending Jesus to die for my sins. I now place my faith in him as my savior. Thank You for sending him to die in my place.*”

2. “Asking Jesus Into Heart”¹¹

- a. **OPENING COMMENTS:** This is by far the most popular cliché in our modern church culture, especially with children.
 - 1) One pastor estimated he had asked Jesus into his heart 600+ times (6-18 years old at least 50 weeks out of the year).
 - 2) AWANA Statistic: Gave a gospel accuracy survey to some 18,000 pastors and Christian workers and 13,500 of them inaccurately stated that they agreed with the gospel invitation, “Right now ask Jesus to come into your heart.” That is 75% of those involved.
- b. **BACKGROUND:** It turns out that Anglo-American Puritans and evangelicals in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries used the phrase “receive Christ into your heart,” or something like it, with some regularity.
 - 1) The great Puritan devotional writer John Flavel, for example, spoke of those who had heard the gospel but who would “receive not Christ into their hearts.”

¹¹ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/evangelical-history/ask-jesus-into-your-heart-a-history-of-the-sinners-prayer/>

- 2) But it was just as common for pastors of that era to use the phrase to describe a *Christian* act of devotion.
 - 3) Thomas Boston (1676-1732), a Scottish Calvinist pastor, encouraged Christians taking communion to receive “Christ into their hearts.”
 - 4) Benjamin Colman (1673-1747), the leading evangelical pastor in Boston in the early eighteenth century, wrote explicitly that *Christians* should “receive Christ into their hearts, and hold him forth in their lives.”
 - 5) The terminology of “receiving Christ into your heart” became more formalized as a non-Christian’s prayer of conversion during the great missionary movement of the nineteenth century.
 - For those using the terminology, it became a useful way to explain to proselytes that they needed to make a personal *decision* to follow Christ. William Carey (1761-1834) is associated with using this phrase or a variation of it, to invite people to make a personal decision.
 - Eliza Hawes (connected to the early VBS movement) seemed to utilize and make popular this phrase in the 1900s as a favorite way to explain salvation in children’s ministry.
 - 6) Then there was a major uptick in the use of the actual phrase “ask Jesus into your heart” in the 1970s, perhaps as children’s ministry became more formalized and leaders looked for simple ways to explain to children what a decision for Christ would entail.
- c. **REASON FOR ITS USE:**
- 1) Some use this and claim that this response simplifies the response to the gospel, especially for children. – The concept of faith, explained biblically, is something that even children can understand.
 - This concept appears in a sermon for children from 1845, by Alexander Fletcher: Oh! my young friends, how happy you shall be, when Christ enters into your heart! I should like every little child this afternoon, to present the following beautiful petition to Christ; it is a very remarkable one; but oh! He loves it. It is this: '**Oh! Jesus, enter into my heart.** May Thy grace enter into the soul of a little child, there to dwell for ever.'¹²
 - 2) Concerned about the prevalence of false conversions, many pastors were keen to emphasize that salvation is not something attained just by attending church or being born into a Christian home. Salvation is *personal* and *individual*. Each sinner has to respond to Christ for themselves.
 - There is a bit of irony however to this motivation. Although this phrase might have been used to prevent false conversions, its misuse can, in fact, heighten the problem of false conversions.

Why These Cliches Are So Prevalent:

AVAILABILITY OF PREACHING/TEACHING: According to Preaching Magazine, and looking at the article labeled “The 25 Most Influential Pastors of the Past 25 Years,” it is no wonder that people are confused as to what these preachers teach (as it relates to the gospel).

