

# Sinner's Prayer Notes from "The Sinner's Prayer: Its Origins and Dangers" by David Malcolm Bennett

---

## Chapter 1

- Two major early figures were D.L. Moody and William Booth. They lived in the last two-thirds of the nineteenth century. Moody seemed to have adopted the Sinner's prayer theology early in his ministry, but his use of the sinner's prayer is open to debate. (Pg. ix in preface)
- In more recent years Billy Graham and Bill Bright have been the most significant figures promoting the use of such prayers. (Pg. ix in preface)
- The Sinner's Prayer can be defined as an actual prayer to God or Jesus. It must be understood that the effective of the prayer will have an immediate result. It must also speak of the sinner inviting/accepting/receiving Christ into their hearts (though another Paul Chitwood defines 4 basic elements: recognition of sin, statement of belief, pledge of repentance, and the acceptance/invitation of Jesus). (Pg. 2)
- The most famous evangelistic booklet in use since WW2 has been *Four Spiritual Laws* (FSL) by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC). It gives a suggested prayer. Claimed to have been distributed to 2.5 billion people. The material goes on to assure the reader that Christ would come into their heart if they prayed it with sincerity. (Pg. 3)
- Another popular tool is *Steps to Peace with God* (SPC) which was originally published by the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association. It has it's own version of the Sinner's Prayer. This material also quotes two passages - Romans 10:13; 1 John 5:12-13. It states, "I prayed the prayer in this booklet, accepting Jesus Christ. I know this means He forgave me and came into my life." (Pg. 4-5)
- Another popular set of material *Personal Commitment Guide* (PCG), produced by the Souther Baptist Convention. Under the section of 'Salvation' the prayer in its entirety is given. The prayer is directed towards Jesus. It asks for forgiveness and expresses belief and repentance. It includes receiving Christ. The final phrase assumes conversation has happened. It thanks Jesus for salvation. (Pg. 5)
- Then you have two Australian booklets. The first is Baptist. It's called the *Guide to Life* (GL). The other is Anglican called *2 Ways to Live* (2Ways). (Pg. 6-7)

## Chapter 2

- Examples of "prayers" are given, but he does not feel they either fit the context or criteria. The thief on the cross is one, but other than that, the only ones I feel are worth mentioning are Rev. 3:20 and John 1:12-13 because they are frequently used. (Pg. 14-16).

- Rev. 3:20 was used in the mid-nineteenth century. While it had been used in earlier times in connection with conversion, as in the works of John Flavel (1691), Jonathan Edwards (1703-58), and Asahel Nettleton (1783-1843, in their writings the initiative in conversion still remained with God. However, the context was directed to Christians who needed to repent and not non-Christians. (Pg. 16-17)
- The American Tract Society (ATS) used to state “will you accept me?” However, modern equivalents now state “I will accept Thee.” The author goes on to state the reason is because theology was going away from Calvinism and original Arminianism. (Pg. 20)
- Dawson Trotman, the founder of the Navigators, was probably using the Sinner’s Prayer even before WW2. His theology and other practices were in line with it. (Pg. 25)
- In 1978 the Institute for American Church Growth claimed that Bill Bright’s organization, CCC, had registered hundreds of thousands of “decisions”, but only 3% of the persons responding ever joined a local church. (Pg. 26)

### Chapter 3 (Before Charles Finney)

- It’s believed that the Sinner’s Prayer as we know it today didn’t come into existence earlier than the second half of the 19th century. This would be after the Altar Call (the practice of inviting people forward for counseling after a Gospel presentation), which was common in the mid-nineteenth century. (Pg. 39)
- Charles Finney lived from 1792-1875. The author states this was a time when the theology of evangelism had gone from Calvinistic to Arminian, or even to almost the Pelagian theology of Finney. In other words - from God choosing and calling you, to you choosing and calling on God. He states he was unable to find any example of a conversation being called a human ‘decision’ before 1832. (Pg. 39)
- Bottom line: he mentions prayer like references before his time, but points out how none of them fit the traditional “sinner’s prayer” approach. Other’s may have cried out for help, but they didn’t have an idea of a formalized prayer resulting in salvation.

