

**Notes on *The Sinner's Prayer: A Historical and Theological Analysis*,
Paul Chitwood (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001)**

Dr. Paul Chitwood's 2001 Ph. D. dissertation *The Sinner's Prayer: A Historical and Theological Analysis* (Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001) is a valuable historical analysis of the development of the evangelistic methodology dominant in the evangelical and fundamentalist world today, namely, the practice of having the lost repeat a "sinner's prayer" in order to become Christians. (Note that positive comments on Chitwood's composition do not constitute an endorsement of the Southern Baptist Convention; no conventions, only independent churches, can be found in the New Testament.) Chitwood effectively demonstrates that the "sinner's prayer" is a new and very recent evangelistic methodology in church history. The following extended quotation summarizes much of the valuable material in his dissertation.

Chitwood notes:

The Sinner's Prayer did not appear until well into the twentieth century. . . . Moreover, the concept of bringing or inviting "Jesus into your heart" is one that does not occur readily before the turn of the twentieth century. . . . The transition to a systematized presentation . . . and a standardized prayer can be seen in the evangelistic literature and training manuals of the early twentieth century. . . . Sometime this century . . . the invitation to immediate conversion was increasingly associated with a specific prayer for and by the sinner which completed the event of salvation. . . . [In] 1945, Faris Dan Whitesell, in his book *Sixty-Five Ways to Give Evangelistic Invitations* . . . provides a sample prayer for the lost to pray. [His work] represents the first known reference to what appears to be a commonly known "prayer of committal." While the form is not identical to the Sinner's Prayer, it can be viewed as an early example. . . . By the 1950s, the Sinner's Prayer was becoming commonplace. In *The Greatest of All Journeys*, published in 1950, Minyard Merrell Barnett tells the lost person to pray: "Oh God! I am a sinner. Forgive me of all my sins, come into my heart and save me NOW; in Jesus' name. Amen." . . . [M]ost of the components of the modern Sinner's Prayer [were by this point in time] . . . include[d]. . . . Notably . . . they include the idea of inviting Jesus into one's heart, a concept earlier introduced and one that seems to have become the common way of expressing conversion by the mid-part of the twentieth century.

In addition to the training manuals and books cited above, research conducted in the area of evangelistic tracts supports the hypothesis that the Sinner's Prayer is what could be termed a modern method in evangelism. No occurrence of a suggested prayer, and certainly not the Sinner's Prayer, appears in evangelistic tracts published by the American Tract Society before the 1950s. . . . ATS is one of the largest tract publishers in the world, and the oldest still in existence. The society was established in 1825 . . . a comprehensive search of all the English tracts dating back to 1825 that are still in existence [demonstrates] . . . that no suggested prayer existed in the literature published by ATS during the first 127 years of its activity[,] [a]lthough many tracts made the plea for a decision on the part of the lost reader. . . . In fact, in all of the tracts predating the 1950s, prayer of any sort is rare. . . . The repeating of a few brief words of prayer is never encouraged. . . . In comparing these examples to modern tracts published by ATS, not only are the [modern] tracts much shorter in length, there is also a notable shift in language, and, more importantly, theology. . . . [S]inners . . . are now encouraged "to invite" Jesus into their "heart and life." The language has obviously softened . . . theology has been modified[.] One could argue that an entire shift of focus has taken place. . . . [A] 1955 tract . . . constitutes, in a formal way, the first prayer for salvation lost persons are asked to pray in the literature of ATS. . . . its late occurrence in ATS tracts suggests that the prayer was not commonly used until late into the twentieth century. . . . Beginning in the late 1950s, the Sinner's Prayer became commonplace in ATS tracts. Today, evangelistic tracts published by ATS almost always include the suggested prayer.