1. The top ten preachers mentioned in the magazine article are the following: (1) Billy Graham, (2) Charles Swindoll, (3) Rick Warren, (4) Gardner C. Taylor, (5) John

¹² <https://christianity.stackexchange.com/questions/30711/where-did-the-idiom-asking-jesus-into-your-heart-come-from>

MacArthur, (6) Adrian Rogers, (7) Haddon Robinson, (8) Andy Stanley, (9) John R.W. Stott, and (10) W.A. Criswell.¹³ Let's briefly look at the highlights of their gospel messages:

- a. **#1 - Billy Graham** - Billy Graham, gives three steps (three responses) one must have in order to get to heaven and have his or her sins forgiven: (1) Be willing to turn from sin, (2) Receive Christ by faith (follow Him), and (3) Obey Christ (i.e., give Him your all).
- b. **#2 - Charles Swindoll** - Swindoll goes to great lengths to keep the gospel message and response of faith alone clear before his hearers. He does a good job of re-stating the gospel response of believe with appropriate synonyms (i.e., lean on Him) rather than creating a word meaning something completely different, such as ask, commit, surrender, give, pray, repent, etc.
- c. **#3 - Rick Warren** - Rick Warren gives the following responses as necessary for salvation: (1) Believe in Jesus, and (2) Receive Jesus, which is comprised of a few additional steps including confession, repent or turn from sins, switch to His plan, turn from self-centeredness, invite Him into one's heart, and pray a prayer.
- d. **#4 - Gardner C. Taylor** - I could not find a transcript or video of a gospel sermon by this man.
- e. **#5 - John MacArthur** - John MacArthur teaches that one must also repent, surrender, and possess a supernatural longing to obey. In addition, he claims that none of these responses can be classified as a work although the Bible clearly classifies faith and faith alone as the only non-work (Rom 4:5). By implication, he suggests that faith is synonymous with submission, yieldedness, and turning from sin.
- f. **#6 - Adrian Rogers** - From Adrian Rogers' personal testimony, one can ascertain three necessary responses to be saved, which are the following: (1) Someone must come forward (in a church meeting), (2) He or she must give his or her heart to Jesus Christ (and all he or she knows of Him), and (3) He or she must repent.
- g. **#7 - Haddon Robinson** - Haddon Robinson is clear with faith being the only biblical response to the gospel. He works simply from the verse Romans 4:5, and he takes nothing from it, nor does he add anything to it.
- h. **#8 - Andy Stanley** - Even though Andy Stanley tries to qualify the use of the prayer as something that "has no magic" associated with it and something where "you can make up your own words," he still emphasizes this as a step where one can "express to God that you're making this transfer." The Bible does not teach that God needs a prayer from the unbeliever in order for Him to know that the unbeliever is putting his or her faith in Christ. Stanley seems to communicate this when he states, "There's no magic to this prayer. The prayer's just a way of expressing to God that you're making this transfer." Following the prayer, Stanley makes this comment, "If you have never had that interaction or made that exchange with your heavenly Father, I would plead with you today to join me. If you would, just bow your heads, and you can pray this out loud. You can pray it, you know, in your heart. You can get on your knees. You can lift your hands. You can just do whatever you want to do..." In other words, just pray something! Stanley seems to indicate that praying a prayer is essential to one's salvation, as he places a great emphasis on it.

¹³ Michael Dudit, "The 25 Most Influential Pastors of the Past 25 Years," *Preaching.Com*, last modified 2017, accessed November 8, 2017, <https://www.preaching.com/articles/the-25-most-influential-pastors-of-the-past-25-years/>.

