

The Scriptural Model for the Ministry of Reconciliation

by
Jim Sayles

My own conversion experience took place at a Baptist youth camp where I was a counselor. As a New Age occult practitioner I had wrestled with God for months, convicted by the Holy Spirit revealed word of God as it was taught sincerely in a Baptist Sunday school class that I reluctantly attended with my wife.

Seeds of doubt were planted in my soul through the teaching I heard, but I was unwilling to denounce my guru, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, or the amazing spiritual events of the previous seven years.

To settle the question once for all I went back to my meditation group where I consulted the spirits who called themselves “the Universal Mind” through one of the female mediums in our group.

“Who are you really?” I heard myself asking, almost by surprise.

I did not know at the time that my question had been prompted by the Holy Spirit for my instruction and that my earnest desire to know God had prompted God to move on my behalf even though I was deceived.

An invisible heaviness came over me, pressing me down in the chair.

“I am the one you worship as god,” said the spirit, speaking through the medium, but, instead of settling my doubts, I was even more confused.

I knew intuitively that if it really was “God” speaking to me, I would have fallen on my face in reverential awe, but what I experienced instead was a dark, confusing fear.

I didn’t know it at the time, but Satan had revealed himself to me. He was the one I had been worshipping as god, Satan masquerading as an angel of light.

At the youth camp I was bunked with two youth ministers and a pastor, and, although I looked a little strange with my long hair and big, bushy beard, they seemed to accept this “Zen Christian” as one of them.

The pastor, though, had the discernment to ask each one of us to give our conversion testimony during the evening Bible study and prayer time in the cabin.

When it came my time I lied by telling them I had been saved during a crusade in the 8th grade, but that, after high school, I stopped attending church and had only recently been going to church again with my wife.

I did not lie about attending a crusade in the 8th grade or going down to the front to be led through a repeat-after-me “confession of faith” and a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer”, but I knew beyond all doubt that I had not experienced the conversion they had been talking about.

All day the next day I carried a heavy weight around with me and my stomach seemed to be knotted in agony. That night, as the camp pastor walked up and down the aisles singing, “Just As I Am”, I went to my knees with tears streaming down my cheeks just like many of the boys.

This time my conversion was real, and it was accompanied by great brokenness, repentance, and a new kind of joy I had never known before.

My hunger for the written word and for “the” Word, Jesus Christ, became insatiable, and I witnessed enthusiastically as a counselor for the Royal Ambassadors, as an organizer and counselor for Hope Camp (an evangelistic camp for “at risk” boys and girls), as a volunteer for almost any public crusade that came to town, as a Sunday school teacher, as a new church planter, and as a vigorous personal witness whenever the opportunity arose.

There were two things that bothered me about many of those who were being “saved”. First, it seemed that many responded to the message with brokenness and tears, but after they were led through a confession of faith and the sinner’s prayer, many seemed to fall away almost immediately. Others seemed to be excited for awhile, but then settled down to a life of obedience to religious traditions and expectations without the kind of fire I felt in my own soul and saw in the Book of Acts.

I also began to wonder why the intense evangelistic efforts of my denomination was not producing a massive harvest of Book of Acts souls. When I read a Billy Graham quote that fewer than 5% of those who made a confession of faith at one of his crusades went on to join a local church, I assumed, as many other church leaders did, that it was merely a lack of organized follow-up.

In recent years I have become concerned by similar shocking statistics about college age youth dropping out of the Christian faith in spite of heavy church involvement during their high school years, but, at the time, what got my attention was the seemingly small percentage of new conversions that produced Book of Acts believers.

Then one Sunday I was led by the Spirit to teach a class on the names of God. After teaching I asked the class to speak the names of God and of Jesus Christ out loud. They were hesitant at first, but then a spirit of boldness seemed to come over the class as they began to shout out the names of the Lord.

After the class one of the young ladies came forward in tears. She confessed that although she had been a faithful church-goer since childhood, something happened inside her heart as she spoke the Lord’s name out loud that day.

“What?” I thought. “No evangelical message? No over-extended altar call? No repeat-after-me confession of faith or repeat-after-me sinner’s prayer?”