The most popular tracts containing the Sinner's Prayer are Billy Graham's *Steps to Peace with God* and Bill Bright's *The Four Spiritual Laws*. Graham and Bright deserve much of the credit for the popularity of the Sinner's Prayer . . . both of these men for years have made regular use of the Sinner's Prayer in their writing and speaking. . . . Graham's enormously popular tract *Steps to Peace with God* was first published in the early 1950s. . . . The tract closes with directions on how to receive Christ and then instructions on what to pray, i. e., the Sinner's Prayer. . . . People emulate Billy Graham . . . [h]is use of the Sinner's Prayer, naturally, has come to be a part of the example others follow. . . . Graham used the Sinner's Prayer in the 1940s . . . Graham would always lead . . . respondents in the Sinner's Prayer. . . . Graham always quoted from . . . Rom 10:13 before leading lost persons in the Sinner's Prayer. . . . [A] member of Graham's evangelistic team . . . suggested the possibility that the prayer may have "come from Graham's own heart."

Coupled with the results of research that indicates that the Sinner's Prayer cannot be found in regular use before the 1940s, this evidence points strongly to Billy Graham as the possible originator of the prayer, but it is not conclusive. When asked [in 1998] whether he was responsible for creating the prayer, Graham responded that he has been using it as long as he can remember . . . he could not recall if the prayer came from someone else or not. What is certain, however, is that Graham has had a major role in popularizing the Sinner's Prayer. . . .

Bill Bright . . . can also be credited with the enormous popularity of the Sinner's Prayer. . . . His organization, *Campus Crusade for Christ* . . . [produced the] film, "Jesus" . . . the most widely viewed film ever produced. According to Bright's organization, "The film has been translated into more than 633 languages and viewed by more than 3.9 billion people in 233 countries. . . . More than 121 million people have indicated making salvation decisions for Christ [that is, prayed the Sinner's Prayer] after viewing it." . . . In the summer of 1958, during a training session at the ministry's new headquarters . . . Bright had an experience that forever impacted his ministry. He explains[:] "[O]ne of our speakers for staff training that summer was a Christian layman who was an outstanding sales consultant, a man who had taught thousands of salesmen how to sell. . . . One of the main points of his addresses was that to be a successful salesman a man must have a pitch. . . . He compared the witnessing Christian to the secular salesman. To be effective . . . we must have, in his words, 'a spiritual pitch.'" . . . Bright immediately objected to this suggestion, but eventually came to realize the value of it. . . . He asked his staff to memorize . . . a twenty-minute presentation [that] became the standard witnessing approach for everyone involved in Campus Crusade. . . . From [this] was born *The Four Spiritual Laws* . . . a much shorter version of the gospel [than] . . . the 20-minute presentation. . . . After the laws are presented, the reader is encouraged to pray . . . the Sinner's Prayer. . . . [Several] billion copies of *The Four Spiritual Laws* have been printed and distributed in well over 100 major languages. . . . Bright is one who has had tremendous influence on a countless number of people. . . . The widespread popularity of the Sinner's Prayer is not due to the fact that the prayer has always been around. Nor is it due to the fact that the Sinner's Prayer is recorded in the Bible. Rather, the prayer is a relatively new practice in evangelism, not coming into use until the twentieth century. . . . Methodologically . . . the rise of the altar call represent[s] [a] critical ste[p] in setting the stage for the Sinner's Prayer. . . . [A] systematized approach eventually [developed which] came to include a standardized prayer. This prayer is popularly known today as the Sinner's Prayer. . . . [The] emphasis upon the need for a quick and easy way to introduce unsaved persons to Christ represents the key factor in the development of the Sinner's Prayer. [Dominant forms] of the Sinner's Prayer [are] repeated. . . . Once a lost person has prayed the Sinner's Prayer, little doubt remains as to whether or not the person is saved and heaven bound. . . . My research indicates that the Sinner's Prayer was not popularized until late into the twentieth century[.] . . .