- i. **#9 – John R. W. Stott** – Stott teaches that unbelievers must do the following to be saved: (1) Claim their personal share in what Christ did for everybody, (2) Ask Him to be their Savior, (3) Ask Him to take sins away, (4) Ask Him to bring them back to God, (5) Repent of their sins, (6) Surrender to Christ, (7) Confess Christ before men, and (8) Pray a prayer of faith.
 - j. **#10 – W. A. Criswell** - Criswell teaches that unbelievers must do the following to be saved: (1) Believe, (2) Commit or make a commitment to Christ, (3) Confess (presumably used of sin, but not clearly stated), (4) Come to the front of the church, and (5) Give their heart to God.
2. Other Influential Teachers:
- a. **Ray Comfort** – Comfort’s Living Waters YouTube channel has over 200,000 subscribers, and their videos routinely hit millions of views.¹⁴ In their videos, which include instruction on evangelism, actual one-on-one evangelism with strangers, street preaching, and documentaries, their evangelism approach is very consistent. Although their public statement of faith reads clearly, “We believe in the absolute necessity of regeneration by the Holy Spirit for salvation because of the exceeding sinfulness of the human nature, and that all are justified on the single ground of faith in the shed blood of Christ, and that only by God’s grace through faith alone are we saved (John 3:16–19; 5:24, Romans 3:23; 5:8,9; Ephesians 2:8–10; Titus 3:5),”¹⁵ Like other prominent pastors, Comfort adds to the simple biblical response of faith by stating there are “two things” one must do in order to be saved. Additionally, he unwittingly adds a third thing (prayer) by implying to the man he is witnessing to that he must pray with him once he turns the camera off. To sum it up, Comfort’s three steps of salvation are: (1) Repent, defined as turning from sins, (2) Trust the Savior, and (3) Pray a prayer.
 - b. **Beth Moore** - Like other popular Bible teachers, Beth Moore includes multiple false response clichés in her effort to share the gospel. Unbelievers must do the following to be saved, according to Moore: (1) Admit their need for forgiveness and peace, (2) Be willing to turn from their sins, (3) Believe that Jesus Christ died for them on the cross and rose from the grave, and (4) Through prayer, invite Jesus Christ to forgive their sin and be their Savior.

RESULTS OF MY DISSERTATION RESEARCH:

1. **Believe As A Response** - 57% of the sample size gave “believe” as ONE of their responses. So, clearly these participants recognized “believe” as a biblical answer and at least part of the equation for one to enter heaven.
 - a. However, further triangulating of the data showed a disturbing trend: those who lacked an understanding of the biblical response of faith “alone” in Christ and His finished work also lacked assurance of their salvation.
 - 1) This means that out of the 100 person sample group who was surveyed, only twenty-three people gave “believe” as their only response
 - 2) Interestingly enough, only one of those twenty-three people had less than 100% assurance of their salvation because they had trusted in the finished work of Christ.

¹⁴ Ray Comfort, “The Way of the Master,” *YouTube*, last modified 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/user/thewayofthemaster>.

¹⁵ Ray Comfort, “Statement of Faith,” *Living Waters*, last modified 2017, accessed December 2, 2017, <http://www.livingwaters.com/statement-of-faith>.

- 3) This means that 95.6% of the respondents who indicated that they were trusting in Jesus Christ alone for their salvation were 100% (positively) sure they were going to heaven
 - 4) Furthermore, this means that in over 75% of the surveys conducted, people were either trusting in something other than Jesus Christ, or they were trusting in Jesus Christ plus something else. So, although they were religious, the respondents were confused and had many mixed, different ideas about how one gets to heaven.
 - 5) Additionally, and just as sad, 24% of the total people surveyed were 100% sure they were going to heaven for the wrong reasons
 - 6) Thus, some of the false response clichés were giving some people *NO* assurance, or false assurance.
2. ***All Responses Used*** - “Asking forgiveness” was used by almost 20% of the participants, “Asking Jesus into your heart” was used by 5% of the participants, “Give my life or heart to God,” was used by 2% of the participants, “Repent of or from my sins” was used by 6% of the participants, “Doing good deeds” was used by 42% of the participants, “Obedience” or “Keeping the 10 commandments” was used by 38% of the participants, and “Being baptized” was used by 4% of the participants

