

# *Praying the prayer*

## **Introduction - we have a problem**

Just recently I was involved in a large evangelistic event. The event itself was very exciting and the response afterwards enthusiastic and very encouraging in that a large number of young people went forward at the appeal, many of them indicating a first time commitment to Jesus.

A few days later I phoned several of these young people to invite them to follow-up meetings we were holding. A couple of them immediately said they were not interested and hung up. Several others said they were definitely interested but never came. What had happened in those few days?

In my experience and in the experience of others I have spoken to, this sort of response is not unusual. People make a response to the gospel "on the night" and at the time are very enthusiastic. However, within a short time, a few days even, it has all gone. What is going on?

One of the last things Jesus said to his disciples before he ascended was to give them these instructions: 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.' (Matt 28:19)

Jesus' instruction was "to make disciples" - the "going", "baptising" and "teaching" were just qualifications to the basic command. Making disciples is fundamental to the mission of the church, the mission delegated to us by the Lord himself. Making disciples is the only measure of success in evangelism and discipleship has to be measured by commitment to and participation in the local church.

It is at this point that the problem I referred to at the beginning of this introduction rears its head. I have been a Christian for over 30 years and have been actively involved in evangelism for most of that time - student summer campaigns, counselling at big crusades, door-to-door visiting, church based event evangelism, street evangelism - you name it, I've done it! But when I look back, I see that the number of disciples is not very big. I've seen many people "go forward", "make a decision", "pray the sinners' prayer" but very few committed to and participating in the local church.

Talking to people involved in big evangelistic events there seems to be an expectation that of those that go forward only about 10%-20% will eventually become active church members. This seems to me to be very different from the expectation in the New Testament.

I know that not all Christians agree, but I believe that real conversion is permanent but we don't see this if "conversion" is equated with "making a decision" or "praying the prayer".

The parable of the sower (Matt 13:1-23) indicates that the word of God is received differently by different people and that how much they take it to heart depends on many things. This may account for some of the fall off but I don't think this is what Jesus was talking about. I think he was talking about the stages before someone really commits themselves to him - we'll come back to this later.

I was very struck recently by Carol Wimber's biography of her late husband ("*John Wimber - the way it was*", Hodder and Stoughton, 1999). In describing their conversion (they became Christians together) she tells how they were involved with a lively church for many months who lovingly shared the whole gospel with them over a period of time. In the end, John and Carol had to BEG this church to lead them to the Lord! The church had the wisdom to wait until they were ready (and desperate) to repent and give their lives to the Lord.

Where we have seen people becoming disciples, it has usually involved long term contact with Christians with many discussions about the gospel and much time spent with them. I think this fact shows us the direction we need to take.

## **How we do evangelism**

The word "Evangelism" covers a wide variety of activities all aimed at bringing people who are outside the church to a point where they experience God for themselves, turning from their past life, trusting in Jesus for salvation and joining a local church.

Whatever the means of evangelism, the end point is usually understood to be the point where the person "makes a decision" or "gives their lives" to Jesus. Usually, this means that they are encouraged to pray "the sinners' prayer" - something like this:

*"Lord Jesus, I admit that I am a sinner.  
I thank you that you died for me.  
I turn away from my sins and ask you to come and live in me now.  
Thank you for your love for me and that you promise to be with me for ever.  
Amen"*

The assumption is that, having done that, they are now converted and, through whatever system of "follow-up" is in place, they will eventually take their place in the church.

In the introduction, we acknowledged that therein lies the problem - many of them never make it. The question I want to ask is, "Is this what we are right to expect or do many of them not make it because our approach to evangelism is wrong?"

Let's go back to the sinner's prayer for a moment. All of us would agree that just saying the words, of course, is not enough - you have to really mean it. But what do these words mean? To "really mean" this prayer you have to:

1. understand who Jesus is - exactly who it is you are addressing
2. understand the nature and consequence of sin
3. understand (or at least accept) the fact of Jesus' atoning death
4. understand that there is absolutely nothing that you can do to win favour with God
5. understand what repentance means in practice
6. be willing to repent (count the cost of repentance)
7. be willing to submit to Jesus as Lord in all aspects of life

True repentance and faith lead to a changed life (or at least a desire for a changed life, for a life like Jesus), assurance of salvation and joy. The last of these is the real giveaway!

