

“I never knew you...”

by
Jim Sayles

Part 2: The Corporate Responsibility of the Church

In Part 1 I quoted Billy Graham as saying that only five percent of those who make a confession of faith at his crusades go on to join a local fellowship of believers, which means that a huge percentage of the confessions of faith solicited in his massive evangelistic crusades are not of faith.

In addition, he said that it was his belief that the greatest missionary field in America and the western world was in church fellowships from Catholic to Charismatic, and he used Matthew 7:21,22 as a scriptural reference to illustrate his claim.

"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

From the very beginning, because of my unusual conversion and the resulting zeal for Christ, I learned and used every system of evangelical presentation technique that I discovered, from the “Roman Road” to “The Four Laws” and “Evangelism Explosion,” and I employed them enthusiastically as I engaged individuals at every opportunity and volunteered to be a counselor for evangelistic crusades, like the Jay Strack crusades, and volunteered as a counselor and organizer for “Hope Camp,” a camp for at risk youth put on by the Abilene Baptist Association and others.

Hope Camp had a powerful influence on some of the youth who attended, and it frequently extended to their families as counselors followed up with the boys they had counseled during camp. But, at one camp, I made a troubling discovery.

All seven boys given into my care made a “decision for Christ” as they responded to the alter call and made a profession of faith through a repeat-after-me confession of faith and a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer,” which is the modern evangelical church’s formula for salvation. All were then told publically that they were now “born again,” regenerated, and included in the kingdom of God.

In the follow up with my boys, though, I quickly discerned that only one out of the seven had actually experienced faith. All of them “believed,” for the moment, but only one experienced the true joy and excitement of a changed heart.

As I continued to follow up on the boys in their homes I was deeply grieved to see the six return to their former lives, experiencing only a form of personal shame for not being able to conform or identify with their “salvation.”

The one, though, carried through with his conversion, becoming a living witness to his family that a radical change in his character and attitude had taken place, and they, too, became responsive to the gospel message of Jesus Christ.

A few years later I taught a Sunday School lesson, not in the published Southern Baptist curriculum, on the names of God and of Christ. At the end of the session I asked the group to raise their hands, and, as I pointed to them one at a time, speak out one of the names of God or of Christ.

This class of mostly young married couples was already trained to be responsive, but I noticed that the proclamations were progressively becoming louder and bolder. At one point the associate pastor stuck his head in the door to find out what all the commotion was about, and then, satisfied that no violence was taking place, he ducked back out again.

Afterwards a young married woman named Julie came forward to speak to me in private as tears ran down her cheeks.

“I’ve been a Christian, or thought I was a Christian for ten years. But today...for the first time in my life...as I spoke His names out loud, I knew, with certainty, that I was born again.”

“What?” I thought. “No overextended alter call? No repeat-after-me confession of faith and repeat-after-me sinner’s prayer?”

In any Southern Baptist church on any given Sunday the gospel message will be presented, and an alter call for the lost and for the backsliders will be given. In ten years she probably heard the gospel message 500 times, but her regenerating faith experience came simply as she spoke His names out loud.

Many Southern Baptists reading this will assume that she was saved years before, and just experienced a revival of her faith. However, in the following year, her changed life and constant enthusiasm for the Lord were those of a new disciple on fire for the Lord.

On another occasion a young man asked me to come pray for him and his wife, because he had concerns about his wife’s behavior. The man had been raised in church and believed himself to be a “Christian,” but the two of them were not currently involved in a fellowship of believers.

As I prayed with the couple I was surprised by the Spirit. The prayer quickly changed to an emphasis on the man becoming the spiritual leader of his household, and later, with tears in his eyes, he confessed that something “clicked” inside his heart as I prayed.

He knew at that moment, for the first time in his life, that he was a son of God, and shortly thereafter he experienced the believer’s baptism.

If the Lord had not prompted him to believe that he and his wife needed prayer, he, too, might have been among those who identify with the Christian religion, but will appear at the great white throne judgment to receive those dreadful words, “I never knew you; depart from me you worker of lawlessness.”

My great concern is that the modern evangelical American and western world church has institutionalized how we solicit a response to our gospel presentations. Our methodology has become a tradition that evangelists, pastors, teachers, and individuals assume is scriptural, correct, and effective, but it is not scriptural and statistics reveal that it is not nearly as effective as we hope.

What follows is not intended as a criticism of those wonderful evangelists, pastors, teachers, and individuals who faithfully share the gospel with unbelievers, and have fallen, like I did, into the tradition without examining it in the light of scripture.