[T]he Sinner's Prayer indicates a theological shift in evangelism . . . [in] evangelistic invitations in the nineteenth century . . . repeating . . . a few brief words of prayer is never encouraged. . . . [T]he seeker is now encouraged "to invite" Jesus into his or her "heart and life." The language has obviously softened . . . an entire shift of focus has taken place. The question was once phrased, "Will you accept me?" Now the statement is made, "I will accept You." . . . God's sovereignty was once in the forefront of decision counseling and prayer . . . [a] dramatic theological shift [is] represented by the Sinner's Prayer . . . [which] became popularized [in] the mid-twentieth century. . . .

[Some scholars] criticiz[e] the use of the Sinner's Prayer in evangelistic invitations because . . . it does not represent biblical evangelism. . . . We have come to believe that a sinner's prayer, worded in a specific way, is absolutely sacrosanct and that nobody can be converted apart from mouthing certain words to God. Usually, this includes an acknowledgement of being sinful . . . [but falls] short of repentance. . . . [Sometimes a Sinner's Prayer includes] an explicit statement about the sinner's desire to follow the Lord. . . . One could argue [that prayers] to turn toward God [involve turning] away from sin . . . repentance. While that argument is a stretch, especially in the prayers that make no reference whatsoever to turning or repenting, even to grant it for the sake of discussion does not resolve the problem in the heart of the sinner because it makes the assumption that the sinner, who is just being introduced to Christ for the first time, realizes that following the Lord means repenting from sin. Not knowing the demands of the gospel the sinner could assume that following Christ Jesus means a million things without ever assuming that it means turning from sin. Sinners could (and in all probability have) state a desire to follow Christ without feeling the least bit sorry for their sin, not to mention making a willful decision to turn from it. When it comes to a matter as important as one's salvation, a proper understanding of what it means to embrace the gospel should not be assumed. It should be explicitly stated [that] [e]mbracing the gospel means, at least in part, turning from sin to Christ. . . . We must be careful, of course, not to make the . . . mistake . . . being made by those who put their trust for salvation in the saying of a rightly worded prayer. The point being made here is that most versions of the prayer that some have come to put their trust in do not even express the biblical requirements for salvation. . . .

[O]ftentimes [the] prayer becomes the object of faith. . . . [Furthermore,] belief in the act of Christ's death, as the Sinner's Prayer expresses, is far removed from trust in his person and work. . . . [P]ersons who have prayed the prayer associate their salvation more with the act of repeating the words than with the work of Christ made manifest in their life. . . . [T]he idea of a person inviting Christ into his/her life is not biblical. . . . [E]xplaining the concept of inviting Christ into your heart is not always an easy thing to do. For children, who have not yet develop[e]d abstract thinking skills and struggle to understand symbolism, the idea can be most confusing. . . . Even for adults the notion may seem obscure, even unintelligible. . . . [A]lthough respondents who have prayed the Sinner's Prayer are then introduced as being "in Christ" . . . to ensure persons of their salvation based upon this criterion is a grave error . . . we seal people in deception. . . . [A]n alternative way to call lost persons to faith in Christ . . . [is,] without offering a public altar call . . . [to] emphasize the gospel message and the object of faith, Jesus Christ. Persons should then be called upon to repent and believe. . . . In addition, the role of assurance is not that of the evangelist who has led the lost person to pray a prayer; it is the role of the Holy Spirit. . . .

[S]ome view the prayer, itself, as a means of works salvation. . . . [it has been referred to as] "the centerpiece of evangelical sacramentalism." . . . [J]ust as some traditions require baptism or even communion as a part of the process of securing salvation, some Evangelicals have come to view the Sinner's Prayer as a part of the process. As such it is necessary to say certain words, endowed with magical powers, in order to be saved. . . .