The proof of her conversion was a life of zeal for the Lord, and I began to study the conversion experiences recorded in the Book of Acts to see what it was about those experiences that was different from the traditional evangelistic models I was familiar with.

Two things stood out immediately as I went from conversion experience to conversion experience in the Book of Acts and later in the gospels and the epistles.

First, I found no place in the Book of Acts, the gospels, or any of the epistles where proselytes were led through a repeat-after-me “confession of faith” or a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer”. And, second, the presence or absence of the indwelling Holy Spirit was often apparent to those who ministered to the new believers, and, for some, the laying on of hands was required before they actually received the Holy Spirit.

There is a deliberate paragraph break here, because I can almost feel the shock this statement is causing in some reader’s minds. Others have already put this testimony down to go read through the Book of Acts, because, like the noble Bereans, they want to examine the scriptures to see if what I am saying is true.

So, I’ll go through the Book of Acts with you:

Acts 2:37,38 – *Repent... (from your act of crucifying the Lord in unbelief)... and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.* (inserts are the author's)

Three thousand broken-hearted Jews plus family members repented and were baptized that day. No mention of being led in the sinner's prayer. No mention, even, of having hands laid on them.

Acts 8:12-17

The Samaritans, including Simon the Sorcerer, heard Philip preach the gospel. They believed him and were baptized, but it wasn't until Peter and John placed their hands on them that they received the Holy Spirit.

Now, that's interesting. Presumably they believed *in their hearts*, and confessed their faith, but they did not receive the Holy Spirit until Peter and John laid hands on them.

Don't jump to Charismatic conclusions here. The receiving of the Holy Spirit was the receiving of the indwelling Spirit, which must happen before the conversion experience is complete.

But why did Peter and John have to pray for them to receive the Holy Spirit and then lay hands on them in order for it to happen? Was the laying on of hands a physical act, demonstrating the authority of the apostles, authorized specifically by Christ in this case in order for the Samaritans to release their faith?

Acts 8:26-39

The eunuch was reading Isaiah 53:7,8 as the Holy Spirit caused Philip to join him, and after Philip revealed Jesus in the scriptures the eunuch said, "Why can't I be baptized?"

As soon as Philip baptized him, the evangelist was carried away by the Spirit.

The lesson here is that God will apparently move evangelists around in the Spirit just to seal one who is earnestly seeking the Lord.

Again, no repeat-after-me sinner's prayer. Just the proclamation of the gospel through the Old Testament, a believer's baptism as his act of obedience to what he believed in his heart, and the eunuch entered the kingdom of God.

Acts 9

Saul's conversion experience should have been unique. The Lord revealed himself directly to Saul, and then He blinded him for three days, possibly as a symbol of His own death and resurrection.

As we see in almost all of the conversion experiences in Acts, God directed the sequence of events, with Ananias laying hands on Saul after his three days of blindness.

For three days Saul believed *in his heart*, and then as the prophet laid hands on him he received his sight and the indwelling Holy Spirit simultaneously.

Afterwards he was baptized.

There is no mention of Ananias leading Saul in the sinner's prayer or a confession of faith.

Acts 10

Cornelius is another who was earnestly seeking God, and God revealed in a vision that he was to seek out Peter.

Peter preached to Cornelius and his household, and the Spirit came on all of them without any mention of the laying on of hands or the sinner's prayer.

Then Cornelius and his household were baptized.

Acts 13:12

The proconsul believed *in his heart* when he saw Elymas, the sorcerer, blinded by Paul's prophecy.

No laying on of hands. No mention of the sinner's prayer.

Acts 16:14-16

Lydia was personally converted and baptized by Paul. No mention of laying on of hands or the sinner's prayer.

Acts 16:25-34

Paul and Silas are in prison when they are freed from their chains by an earthquake. The jailer is in deep trouble if the prisoners escape, but Paul and Silas make no attempt to escape.

The jailer is convicted by their righteousness, and he invites them to his home where they preach the gospel. The jailer and his entire household are saved.

No mention of laying on of hands or the sinner's prayer.