### Chapter 4 (Charles Finney)

- When considering the origins of the Sinner’s Prayer, Charles Finney has to be considered as a possible source. Originally a Presbyterian clergyman, he later joined Congregationalists. His theology and methods of evangelism were in some respects new. He was “more Arminian than that Arminians and he even came very close to Pelagianism.” He used some forms of the Altar Call. (Pg. 48). *(My note: This was a form to encourage others to come forward for help. Not originally tied to the sinners prayer.)*
- He did seem to preach the idea of “accepting Jesus”, but they appear rarely and not in any prayer formula (Pg. 51). *(My note: the author, David Bennett, is clearly offended by Finney's take on how salvation works - I actually tend to agree with Finney).*

- Bottom line: Finney seemed to emphasize immediate repentance more than anything. However, it seems as though he didn't see one basic approach for every person, because each one is at a different point in life. He believed a person needed a basic amount of understanding and shouldn't be pressured. (Pg. 51-52)
- He would counsel other counselors to pray with others, but this doesn't prove anything. It doesn't mean it was a prayer resulting in immediate salvation. However, he did think that Christians should pray for the salvation of non-Christians and even believed that may be the reason others didn't come to know Jesus since God is faithful to prayer. (Pg. 53) *(My note: this was error - if we have free will, then we are not hindered due to a lack of Christian prayers, rather, because of a hard heart.)*
- No evidence can be found that he used the sinner's prayer. In fact, the evidence points in the other direction. Though it can be successfully argued that Finney had a significant influence upon modern evangelism, his language of conversion is strikingly different from that used in today's evangelical churches. He only rarely used such terms as "accepting' or receiving Christ' and did not describe conversion as a decision, though he used other terms that implied that a decision was necessary. His common language was, rather, 'repent and submit. Nor did he seem to believe that non-Christians should pray for salvation. However, his theology and practice did establish a type of thinking from which the Sinner's Prayer could emerge. This thinking included the teaching that an individual's conversion was in their own power, that one could become a Christian at any time one chose, and the 'prayer of faith' idea. All these are echoed in Sinner's Prayer method. In addition, his idea that revivals could be brought about by human activity led to an increase in organized evangelistic campaigns, which were an ideal environment from which the Sinner's Prayer might emerge. (Pg. 54)
- *(My note: Finney was known for popularizing the Altar Call. He would put others in the hot seat by basically scaring them. It sounds like he was struggling with the balance of not pushing others to Christ, while also emphasizing their lost condition. So, they came forward as a show of repentance and would pray, but not a model prayer resulting in salvation. That's the point of this author.)*

## Chapter 5 (Mid and Late 19th Century Methodism)

- Mid and Late 19th Century Methodism
- American Camp Meetings. Though Rev. 3:20 was used, there's no evidence of the Sinner's Prayer. There was the idea/belief that non-Christians could be saved quickly, but no sinner's prayer. (Pg. 56)
- James Caughey (1810-91) came to the US as a Methodist. He was part of missions in the US. William Booth, founder of The Salvation Army, heard Caughey speak in the 40's late 50's and 60's. He may have been influenced by Finney. Caughey would urge sinners to make a decision and choose God, like Elijah urged his hearers. (Pg. 56-57)

- Caughey did give an example of a man who prayed for the Father and Son to hear him. Caughey said then man then and there found mercy and was justified. However, it doesn't fit the "sinner's prayer" idea. (Pg. 60). *(My note: We see evidence of it being practiced. But, moments like this will aid the use of it later. He did believe you could pray and receive - maybe immediately - salvation. However, he's only recorded to use this once.)*
- William 'California' Taylor (1821-1902) was another Methodist and American evangelist who traveled the world. He was a slightly later contemporary of Caughey and of the same denomination, but unlike Caughey, he frequently used the terms "accept" or "receive Christ" as synonyms for conversion. (Pg. 61)
  - It does seem as though he equated belief as accepting Christ which would result in immediate salvation (Pg. 63)
  - This recounts how he told a woman say "I accept Christ" until your heart says it. In the 1960's. He told her God was knocking at the door of her heart. She said, "I accept Christ, I accept Christ" and was saved. *(My note: this sounds more like a confession to me)* (Pg. 64)
  - He speaks of a man who thought he couldn't be heard by God. He was encouraged to cry out like the tax collector. He did and received salvation. (Pg. 65)
  - "Taylor's frequent comments about accepting and receiving Christ may well have played a part in the development of Sinner's Prayer theology, but we have found no evidence that he used such a prayer himself, though he often encouraged enquirers to pray." (Pg. 67)
- Wesleyan Methodist Magazine (*WMM* of 1865, a British magazine)
  - Salvation happened due to repentance and belief/faith. It wasn't so much a decision (they did see it as a man's decision, but God working on man's heart) (Pg. 67-68)
- William Booth (1829-1912), Catherine Booth (1829-1890) and The Salvation Army
  - William Booth was Methodist (along with his wife) and Founder and first General of The Salvation Army.
  - William was always interested in different methods/approaches to bring about soul saving. His wife became that way later in life as well. They were influenced by James Caughey and Charles Finney. (Pg. 70)
  - He did encourage others to respond now, but not if they weren't ready. He used methods such as the Altar Call (Pg. 71)
  - He became an independent evangelist in 61. (Pg. 73)
  - It does give examples of those who prayed for their salvation (Pg. 74). *(My note: the author spends more time debating whether or not such people are deciding to accept*