[T]he process of getting saved in America has changed considerably since Jonathan Edwards placed sinners in the hand of an angry God. . . . How did this change take place? . . . [T]he challenges presented by deistic rationalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries [bore heavy] responsibility for the change. . . . One of the many . . . results of this theological compromise was an approach to conversion that in both practice and theory views conversion as nothing more than a decision of the human will. . . . [T]he origin of this concept of conversion [can be traced] to the Christian (Plymouth) Brethren of the nineteenth century. . . . The Brethren . . . stressed the concept of "receiving" Christ, thought of feelings as being irrelevant in conversion, and downplayed repentance. . . . The stress on mere intellectual acceptance of the gospel naturally yielded an evangelistic appeal that sought an instant "decision" for Christ. . . . Often in the counseling room the inquirer was just asked, "Do you accept Jesus as your Savior?", and when the person said, "Yes!", as most did, that individual was immediately regarded as converted. . . . The "decisionism" concept of conversion was epitomized in the evangelism of Finney. . . . [T]he conversion process shortened substantially. The lengthy struggles with sin and self that characterized earlier Regular and separate Baptist conversion were reduced to sign posts on the way to instantaneous regeneration. Conversion became a simple matter of praying the "sinner's prayer" and inviting Jesus into your heart. One sincere prayer brought immediate salvation.

While most contemporary Evangelicals would express our theological understanding of conversion as being more than a mere intellectual decision, our methods in evangelism may suggest otherwise. The decision-type conversion process that usually culminates in repeating the words of the Sinner's Prayer asks for little more than intellectual assent to the gospel. "Do you believe these things?" the evangelist might ask. "Yes," the sinner would say. "Then if you are ready to accept Christ as your savior, repeat after me the words of this prayer." After the prayer comes a hug or handshake, and then the sinner is introduced as a convert, based upon his/her decision for Christ. . . . [I]f becoming a Christian cannot be biblically defined as simply making a decision, nor even primarily so, then this method is faulty at its root. Though the method is fairly simple to use, it does not seem to go far enough in establishing an individual's spiritual condition, nor does it teach adequately the doctrines of the nature of God, sin and salvation, particularly in the case of those unfamiliar with biblical concepts. . . . Can a person be a Christian who professes Christ as Savior but does not follow Him as Lord? Or, to apply this question to the current discussion, is the person saved who has "prayed the prayer" but not lived as a Christian? The magnitude of this question for contemporary Evangelicalism is difficult to overstate because it applies to countless thousands of souls. "Uncle Bob prayed the prayer when he was ten but lived like the devil and didn't darken the church doors after he was twelve. Reckon he's in heaven?" Or, "Sue always said she didn't believe in God but the preacher did get her to say the prayer right before she died. I guess she's okay." . . . The problem of supposedly converted souls who have never made their way into the church, or have been there and left, is well documented. . . . It would be impossible to estimate the number of persons who are convinced that simply because they have prayed the Sinner's Prayer they are Christians and, therefore, bound for heaven. While there is no evidence of genuine conversion in their lives, they rest on the "assurance" of their accurate recitation of the words of the Sinner's Prayer. Many ministers of the gospel will have to accept blame for promoting this notion. . . .

As the salesman's success is judged by his/her ability to "close" the deal, so evangelistic efforts are often deemed successful to the degree that they produce "decisions" for Christ. In our day, a decision is indicated by the willingness of a lost individual to repeat the Sinner's Prayer. . . . God is looking for more than professions of faith. He is looking for church growth . . . biblical evangelism will include the salvation of the lost and the growth of the church. . . . [H]aving the sinner repeat the words of a prayer is often treated as the ultimate goal of the witnessing encounter. It is not. A genuine conversion is the ultimate goal. A new disciple is the penultimate goal. . . . Methods cannot substitute for God's movement; and even the best methods will fail without that movement. Thus, methods in evangelism are always limited to the degree that God limits them. Unfortunately, this limitation does not prevent the evangelist from using tactics to get results without God's participation[.] . . .