The level of understanding and willingness that a person may have will depend on many things and will change with time and experience. It is clear that if someone "prays the prayer" with all the understanding and willingness in the list above, then there should be no doubt about their conversion and radical change in their life will be rapidly apparent. But what if that is not the case?

Becoming a Christian is a process and not an event and the Engel Scale is a useful model of this process. People we meet when we are involved in evangelism can be anywhere on this scale. Because of the secularisation of our society, people we meet these days are more likely to be around -7 or -8. Fifty years ago, evangelists could probably expect most people they met to be around -6. What happens if we encourage someone to "pray the prayer" when they are at -4 or -8?

Let's explore this.

## **What do the words mean?**

In the following paragraphs, I want to look at what someone at each stage of the Engel Scale might "look like" in terms of the seven understandings and willingnesses in the list above, and then to look at what the "sinner's prayer" might actually mean to someone like this.

### **-8 Awareness of a Supreme Being but no effective knowledge of gospel**

Such a person will have an understanding of God as creator and will hold him in high regard. However, they may also hold many other views, which are not necessarily Christian. In today's society such views may very well be pantheistic (New Age) and will probably be influenced by several other religious faiths.

Views about Jesus will vary enormously - a good man, a great teacher, a prophet, a god - he may even be equated with gods from other religions, such as Shali. Almost certainly, he will not be seen as God's only Son, the one who said he was the (only) way, the truth and the life. His death will be seen as a shame but not as the way to life.

Views on the Holy Spirit will be even more vague. Usually he will not be seen as a person but as an impersonal force, nothing more than the source of religious experiences.

Views on man will also vary. There will probably, but not always, some understanding of sin or, at least understanding of the effects of selfishness. Thoughts about its remedy may encompass salvation by works ('good' outweighing 'bad'), salvation through enlightenment, reincarnation, etc. There will almost certainly be no understanding of sin's offence against a holy God.

Such people may be very religious and, if so, will probably see religious experiences as all-important. Religious experiences are all considered valid and good even when, in extremes, they are gained through misuse of drugs, etc.

If such a person "Prays the prayer" they will do so with little or no understanding of who Jesus is (particularly his uniqueness and lordship), little or no concept of sin (although they will be able to see some of its consequences), no understanding of Jesus' sacrifice and no understanding of the need to repent - even though they say the words, because the meaning of the words is heavily modified by their present experience and belief system.

They may well "pray the prayer" simply as a means to a religious experience. If they see all religions as equally valid, they may "pray the prayer" in order to add Jesus to the set of gods they are already devoted to - another string to their religious bow.

Such a person will almost certainly not become a disciple at this point (which is not to say that they will not become a disciple at some later time) although "praying the prayer" may have the effect of making them think about Jesus and the gospel message and move them to the next stage. There will, however, probably be no visible change in their lives. There is also the danger that they may here the gospel again at some later stage but think, "I tried that before and it didn't work".

### **-7 Initial awareness of gospel**

Such a person will possibly have quite different views from the previous group. To have any awareness of the gospel they either know a Christian quite well, in which case they will have seen the gospel in operation in someone else, or they will probably have some connection with the church.

Many such people are church attenders (regular or occasional, maybe even in an evangelical church), some will have gone to Sunday School as a child or have gone to a church school. They will probably count themselves as Christians and will be highly offended if they think someone is implying that they are not Christian. For them "Christian" means "a good person" rather than a follower of Christ.

Some such people will hold non-Christian views (such as belief in truth of other religions or belief in reincarnation) alongside their "Christian" faith.

If their knowledge of the gospel comes by observing a Christian acquaintance they will be aware of the specialness of Jesus, the importance of his death and of church attendance. They may also believe church rituals to be important, at least for their friend. There is no saying that their awareness of the gospel leads to a positive attitude to what they understand of the gospel. They may think their friend is mad! They may be of the opinion "that it is great for other people".

Attitudes to the gospel are more likely to be positive if the knowledge comes through teaching in church or elsewhere. It is sad to have to observe, however, that in many churches the elements of the gospel are so mixed with other doctrine that such a person may have an extremely distorted understanding of what the gospel is. For example, they may know all about Jesus' death and truly understand that he died for them but still believe that they have to earn his love or forgiveness through religious observance or good works.

When such a person "prays the prayer" they may see it as just another ritual of the church that they are expected to perform or they may see it as an "insurance policy", making sure they have left no stone unturned - ironically, "praying the prayer" could actually be a form of salvation by works!