*Christ on their own free will rather than discuss the fact that they were praying for their salvation. The Sinner's Prayer is not yet in play, but it seems clear to me that by the mid 19th century, many thought you could pray to God to be saved.)*

- An example is given of one being convicted of sin through prayer, but not being saved till' later. (My note: it seems as though they didn't have a set way of being saved. Prayer just seemed like a natural thing to do. Either ask God for help or ask Him to save you since you're feeling convicted and believe.) (Pg. 75)
- In 1889, it is said that one woman "Accepted Jesus Christ as her personal Savior." (Pg. 77-78)
- In the early 1880s William did present what is seen as a prompt for a prayer for salvation in a booklet of *Army Doctrines and Discipline*. It's not so much a prayer than a statement, but it does carry the idea of immediate salvation. More of a confession (Pg. 78)
- In the 90's, Booth would write a pamphlet on "*Full Salvation - A Ladder to Holiness*," which included 7 steps, but that was for Christians. "*How to be Saved*" which also included 7 steps. That was for non-Christians. The first material included many prayers to God with the implication they would have immediate effect. Surprisingly, while the "*How to be Saved*" does encourage prayer through it, it does not end with a prayer. Yet, prayer is throughout and asking for mercy and confessing sin. (Pg. 79-80)
  - This booklet is technically not the Sinner's Prayer, but it carries the theology and expectations of the Sinner's Prayer. It does urge the reader to pray a form of the Sinner's Prayer. Salvationists were being encouraged in the early 1890s to instruct their non-Christian contacts to us a Sinner's Prayer. However, no evidence has been discovered of such a prayer appearing in printed form for prospective converts at that time. (Pg. 82)
- Booth used the Altar Call and believed those who were ready should feel the pressure to respond. If the sermon topic was Christ knocking at the door of the hearts of sinners, then they should be asked, "Have you let Jesus in?" (Pg. 83)
- He thinks that Booth may have been persuaded by D. L. Moody and his Sinner's Prayer theology, but he can't prove it.

## Chapter 6 (The World of D.L. Moody)

- (1837-1899) American salesman who became a major evangelist, first in Britain, then in the USA. He is the founder of the Moody Bible Institute which is widely known.
- He wasn't a theologian and many times made negative comments towards theology, but others said he had his own (albeit simple) theology. He would end of teaching a theology totally consistent with the Sinner's Prayer. He's said to still influence the evangelical world in the 21st century.

- Though Finney and Moody's lives overlapped by 30 years, there's not evidence that Moody ever met or read any of Finney's material.
- He once encouraged a congregation to consider what the question (what should I do with Jesus) and come back next week telling him what they would do. However, the Chicago fire of 1871 took 300 lives and many buildings (including theirs). So, that next Sunday never came. He decided to never leave a question hanging. He wanted others to act immediately while they had the time. He advised, "The way to be saved is not to delay, but to come and take, t-a-k-e- TAKE."
- Bottom line: he didn't use an official sinner's prayer, but urged others to accept Christ immediately, whether that was through confession or prayer. He felt that salvation should be available to all who were ready to accept Christ's gift of salvation. *(My note: Prayer, when you reject baptism as the mode of salvation and don't have a specific guide to what a person should do, seems to be a natural way to go about it. It's seems to be the way to express your belief.)*
- He then discusses a song book put together by Moody (though he was tone deaf) that was later enlarged and republished with 1200 songs (with the help of others) around that time. No song seems to fit the strict "Sinner's Prayer", yet many carry the ideas or main points. *(My note: We sing some of them today. You just think about it differently when you do, "Jesus is tenderly calling today" we sing. However, we think and do something different with that song.)*
- R.A. Torrey (1856-1928) was the first head of the Moody Bible Institute. Known for his intellect. He wasn't an emotional evangelist. Was very influential and part of what paved the way for the Sinner's Prayer. He was "method" driven. Worried later in life about salvation being the method driven, including his own.
  - He didn't have an official sinner's prayer, but there's one example of him (perhaps impromptu) having several nonbelievers come to the front, say a prayer, and then turn facing the crowd stating they had accepted Jesus as "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross" was being sung.

## Chapter 7 (The Wider Influence)

- Billy Sunday (1862-1935)
  - An American baseball star turned evangelist. He has been charged with changing evangelistic method in a negative way, but it's probably best to see it as developing a process already well under way.
  - He used the Altar Call to greet those coming forward with a handshake. He encouraged them to come forward, shake his hand, and by doing so confess and accept Jesus Christ as their personal Savior.