Instead, I am merely suggesting that we examine our methodology for the sake of the MULTITUDE who believe they are “Christians,” destined for heaven, but will, instead, face the Lord at the Great White Throne Judgment.

My questions in regard to this concern, are; why isn’t the repeat-after-me confession of faith and repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer” a sure response to the gospel message, and what is an appropriate, scriptural, Spirit-led way to solicit a confession of faith in both individual and large group presentations of the gospel?

Over the years I have examined, studied, and meditated on New Testament scripture, especially the book of Acts, and it has become clear to me that many in the modern evangelical church are not, in large part, following the pattern demonstrated in scripture concerning the evangelization of non-believers.

For example, at no point, anywhere in scripture, have I found an illustration of those being evangelized being led in a repeat-after-me confession of faith and a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer.”

When I came to that realization I was dumbfounded. Where did that practice come from if it was not used in the early church? All of the evangelical models I studied and used included a repeat-after-me confession of faith and a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer.”

If an overwhelming majority of evangelical believers use the model of presenting the gospel in a preached message or in personal dialogue followed by an invitation to respond to the message through a repeat-after-me confession of faith and repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer,” and this method, according to Billy Graham, is only five percent effective in his crusades, it is obviously a questionable practice.

And what are we doing to those who make an emotional response to the message, and are told that if they prayed that prayer they are now “saved” and going to heaven, when they fall away, feel that they have been emotionally manipulated, and become embittered against the gospel and the church?

The Evangelism Explosion group did a survey to find out what objections and attitudes people engaged in personal evangelism in America encounter that prevent unbelieving respondents from receiving the gospel of Jesus Christ. The number one objection that hardened the hearts of unbelievers was the hypocrisy they experienced in the lives of “church people.”

Our pat answer, of course, is that we’re all imperfect “sinners,” but that answer is not really in line with scripture. And it does not provide hope for the unbeliever.

Those who are regenerated, “born again” believers in Jesus Christ do still miss the mark to one degree or another in their thoughts, words, and actions, but their essential nature has changed. They now have a constant, 24 hour a day connection with the Holy Spirit whose influence begins to transform them from the inside out as He brings their thoughts, words, and actions into line with the supernatural revelation of the truth, promises, and commands of God.

But those who have adopted the Christian religion without experiencing regeneration by grace through faith can only attempt to conform to religious rules and the religious expectations of men. And these are those whom Billy Graham says constitute the greatest missionary field in America and the western world. These are also those who will appear at the Great White Throne Judgment.

Most of these are also those whom unbelievers rightly discern as being “hypocrites,” though the words and actions of regenerated, “born again” believers are also hypocritical at times.

There is an enormous amount of social and religious pressure on evangelists, pastors, teachers, and individuals to follow whatever traditional patterns of evangelism exist at the time, in spite of heavy scriptural evidence to the contrary. But the current model is a relatively modern practice originating initially during the Great Awakening (1730’s-1850’s), and then popularized by well-known evangelists like Billy Sunday and Billy Graham.

Evangelical denominations then adopted and institutionalized the popularized methodology, and it is now an established tradition defended to the hilt as being scriptural, correct, and effective.

What we see in scripture, though, is the Lord’s example found in Matthew 16:15-18, Peter’s example in Acts 2:22-41, and Phillip’s example in Acts 8:26-40.

The Lord’s example:

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter...(little rock)..., and on this...(big)... rock...(not Peter, himself, but our spontaneous, God inspired profession of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ...) I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (inserts are the author’s)

Peter’s example:

After preaching a message specific to the crowd he was addressing, but containing the revelation that Jesus is the crucified Messiah who died to redeem all who would come to believe the gospel message in their hearts (unique spirit-mind connection), he told them how to respond.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart...(the conviction of the Spirit that comes by revelation, not by emotional guilt)..., and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself." And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." So those who received his word...(by faith)... were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (emphasis and inserts are the author’s)

There is no record that he then led them in a repeat-after-me confession of faith and a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer.” However, unlike the modern model, scripture records a one hundred percent conversion by those who received Peter’s evangelical message.

Peter's instruction to "repent" was only indirectly related to personal sin. It was primarily related to their rejection of Christ as the Messiah. Repentance from a life of sin and separation from the covenant of God and the direct influence of God in their spirits is the natural response of any regenerated man or woman as was demonstrated by the conversion of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1-10). His act of repentance was not solicited by Jesus but by the Holy Spirit.