If such a person has been influenced by a Christian friend, they may "pray the prayer" to please their friend or because of a desire to be like their friend.

In all of these cases there is, at least, a lack of understanding of the need to or nature of repentance and probably no will to repent. There could also be the little understanding of who Jesus really is, the nature of sin and of the need to make Jesus Lord.

When such a person "prays the prayer", almost certainly they won't see it as becoming a Christian because they would already claim to be a Christian. In fact they probably won't become a disciple at this point. Again there will probably not be any visible change in their life.

As in the previous case, "praying the prayer" may have the effect of making them think more about Jesus and the gospel message and move them to the next stage or of putting them off entirely.

#### **-6 Awareness of the fundamentals of the gospel**

Such a person is superficially similar to the one described above. They will however have grasped the basic truths of the gospel, namely

- God's holiness
- God's love
- Man's sinfulness
- Atonement through Jesus' death

And maybe some others. The problem will probably arise because this knowledge is "head knowledge" rather than "heart knowledge" - only in the mind and not affecting the emotions or actions.

They will probably not have a clear understanding of who Jesus is nor what his lordship means. They will probably not understand that eternal life is free but think that they need to do something to obtain it. They will probably not understand what repentance means.

Another alternative is that such a person may have belonged to (or still belong to) a Bible believing church but have been upset or put off by such things as an over-emphasis on God's wrath, judgement and hell, by misuse of the gift of tongues or something else. They may have picked up some of the basics of the gospel but had their understanding clouded because of other issues.

There is no saying that such a person has a positive attitude to what they understand of the gospel.

When such a person "prays the prayer" they might very well think they already were a Christian as in the previous case. They may pray it out of fear of "hell fire" or because it is seen as something expected by the church they attend - a necessary step to belonging (which in a sense it is). However, because repentance is not really understood, conversion may not be real.

#### **-5 Grasp of implications of the gospel**

Such a person will have similar or greater understanding of the elements of the gospel to the person in the last section. They will also have some "heart knowledge" in that they will understand something needs to happen. They may even desire this.

The main implication of the gospel is the requirement to give over control of ones life to God and to be changed from the inside. This is costly - it will affect family, friends, career, hobbies, use of money, use of time, etc. Such a person may understand the implications but not the means that God uses to achieve his purpose in their life.

Someone who has grasped the implications might actually be very depressed about the whole thing, maybe wondering if they can "measure up". They will see the need for change but still think they have to change themselves. They will probably doubt their ability to do it. (They are right!).

If someone here "prays the prayer" they might then spend a long time (years) trying to live the Christian life without God's power to do so. They will not see the expected change and neither will the church or the world. They have not become a true disciple at this point.

#### **-4 Positive attitude towards the gospel**

As noted above, it is quite possible to understand the basics of the gospel and their implications and still be very negative towards the gospel. This was the situation of Paul of Tarsus as he set out for Damascus in Acts 9.

If a person understands the implications of the gospel and have a positive attitude to it, then "praying the prayer" probably takes them directly through the next 3 stages. One possible hindrance might be if they understand the implications but have not really counted the personal cost. This could possibly mean that repentance is not complete with the result that change of life is hindered and assurance lacking.

#### **-3 Counting the cost**

If a person is genuinely counting the cost of being a disciple then they will understand the implications of "praying the prayer". If they decide to pray it then they have moved on to -2.

#### **-2 Decision to act**

At this point, "praying the prayer" is a move to -1 and to rebirth.

### **-1 Repentance and faith in Christ**

This is what happens when someone "prays the prayer" in full understanding of what they are doing.

When I did this analysis, I found it quite salutary. What it means is this: if someone "prays the prayer" at an evangelistic event or, indeed, during any other evangelism, and they are at some point before -2, then we cannot be sure that they really have become a Christian. They may have said the words, but their understanding of what the words mean is different from what the person leading them thinks they mean!

Of course, this will not always be the case, and, in any case, we cannot look into men's souls and see what they do or don't mean. But, it may explain the problem we started out with. Could it be that the reason so many converts "don't make it" to discipleship is that they were never really converted; they never really repented? In other words, they "prayed the prayer" but it meant something different than the evangelist thought or expected because the words actually mean something different to them. The seed was sown on stony ground.

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