Having evaluated the Sinner's Prayer in light of biblical soteriology, can we, in good conscience, continue to utilize it? . . . I argue that the Sinner's Prayer cannot be used in good conscience until the limitations revealed in this study are addressed. . . . to think that we cannot lead a person to Christ without the prayer is a mistaken assumption. . . . The Sinner's Prayer represents an unmistakable and dramatic shift in the theology of evangelism. . . . Most versions are weak in the area of repentance, fail to distinguish between intellectual belief and personal trust, and use symbolic language that may lead to confusion. Further, the prayer represents an approach to evangelism . . . bordering at times on sacramentalism. . . . The method itself may . . . come to be thought of as having saving power. . . . [W]e may . . . bring people to belief in the efficacy of a prayer and not the efficacy of Christ's work . . . when we do so, the prayer become a stumbling block to that person's salvation, the chief stumbling block indeed. On the other hand, we may communicate to people who have not prayed the prayer that they are lost and without praying the prayer they cannot be saved. . . . Therefore, the Sinner's Prayer must not be understood as the means by which a person is saved. . . . The evangelist must clarify the need for genuine faith, as opposed to the need for words. . . . It is also part of an evangelistic approach that has resulted in a tremendous number of "conversions" but proportionally few disciples. . . . [M]any who have responded to an emotionally charged invitation, and are sincerely seeking, but not yet ready to embrace the gospel, have repeated the words of the prayer at the request of a pastor, youth minister, or evangelist. . . . [T]he evangelist . . . must understand the biblical theology of evangelism . . . [and] adhere to the biblical theology of evangelism during the witnessing encounter. Understanding the theology of evangelism is not enough. That theology must undergird, inform, and guide the actual process of evangelism. . . . If theological understanding does not dictate practice it has no benefit. . . . Given these findings, the Sinner's Prayer as it is often used has

possibly become a more valuable tool in service to the Enemy than it is in service to Christ. . . . Like a spreading cancer not yet detected . . . the prayer as it is often used has a poisoning effect that few seem to have diagnosed. . . . When more of us begin to realize that our approach to conversion, including the Sinner's Prayer, is directly responsible for the predicaments of unrepentant absenteeism and unregenerate membership, we will be one significant step closer to a cure. . . .

[T]heological terms must be clearly defined for the sinner. . . . While explaining the plan of salvation may seem simple enough to the evangelist, understanding it correctly may be a significant task for the sinner. [Many evangelistic models are] loaded with words that we take for granted as Christians [but] may be as foreign to the lost, non-religiously-oriented person as most software programming jargon is to the layperson trying to use his lap-top.

To say we should make no assumptions would be to understate the case. Rather, we should make at least two assumptions. We should assume, first, that we will use some theological terms unfamiliar to the sinner, and those terms must be explained. We should assume, second, that we will use some theological terms with which the sinner is familiar, but clearly misunderstands, and those terms need to be redefined. Although this practice may take considerably more time and effort, only by clarifying our language can we avoid . . . very serious and costly theological pitfalls . . . in evangelism. . . .

Objections raised to the manner in which the Sinner's Prayer is utilized as a tool in evangelism are more than theological and methodological in nature; they entail ethical considerations. . . . First, while Paul's method attempts to reach everyone, it allows for some to reject the gospel. . . . [E]thical evangelistic methods are those methods which allow people the freedom to say no and walk away . . . any approach to evangelism that always succeeds is questionable. If all who are approached with an evangelistic method or presentation say yes to Jesus, they either do not understand the message or they are not allowed to say no. Neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor Peter, nor any New Testament witness saw total success with their methods of evangelism. If there is not resistance to and rejection of the gospel, there is manipulation and coercion in the method. . . . [Some] people find it easier to "play along" than to reject the offer of the evangelist. . . . [Also,] we can mistakenly communicate that all we want people to do is repeat the words of a prayer . . . we simply have an ethical obligation to present the full truth of the gospel and make certain that it is understood and embraced in its entirety[.] . . . Paul's ethic of evangelism ensures that the gospel, not the method of presenting the gospel, is the stumbling block for those who refuse to believe. (pgs. 9, 44-64, 69-80, 91-99, 103-126, 133, 136)

The following notes and associated page numbers provide useful information on significant aspects of Chitwood's dissertation:

Pg. 8: The Sinner's Prayer did not appear until well into the twentieth century; it is absent from church history before that time. See also pgs. 44ff., 54, 61-63, 69, 75.