- He had printed material encouraging his readers to take a moment and receive Christ. However, it does not include a sinner's prayer. It takes the approach of asking questions. If you can answer yes to all, then you're a child of God.
- He also used Romans 10:9.
- Decision Cards had their beginning towards the end of the 19th century. Typically used for young people. Decisions about their salvation or something important they sought to accomplish. One evangelist encouraged the students to use the during bible school, and to say a prayer for conversion. Basically the Sinner's Prayer. That was in 1901. They seemed to morph into specifically decision of salvation.
- 1922 has the first prayer in print that is basically in line with how the author defines a Sinner's Prayer. Not exactly, but pretty much. It's encouraged to be used during a Decision Day ceremony.
- Note - many men did not believe it was the prayer that saved, rather an act of faith.
- We have two cases of printed prayers that would meet the "Sinner's Prayer" definition. This is all pre-WW2. However, it was not widely used, but increasing in popularity.
- All existing tracts published by the American Tract Society (ATS) since 1825 have been examined by Paul Chitwood. He said, "no suggested prayer existed in the literature published by ATS during the first 127 years of its activity. So, tracts prior to to 1950s did not contain a Sinner's Prayer and "prayer of any sort is rare." Some of the early tracts (1827-33) urged their readers to pray for salvation, but no specific prayer was included. Chitwood compared the older tracts to modern ATS tracts. He said it went from urging the reader to ask God, "Will you accept me?" to "I will accept Thee." This author claims is has to do with theology. (*My note: I wonder if it's mentality rather than theology.*)

## Chapter 8 (After World War Two)

- This work is 150 pages long. This section doesn't begin until page 139.
- Billy Graham (1918-2018) was a Southern Baptist minister. Has been called "America's Pastor." Was the first employee for Youth For Christ.
  - Graham explains his own conversion in 34 (around 16 years old). The minister prayed with him and then Graham prayed. He understood he had to do something. It's clear that he believed he was saved at that moment. Not an official Sinner's Prayer, but there you have it.
  - Graham, unlike Finney, believed that God had to do all the work. Anything you do is because the Spirit has changed you. It's all God's doing. God calls/pulls you. He felt this happened at his conversion - he felt God pulled him forward.
  - Graham said that he was using the sinner's prayer even in his Bible School days, the late 1930s to the early 1940s, though he was unaware of its origins.

- In 1954, Graham's organization produced a tract called *Steps to Peace with God* that included a Sinner's Prayer. Not written by Graham, but it was to help counsel others.
- Bill Bright (1921-2003) was an evangelical (Presbyterian).
  - The most famous evangelistic booklet in use since WW2 has been *Four Spiritual Laws* (FSL) by Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ (CCC). It gives a suggested prayer. Claimed to have been distributed to 2.5 billion people. The material goes on to assure the reader that Christ would come into their heart if they prayed it with sincerity.
  - Also creator of the movie *Jesus* (1979).
  - They were using a Sinner's Prayer as early as 1952. The material ends with a prayer.

## Conclusion

It is clear from this study that a theology that could support the me or the sinner's Prayer emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century. This is evident in the teachings of Methodist preachers, such as James Caughey and, especially, William 'California' Taylor. It was a crucial component of D. L. Moody's preaching from the mid 1870s. At the end of that century, it would also seem very likely that the use of spoken Sinner's Prayers was being encouraged in Moody meetings by some counselors and by officers in The Salvation Army. This practice seems to have become common in the first half of the twentieth century, especially in America, with printed forms certainly appearing in books in 1922 and 1945. Cards, booklets and tracts with Sinner's Prayers were being used from the late 1940s and 1950, and they became common in the 1960s. Billy Graham and Campus Crusades Four Spiritual Laws have done more than anything else to popularize this method of evangelism, taking it to most countries in the world.

Sinner's Prayer evangelism, therefore, can be regarded as first emerging in the late nineteenth century, developing in the first half of the twentieth, before becoming a major form of evangelism from about 1960.

### Biblical?

- Luke 18:10-14? Context, timing and harmony (what about Acts 2:38)?
- Acts 8:22? Is this a nonbeliever?
- Revelation 3:20? Nonbelievers?
- Romans 10:9-10, 13? Full context? A prayer? What about repentance?
- John 1:11-13? So you can receive Him? What did it look like to believe in Jesus?

As we can see from context - these passages are being misused and not in harmony with clear scriptures such as Mark 16:16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; Romans 6:1-5; Colossians 2:11-12; Gal. 3:27; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 3:21, etc.