

## THE PRAYER OF FAITH

**Repentance and faith** cannot exist without each other. True repentance involves seeing sin for what it really is; not just a character defect, but a permanent attitude of rebellion against the love and care and righteous authority of God. It is this new understanding of God and of one's own sin that leads to true repentance. There will also be a great desire to break with the past and to live in future only to please God (Acts 26:20). That is repentance.

*Faith* is an unwavering trust in the Lord Jesus Christ as the only Saviour to deal with sin (Acts 20:21; Romans 3:25). It is not merely an intellectual assent to a set of doctrines, but a coming to Christ in repentance, crying for mercy. Faith hears the truth of the gospel, believes it and then acts upon it. Saving faith progresses from a belief in certain facts to a real trusting in Christ and what he has done on our behalf and for our salvation. Faith is a response of the mind and heart to the Saviour of whom the gospel speaks (1 Peter 1:21).

Conviction of sin, repentance and faith are the biblical way and are far removed from an easy believism or a mouthing of the so called prayer of faith.

In the last 150 years or so the sinner's prayer has become an indispensable part of evangelism. It has been made popular by the ministries of Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. Before that it was almost unknown and certainly it is not found in the New Testament. There when sinners were confronted with the gospel two things were necessary to lead to salvation, conviction of sin and repentance.

In Acts 2 the gospel was preached with the result that sinners 'were cut to the heart' (deep conviction of sin), they were then told to repent. No prayer was given them to repeat but 3000 were saved. Today if a man shows an interest in the gospel he is urged to repeat the sinner's prayer and on the strength of that is told he is now saved. The prayer will vary but basically it is, "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 Saviour 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."

There is nothing wrong with the words but what is wrong is the emphasis put upon them as a means of salvation. As a means of salvation they are about as useful as a bag of chips. The chips may look good, smell good and taste good. They will temporarily fill a hunger gap but tomorrow you will have to get another bag because the chips effects soon wear off. There is no lasting value. That is not the salvation of the New Testament and that is why so many who pray the sinner's prayer do not last long in the Christian life.

When this happens we are told that the follow up was poor, and they fell from grace, instead of the more obvious reason that they were not saved in the first place. Consider the following scenario that is all too often seen today.

A man attends church fairly regularly on a Sunday morning. He never comes to the evening service or the mid week prayer meeting and he never reads the Bible or prays on his own. He is not a Christian. He knows it and everyone in the church knows it. One Sunday he shows more than a passing interest in the gospel and this thrills the Christians in the church. One of them eagerly encourages him to pray the sinner's prayer and he is told he is now a Christian. He still does not attend the Sunday evening service or the prayer meeting, and still never reads the Bible or prays, but he has prayed the sinner's prayer and that is enough for most Christians. But it is not enough for God who demands conviction of sin and repentance as essential to conversion and a changed life as evidence of it.

The whole system speaks of an impatience on our part with God's way. It is as if we say to God, "Lord, you have made the way of salvation too hard by your insistence on conviction and repentance so we will devise an easier and quicker way".

The sinner's prayer will certainly give you results but what about the fruit? Warren Wiersbe makes the strong point that "There is a difference between "fruit" and "results". You can get "results" by following sure-fire formulas, manipulating people, or turning on your charisma; but "fruit" comes from life. When the Spirit of life is working through the Word of life, the seed planted bears fruit; and that fruit has in it the seeds for more fruit (Genesis 1:11-12). Results are counted and soon become silent statistics, but living fruit remains and continues to multiply to the glory of God (John 15:6).'

How did Jesus deal with a man who appeared to be searching for God? The Rich Young Ruler had all appearance of a genuine seeker and if he was given the sinner's prayer he would have gone away believing he was now a Christian. But Jesus took him to the law, to the Ten Commandments, in order to show him his sin. This young man had no awareness of sin let alone a conviction of personal guilt. If he had, then perhaps the sinner's prayer might have been of some use to him, but no conviction means no repentance and this means no salvation.

When seeking to evangelise, stick to God's ways.

In his book *God Sent Revival* Thornbury says that Charles Finney in his use of the anxious put God up for vote. If this is true, and I believe it is, then we have

to say that today's use of the prayer of faith by-passes God's essential in salvation of repentance. It is noticeable how the emphasis on conviction and repentance has all but disappeared from evangelical preaching today. They have been replaced by phrases like, open your heart to Jesus or make a decision for Jesus.

In the matter of salvation God has to be kept as sovereign if not we will end up filling the church with chaff and not wheat. Dallimore says of Charles Wesley, "During 1743 and 1744 certain of Charles's views and practices were beginning to change. For one thing, he came to recognize that everyone who professed faith in Christ was not necessarily converted. He stated, 'We have certainly been too rash and easy in allowing persons for believers on their own testimony; nay, and even persuading them into a false opinion of themselves.' And to 'a young son in the gospel', he declared, 'Be not over sure that so many are justified. By their fruits ye shall know them. You will see reason to be more and more deliberate in the judgement you pass on souls. Wait for their conversation. I do not know whether we can infallibly pronounce *at the time* that anyone is justified. I once thought several in that state, who, I am now convinced, were only under the drawings of the Father. Try the spirits, therefore, lest you should lay the stumbling-block of pride in their way, and by allowing them to have faith too soon, keep them out of it for ever.'

God's way of salvation is very clear in the New Testament

- Hear the word of God. (Romans 10:17)
- Believe it. (Acts 4:4)
- Conviction and repentance. (Acts 2: 37-38)
- Receive Christ as saviour. (1 John 5:11)