Pg. 9: Tracts from the ATS (American Tract Society) did not contain the Sinner's Prayer until modern times.

Pg. 13: Chitwood's view is that the Sinner's Prayer has severe limitations but totally abandoning it is not necessary. In this he does not go far enough; it would be far better to entirely abolish it.

Pgs. 17-18: Neither the Gospels, nor Acts, nor the early church, support the Sinner's Prayer.

Pg. 20: He cites the unregenerate advocates of Roman Catholicism's false gospel Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi alongside of the Christians Peter Waldo and John Wyclif as examples of "authentic, Christ-centered evangelism during the Middle Ages"!

Pgs. 31-37: Charles Finney and the preparation for the rise of the Sinner's Prayer: It did not exist in his day but his theology helped to prepare the way for it.

Pg. 38: Inquiry meetings originated in the 1800s.

Pgs. 39-41: Moody's contribution to the rise of the Sinner's Prayer—it does not yet exist in his day, however.

Pg. 42: Torrey one of the first to use the Sinner's Prayer.

Pgs. 43-44: Inviting Jesus Christ into one's heart occurs around the turn of the 20th century, but is not readily found before that time.

Pgs. 47-48: The first known reference to the Sinner's Prayer in print is in 1945—it then became commonplace in the 1950s.

Pgs. 50-53: American Tract Society tracts were without the Sinner's Prayer for 127 years—the first instance of the Sinner's Prayer is in 1955.

Pgs. 52: The modern changes that also came with the Sinner's Prayer; asking Jesus into one's heart and weak, watered down, less convicting, and shorter presentations of the gospel.

Pg. 54: The Sinner's Prayer popularized by Billy Graham and Bill Bright.

Pg. 57: Billy Graham very possibly the originator of the Sinner's Prayer. Chitwood has too high a view of Graham as a great evangelist, when Graham's acceptance of Rome's false gospel, rejection of hell fire, belief in salvation for the heathen apart from the gospel, declaration that infants can be regenerated through infant baptism, and other abominable heresies make it sadly likely that he is unconverted.

Pg. 58: Bill Bright and the Four Spiritual Laws.

Pg. 59: Statistics on Campus Crusade's "Jesus" film; the most widely viewed film ever—astonishing statistics on it.

Pgs. 59-60: The Four Spiritual Laws developed from a salesman's presentation as a sales pitch.

Pgs. 61-63: A great summary of the rise of the Sinner's Prayer.

Pg. 62: Regrettably, Chitwood does not understand Romans 10 correctly (see also pgs. 76-78). He would do well to read the studies here (<http://faithsaves.net/exegesis-application-romans-109-14-soulwinning-churches-christians-passage-teach-sinners-prayer/>) and here

(<http://faithsaves.net/ask-Jesus-Christ-into-heart-sinners-prayer-saved/>) and recognize that Romans 10, like the rest of the Bible, does not teach that the unsaved say words with their mouth or call out in prayer in order to be justified.

Pg. 69: The Sinner's Prayer popularized "as late as the 1940s or even the early 1950s."

Pg. 69: Billy Graham teaches that one is to invite Christ into his heart.

Pg. 79: What to do instead of telling the lost to say the Sinner's Prayer after hearing Biblical preaching.

Pgs. 80-92: Most versions of the Sinner's Prayer leave out repentance.

Pg. 84: A typo: "practical anyone."

Pgs. 86ff.: Chitwood teaches the Reformed error that regeneration precedes faith.

Pgs. 92-93: The Sinner's Prayer confuses trust in Christ and belief in the act of Christ's death.

Pg. 93: Chitwood makes the surprising and unscriptural affirmation that "we must reject the word 'belief' because it does not communicate to the contemporary mind the biblical concept of trusting in Christ." Saving "belief" should be properly defined, but the word certainly should NOT be rejected because many people are confused about what it is.