A QUICK LOOK AT A GROWING COMMON CLICHÉ – Ask For Forgiveness

1. One such false response cliché that is very popular and gaining traction today is the phrase “Ask for forgiveness.”
 - a. *Some Examples:* The ministry of CARM (Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry) says on their website, “Can God really forgive you of all your sins? Absolutely, yes. He did so with mine. He will do so with yours if you come to Christ and ask him.”¹⁶
 - b. Additionally, on the Southern Baptist Convention official website, the writer describes how to become a Christian and encourages the following prayer, “Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner and I do not deserve eternal life. But, I believe You died and rose from the grave to make me a new creation and to prepare me to dwell in your presence forever. Jesus, come into my life, take control of my life, forgive my sins and save me. I am now placing my trust in You alone for my salvation and I accept your free gift of eternal life.”¹⁷
 - c. In the movie *Left Behind*, Kirk Cameron relates a story during filming, “Well-known actor Lou Gossett Jr. plays ‘President Fitzhugh’... Lou so threw himself into the role that he began to weep as he prayed to receive the Lord and ask for forgiveness. To think that SONY will be distributing this movie (with its clear gospel content) in Wal-Mart is mind boggling.”¹⁸
2. On the surface, one might ask, “What is wrong with this response? After all, don’t humans need forgiveness of their sins and are they not asking the only One (God) for the very thing they need?” In short, the answer is “Yes.” Forgiveness is a biblical term, and, “yes,” God is the only One who can provide forgiveness. However, when it comes

¹⁶ Matt Slick, “Can God Really Forgive Me of All of My Sins?” *Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry*, accessed November 1, 2017, <https://carm.org/can-god-forgive-all-my-sins>.

¹⁷ “How to Become a Christian,” *Southern Baptist Convention*, last modified 2017, accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.sbc.net/knowjesus/theplan.asp>.

¹⁸ Kirk Cameron, “Left Behind III: The Disco Version,” *Living Waters*, last modified 2017, accessed November 1, 2017, <http://www.livingwaters.com/articles/left-behind-iii-the-disco-version>.

- to the means by which one receives that forgiveness, does the Bible teach that one must ask for it, or is it received in another way? What does the Scripture say?
- a. Acts 10:43 & Acts 13:38–39.
 3. It does not take much investigation to realize that the words “ask” and “believe” are not synonymous.
 - a. In fact, if one were to peruse thesaurus entries for the words “ask” and “believe,” one will notice no word overlaps.¹⁹
 - b. *Asking someone* for something implies that the answer or outcome is in doubt. The answer could be “yes,” or the answer could be “no.”
 - c. *Believing in someone* implies that someone is taking another person’s word at face value as to what they have promised.
 - d. *This the contrast...* Belief or faith trusts in a known outcome; whereas asking someone for something implies an unknown outcome. Ironically, asking someone for something that they have already promised to do is the antithesis of faith — it is a subtle form of unbelief.
 4. Furthermore, it is also clear that biblical forgiveness is not just “given” with the wave of a wand or given to someone who simply asks for it. Forgiveness is a forensic and judicial need based upon the Law of God, the penalty of sin, and the character of God in executing His justice.
 - a. Hebrews 9:22 is clear: “And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no remission.” Blood must be shed - a death penalty must be paid in order for there to be remission (forgiveness) of sins.
 - b. Thus, which is the true question: “God, can you forgive my sins?” or “God, can someone pay my death penalty?” The true question would be to ask God to provide a willing substitute to pay one’s death penalty because this is what is needed for forgiveness. Praise the Lord, through the gospel, God has *already* provided that substitute; and, hence, there is no need to ask Him to do it because He already has.
 - c. Ironically enough, those who “ask” God for forgiveness are actually exhibiting unbelief — the very opposite response of how one is saved.
 5. Ephesians 1:7 states: “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace.” Hence, the forgiveness of sins is directly tied to the work of Christ on the cross where He shed His blood for individuals’ sins.
 6. Just “asking” for forgiveness indirectly bypasses Christ’s work on the cross. People do not need Christ to pay the penalty for their sins. In this case, they only need a forgiving God, a God who can forgive any sin without requiring payment for those sins. That is not the God of the Bible.

¹⁹ “Thesaurus.Com,” *Dictionary.Com, LLC*, last modified 2017, accessed August 30, 2017, www.thesaurus.com.