Genuine repentance, then, is not a prayer. It is a lifelong, obedient spiritual response to the ongoing revelation of God. Saying a prayer of repentance without actually being "cut to the heart" so that we genuinely repent (i.e. make a 180 degree turn), is not only futile, but misleading to the one who has been told that they must only say a prayer of repentance.

Phillip's example:

Phillip, directed by the Spirit, joined an Ethiopian eunuch reading the prophet Isaiah, and, after explaining the passage in Isaiah to the Ethiopian, Phillip presented the gospel message.

Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him. And when they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord carried Philip away...

What we see here is that the Eunuch obviously believed in his heart, his unique spirit-soul connection, and his request to be baptized was both spontaneous and the only "confession of faith" necessary.

No repeat-after-me confession of faith and no repeat-after-me "sinner's prayer" took place, and my burning question is; if the proselyte is repeating a confession of faith and a "sinner's prayer" spoken by someone else, is it the proselyte's confession of faith and prayer, or is it the confession of faith and prayer of the one leading the proselyte?

The answer, I believe, in many cases, is that it is the confession of faith and prayer of the one leading the proselyte, and it frequently does not result in the regeneration of the one repeating the confession of faith and the "sinner's prayer."

But we, corporately and individually, tell them that it does, and that weighs heavily on my heart.

Watchman Nee, an influential father of the church in China, who died in prison under the Mao regime, did not believe in denominations, and he insisted that believers merely refer to the church in this town or that town. He also made it clear that the evangelization of the lost was most effective as individual believers, whose lives demonstrate the influence of Christ in their spirits, present the gospel one on one or in small group settings.

In mainland, communist China today it is virtually impossible for the underground house church to do otherwise. They are, therefore, spared the temptation to have big evangelical campaigns in public stadiums, auditoriums, church buildings, or on television. They are also spared the temptation to follow the modern American and western world church model of utilizing a repeat-after-me confession of faith and a repeat-after-me "sinner's prayer," which, according to Billy Graham, is only five percent effective in his meetings.

In the underground house church of China, personal, one on one and small group evangelization is at the opposite end of the scale. There are almost no members of house church groups claiming to be “Christian” who are not actually regenerated, “born again” believers in Christ.

And the house church movement in mainland China and other places around the world may be the fastest growing body of regenerated, “born again” believers in the world today.

Does it not speak to us at all that the modern evangelical tradition in America and the western world is so ineffective while the ancient, biblical example of simply presenting the gospel according to the circumstance (rather than a formula), even using the Old Testament when that is applicable, until the proselyte makes a natural, spontaneous response prompted only by the Holy Spirit, demonstrating that they have believed in their hearts and confessed with their mouths that Jesus is risen from the dead?

I am not suggesting in the least that we should not have alter calls or solicit a response from those who have heard a large group gospel message. I am saying that we may actually hinder the conversion of many who make an emotional response to the message when we try to “close the deal” by leading them through a cheap, easy, repeat-after-me confession of faith and a cheap, easy, repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer.”

Even when we have highly organized follow-up for the respondents to an evangelical message, if we have already engaged them in a repeat-after-me confession of faith and repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer” with the promise, upon conclusion, that they are now “saved” and included in the kingdom of God, we hinder the spontaneous, Spirit-inspired confession of faith of those who are not saved by this “easy,” non-scriptural traditon.

I will not be presumtuous in suggesting an appropriate, specific, scriptural methodology for presenting the gospel and soliciting a faith response in either a one on one situation or in group meetings, but I will suggest that evangelists, pastors, teachers, and individuals engaged in personal evangelism re-consider this relatively recent tradition of using a repeat-after-me confession of faith and repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer,” to seal the deal for those who have responded to the message.

Is it too much to ask that we be sensitive to the Spirit in this process? Do we have so few regenerated, “born again” believers in our fellowships who are capable of discerning the Spirit’s lead that we cannot take the time to counsel respondents individually apart from some large group, “one size fits all” formula? After all, who is drawing the unbeliever into the experience? Who then should lead both the presenter and the proselyte in the process?

It has been suggested to me, in defense of the current tradition, that we do, at least, throw a big net, when we solicit what is, in large part, an emotional response, and then attempt to close the deal with a repeat-after-me confession of faith and repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer.”

Some are saved, of course, and that is good. But how many are there, like Julie in my testimony, who believe that they have been “born again” because we tell them so, and they then go on to participate in the Christian religion without experiencing genuine faith?

Billy Graham says the number is HUGE, and the Lord tells us that there are a MULTITUDE of these who will come before Him at the white throne judgment because they believed that they were saved but were not.

And I, for one, do not want to answer to the Lord for that.