Acts 19

Paul encounters some disciples and asks them if they received the Holy Spirit when they believed. The disciples said they had not even heard of the Holy Spirit. They had been baptized by John's baptism, and when Paul explained the difference, they were then baptized into Jesus. When Paul laid hands on them the indwelling Holy Spirit was given to them as well as manifesting through them in tongues and prophesying.

No mention of the sinner's prayer.

Acts 19:18

Those who heard the gospel *believed in their hearts*, and they responded with acts of repentance.

No mention of laying on of hands or the sinner's prayer.

The abovementioned examples raise some questions in regard to the role of laying on of hands in the release of their faith and in the receiving the indwelling Holy Spirit for some believers, but one thing is absolutely clear. There is something inherently wrong with the modern evangelical model of leading proselytes in a repeat-after-me "confession of faith" and a repeat-after-me "sinners prayer".

If you are offended by my statement, keep in mind that I came to this conclusion after having spent many years practicing that model the way I was taught, not only by my original denomination, but by almost every other modern evangelical model I have ever come into contact with.

Some were saved in spite of the incorrectness of that model, but how many still remain lost and disillusioned concerning the faith, or, worse, enveloped in a false sense of security, because I did not follow the scriptural model for leading proselytes through a conversion experience?

Examine the classic scripture about saving faith:

Romans 10:8-10 Amplified (bold is the author's)

But what does it say? The Word (God's message in Christ) is near you, on your lips and in your heart; that is, the Word (the message, the basis and object) of faith which we preach, because if you

*acknowledge and confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and in your heart believe (adhere to, trust in, and rely on the truth) that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. **For with the heart a person believes** (adheres to, trusts in, and relies on Christ) **and so is justified** (declared righteous, acceptable to God), **and with the mouth he confesses** (declares openly and speaks out freely his faith) **and confirms [his] salvation.***

In the simplest terms possible, a person is justified (made righteous in the sight of God) at the moment he/she **believes in the heart** (spirit or spirit-mind) **that God raised Jesus Christ from the dead, and confesses with his mouth that Jesus is Lord.** Period.

In this passage repentance is assumed, but is “the sinner’s prayer” required in order for sinners to repent?

Repentance is a change of heart. That change of heart may be expressed in prayer, but the prayer should come directly from the heart of the believer, not from his or her counselor.

When we lead someone in the sinner’s prayer we are attempting to pull something out of their hearts that may or may not be there. If it is not there then making them say the words will not produce it. If it is there, then there is no need to lead them in a sinner’s prayer. Pray for them, certainly. Allow them to pray as they are led, certainly, but a repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer” is neither scriptural nor effective.

Repentance in the salvation scenario is not usually repentance from some specific sin as it is for believers when they confess their sins (1 John 1:9). It is a change of heart and turning away from a **life of sin** and separation from God.

If it is repentance from specific sins, what happens if the proselyte forgets to mention some specific sin? And are we saying that that the new believer is not forgiven for all sins, past, present, and future at the moment of regeneration?

I am convinced that the person who has a revelation of Jesus as Savior has a simultaneous revelation of his/her sinfulness and separation from God, and if that revelation is not there a repeat-after-me sinner’s prayer will not produce it. Repentance, brokenness, and faith in Jesus as Savior are the result of the work of the Holy Spirit in the sinner as the gospel is being proclaimed.

The **true** confession of faith, therefore, assumes repentance from a life in which sin (failure to live up to God’s righteous requirements) of every degree is natural, and in which true righteousness (right standing with God) is unattainable.

Requiring a proselyte to make some kind of vow of repentance through a prayer by rote may actually **inhibit and circumvent the natural response of repentance caused by the Holy Spirit’s conviction.**

2 Corinthians 7:10 Amplified (bold is the author’s)

*For godly grief and **the pain God is permitted to direct**, produce a repentance that leads and contributes to salvation and deliverance from evil, and it never brings regret...*

In this scripture passage we see that godly sorrow and true repentance are the result of pain that the Holy Spirit provokes in the sinner by a revelation of scripture concerning the sinner’s true state or condition. It could be, but is seldom, provoked or prompted by someone leading them in the sinner’s prayer.

If we lead someone in a sinner’s prayer and a confession of faith, whose repentance and whose confession of faith is it? Is it the proselyte’s or the one leading it? If it is the one who is leading it, then there may be some doubt about whether or not the proselyte is making a true confession of faith.

The sinner's prayer may, or may not, be closure for the repentance that a sinner is already feeling in his heart, and, **unless the one leading the sinner in a prayer of repentance is prompted by the Holy Spirit with a direct revelation on how to lead that sinner through the prayer, he may become a stumbling block to him.** That one may, then, have a false sense of security as he engages in religious conformity without true faith, or he may develop a hardness of heart against future presentations of the gospel.

Therefore, the only scriptural way to lead a proselyte to experience godly sorrow and true repentance is through the teaching and preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Likewise, the evidence of true repentance is a broken and contrite heart, and, at that point, there is no need for a formal prayer of repentance.

The confession of faith that we traditionally include in the sinner's prayer is also hindered by the repeat-after-me scenario.

One thing that jumped out at me as I examined all of the conversion experiences in the Book of Acts was that **they did not all happen in exactly the same way.** The required elements of repentance from a life of sin and separation from God and faith in Jesus Christ as Savior were there, but the process was quite different from circumstance to circumstance.

The pressure of tradition and protocol is so strong in most denominations and most church settings, including many Charismatic churches, that we are not truly free to respond to the Holy Spirit when leading a sinner to Christ.

If you were a counselor or elder in your local church and someone you didn't know came forward after the message would you be totally free to follow the leading of the Spirit in the administration of salvation?

Even if that meant laying on of hands or casting out demons?

There is safety in following tradition and protocol in spiritual matters, but are we attempting to minister salvation too cheaply in our assumption that the role model we are following is both acceptable to God and effective in ministering salvation to a sinner?

What we see in the Book of Acts is that the disciples were sensitive to and followed the lead of the Holy Spirit in leading others to Christ through a wide variety of circumstances and responses, including leaving an evangelical crusade on a marathon run out of the city just to witness to a single seeker after God.

In soliciting a confession of faith look at the model Jesus presented us with when he asked Peter, "Who do you say I am?"

Peter, who believed in his heart, confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In his confession of faith Peter was not told what to confess. He confessed what he believed in his heart.

Luke 12:8 Amplified

And I tell you, Whoever declares openly [speaking out freely] and confesses that he is My worshiper and acknowledges Me before men, the Son of Man also will declare and confess and acknowledge him before the angels of God.

Matthew 10:32,33 Amplified

Therefore, everyone who acknowledges Me before men and confesses Me [out of a state of oneness with Me], I will also acknowledge him before My Father Who is in heaven and confess [that I am abiding in] him. But whoever denies and disowns Me before men, I also will deny and disown him before My Father Who is in heaven.

For years I heard these scriptures taught in relation to our boldness in witnessing, but the exact spiritual context deals with our initial confession of faith, not our boldness in professing our faith before men as witnesses.

Nor does it apply to a confession based on **belief** rather than faith, such as the prayer book confessions of faith found in some traditional denominations, and the repetition of something someone else says, even when we are in agreement, is not necessarily a confession made by faith **even when it is spoken over and over year after year.**

In Luke 12:8 and Matthew 10:32, 33 we see that it is the believer who **speaks out freely** (not by following a script, but by confessing what he **believes in his heart**) is the one whom Jesus will confess (as belonging to Him) in heaven.

The statement in Matthew 10:32, if viewed out of context with Matthew 10:33, could be interpreted as a post-salvation confession, but as we see in Romans 10:8-10 it is **believing in our hearts** that saves us and the confession of (acting on) what we **believe in our hearts** that confirms us.

To summarize, then, the scriptural model is simply to present the gospel in such a way that the Holy Spirit can reveal the truth about the sinner's status or condition and Jesus Christ as the Savior.

If there is no true repentance, then, in the mind of the sinner, there is no **need** for a Savior, but the sinner who is convicted by the Spirit will experience brokenness leading to repentance from a life of sin and separation from God. This repentance does **not** have to be openly confessed, although, in some circumstances, the Holy Spirit may require the sinner to openly repent from certain specific sins such as involvements in false worship, witchcraft, sorcery, occultism, drugs, etc.

This type of repentance may also be accompanied by certain acts of repentance such as burning occult books (Acts 19:19) or making restitution. But there is no formula here. The only "formula" we have is to follow the lead of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit may also require the sinner to be delivered from demonic possession or bondage, and the person or persons administering the deliverance should be guided specifically by the Holy Spirit in this ministry.

Therefore, we should be sensitive to the possibility that the sinner may need to carry out some specific act of repentance, but leading them through a prayer of repentance, **unless specifically directed by the Holy Spirit**, is unnecessary and a potential stumbling block for someone who does need to carry out a specific act of repentance.

The greater stumbling block, though, is leading the sinner through a repeat-after-me confession of faith.

Luke 12:8 and Matthew 10:32,33 are about a confession of faith, but not a repeat-after-me confession of faith. In these scriptures we see that the believer is to speak his faith out freely from a Spirit-given sense of oneness with Christ.

Romans 8:16 NIV

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.

Therefore, if we are attempting to lead someone through the conversion experience we should follow the scriptural example by simply asking questions, such as, "I don't want you to tell me what you think I want to hear...but, now that you've heard the gospel, what do you believe about Jesus Christ?"

If the sinner does not have a true revelation concerning the gospel it will be revealed in his answer, and we can continue to present the gospel to that one appropriately.

If, however, we lead them through a confession of faith, and they have not believed in their hearts, how will we know that we need to continue prayerfully with a presentation of the gospel?

Even worse, we will congratulate them on their supposed inclusion in the kingdom, get them baptized, and then wonder later why they fall away from the faith.

Using “the Roman Road” or tracts like “The Four Spiritual Laws” may be helpful in presenting the gospel, but the tendency is for us to rush forward to the close (i.e. the repeat-after-me “sinner’s prayer” and repeat-after-me “confession of faith”).

I once witnessed daily to a co-worker who was heavily involved in the Masonic Lodge. He was convinced that he was lost and separated from the covenant life and blessings of God, but he could not overcome the heavy burden of “works” that the Masonic Lodge had laid upon him.

He wept on several occasions in the knowledge that he was lost, and, in earlier days I would have quickly led him through the sinner’s prayer and assumed that his repeat-after-me confession of faith was all that was required.

Instead I prayed that the Holy Spirit would reveal the truth to him concerning the free gift of God through Jesus Christ, and I left him in his state of brokenness and doubt as I progressively presented the complete picture of redemption through Jesus Christ.

I was deeply disappointed when he went to work for another company and moved out of town, but two years later the Holy Spirit arranged for us to meet in the Post Office while he was in town visiting his wife’s relatives. He almost ran toward me as he threw his arms around me and declared with joy that he was now a born again believer in Jesus Christ and that he had renounced the Masonic Lodge and its teachings.

What that taught me was that everyone has to go through a process in order to ultimately confess with our lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believe in our hearts that God has raised him from the dead. That process might take three minutes or it might take thirty years, and it is our responsibility, as faithful witnesses to the life-changing love and reality of Jesus Christ, not to interfere with that process through some spiritually insensitive and artificial attempt to close the deal before the Spirit has finished His work.

There are at least three recognizable phases each person goes through in order to ultimately experience saving faith in Christ.

The first phase is to doubt the certainty of our current beliefs. Although I believe that certain specific “techniques” can be manipulative, Evangelism Explosion, as a “technique”, teaches witnesses to do this by confronting the non-believer with a provocative question: “If you died tonight, are you certain that you would go to heaven?”

Even if the non-believer answers, “yes”, the witness moves on to ask the non-believer to confirm the source of his/her confidence. This might be something like, “I think I’m a good person...etc.” The witness moves on then to reveal the uncertainty of leaving something as important as our eternal security to the hands of chance or to a judgment that we cannot be certain about, and he asks, “Wouldn’t you like to know absolutely, with total certainty, that if you died tonight you would be going to heaven?”

The answer has to be, “yes”, and then the witness moves on to the second phase, which is knowing with certainty that we are lost and separated from the life and blessings of God because of sin (not just personal sin but also being born “in Adam” separated from the life and covenant blessings of God). In some cases it may be possible to take a non-believer through the first phase without the specific intervention of the Holy Spirit, but in my own case it was the

Spirit's witness to my heart that caused me to doubt seven years of supernaturally imparted deception and prepared my heart for the second phase, which is to know the truth concerning my separation from the life and blessings of God.

Then, and only then, is the non-believer prepared to receive the truth concerning the redemptive purpose of Christ, which is the third and final phase of the re-generation experience, and that truth must be imparted by the Holy Spirit.

If we attempt closure by leading the proselyte through a repeat-after-me "sinner's prayer" or confession of faith, we may actually short circuit the process.

What I am saying, even pleading, is that we must carry out our priestly duty as ambassadors of Christ and ministers of reconciliation with the same sense of urgency and life or death importance that believers in the Book of Acts did.

We cannot afford to continue in traditions that are not inspired by the Holy Spirit, such as leading proselytes through a cheap repeat-after-me sinner's prayer, and we must learn how to be led by the Spirit in the process.

Ask yourself this question. If you had to choose the one and only person who would present the gospel to a member of your family, who would you pick?

Would you pick someone who had been through half a dozen witnessing training programs, but who was, at most, lukewarm in the faith, or would you pick someone who had never been through witnessing training but demonstrated by his life and ministry that he was led by and sensitive to the Spirit?

Now, who would you call if someone you loved was diagnosed with cancer?

My guess is that it would be the same person.

As believers we should all be that person.

The most important "tool" a believer can have for leading others to Christ, other than the gift of evangelism, is the joy of his/her own fellowship with the Lord, not witness training. I am not saying that witness training or specific tools such as "The Roman Road" or "The Four Spiritual Laws" or "Evangelism Explosion" training is not useful in witnessing to the lost, but I am saying that such tools cannot take the place of a witness that flows naturally from the believer's own fellowship with the Lord.

I heard a recently recorded survey of Christian "leaders" being asked about personal evangelism. Seventeen of the twenty surveyed said they used "lifestyle evangelism", attracting sinners to the gospel (or to religious conformity) by their lives. Only three of the twenty talked about proclaiming the gospel. My suspicion is that the three were the only ones in the group who routinely led non-believers to saving faith in Christ.

What these surveys reveal is **not** a need for more witness training, new witnessing tools, or even the need for more organized follow up of evangelistic crusades and sermons. What they reveal is that much of the modern church in America has adopted scripturally incorrect models for fulfilling the Great Commission, models that actually hinder the personal evangelism that should flow naturally from the joy of a believers' fellowship with the Lord. What Jesus said in Matthew 28:18-20 is that His disciples (as defined by Luke 9:23) should make disciples and then teach them to obey everything Jesus taught His original disciples.

What Jesus did not teach His disciples, as evidenced in the Book of Acts, was to formalize evangelism in a manner that reduces the importance of our sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit or to merely attract sinners to the gospel through "lifestyle evangelism".

For leaders of Charismatic and non-Charismatic evangelical denominations and fellowships the difficulty comes in determining how, when, and if the laying on of hands becomes appropriate during the conversion process.

This has been dismissed by some as being something only the original apostles had authority to do. However, Ananias, who was not an apostle, is the one who laid hands on Paul.

For traditional denominations the problem is one of disobedience because of a dependency on religious traditions devoid of revelation. For Charismatic denominations and fellowships the problem is the same in regard to following non-scriptural models of utilizing a repeat-after-me sinner's prayer and confession of faith, but, in the case of laying on of hands, the problem is that the laying on of hands is often too hastily applied and without the specific leading of the Holy Spirit.

Whether we belong to traditional evangelical church fellowships or Charismatic fellowships we are intended to minister salvation to the lost just as we are to seek our own sanctification...with "fear and trembling" and with great sensitivity to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

This word of testimony is, therefore, humbly offered to whomever it was intended.

So be it.