Pgs. 93-95: Chitwood is also too weak on the invitation system; he says it should be reformed, not abolished, because abolishing it is "extreme." However, God's Regulative Principle of worship (Lev 10:1-2) can be considered "extreme" also, but the Principle requires that the Invitation System be abolished.

Pg. 94: Chitwood's discussion of asking Jesus into one's heart is OK, but it is not great. The discussion is superior here: <http://faithsaves.net/ask-Jesus-Christ-into-heart-sinners-prayer-saved/>.

Pg. 97: The origin of the assumption that saying "yes" to certain questions meant one was saved among the Plymouth Brethren—very interesting.

Pgs. 98-100: A good discussion attacking decisionism, although Calvinistic.

Pgs. 100-107: A discussion of Lordship salvation and the Sinner's Prayer; the goal is a genuine disciple in the church, not just the Sinner's Prayer recited.

Pgs. 101-102: A possible origin of the “carnal Christian” error; the Plymouth Brethren denomination in the 19th century.

Pgs. 107-109: He says the Sinner’s Prayer should be abandoned (Amen!)—but only until its theology is corrected! But how can one correct the theology of something that is unbiblical? However, his proposed theological correctives are themselves good, although his conclusion that the Sinner’s Prayer can be retained if it is radically revised is not good, although it is better than leaving it as the corrupt thing that it is without radical revision.

Pgs. 110ff.: Valuable thoughts on evangelistic methodology.

Pgs. 114-115: Chitwood affirms that the Sinner’s Prayer is one method in evangelism, but not the only one. But why is it one legitimate method at all?

Pgs. 115-123: An excellent discussion of the dangers in the use of the Sinner’s Prayer in evangelism.

Pg. 123: A very poorly stated affirmation of what response is required of the lost for justification—the Biblical answer is repent/believe, the single response of faith in Christ as Lord and Savior—Chitwood, however, says the lost should be told: “Call upon the name of the Lord, believe and repent; then confess, ‘Jesus is Lord.’” Such an answer is radically different from what Paul told the jailer in Acts 16:31—for the Apostle, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” was the proper answer to “What must I do to be saved?” Chitwood’s response is based upon his faulty understanding of Romans 10:9-14 (see the note on pg. 62 above). Based upon his misunderstanding of Romans 10, Chitwood concludes that the Sinner’s Prayer is acceptable at times. The material on this page is bad.

Pg. 123-124: Chitwood falsely affirms that the critical issue is not if the Sinner’s Prayer is used, but how it is used. This is false, for the Sinner’s Prayer should not be used at all.

Pg. 124: His suggestions about how to reform the Sinner’s Prayer.

Pg. 125: The Sinner’s Prayer must not be understood as the means of salvation—that is very true.

Pgs. 129-131: Spurgeon on prayer—affirmations that are good, and are also notably different from the theology of the Sinner’s Prayer.

The abstract from his dissertation is reproduced below:

The Sinner's Prayer:
An Historical and Theological Analysis

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The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2001

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This dissertation is an historical and theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer. Chapter 1 introduces the topic, provides an example of the Sinner's Prayer, and proposes the importance of this study. The methodology and limitations of the study are also discussed.

Chapter 2 traces the history of evangelism from New Testament times. Significant movements and persons are discussed as they have importance for the development of evangelism that lead the way to the introduction of the Sinner's Prayer. Gospel tracts receive attention because they are representative of the popular approaches to evangelism. The case presented is that the Sinner's Prayer originated in the early twentieth century as a result of efforts to simplify and reproduce methods in evangelism. Billy Graham is given primary credit for popularizing the prayer.

Chapter 3 provides a theological analysis of the Sinner's Prayer. The doctrine of prayer is discussed. Biblical soteriology receives significant attention. Theological objections that have been raised regarding the Sinner's Prayer are also discussed. Theological correctives are offered to those who will continue to use the prayer as a tool in evangelism.

Chapter 4 discusses the use of methods in evangelism, noting limitations, dangers, and ethical considerations. This chapter stresses the need for reform in the way the Sinner's Prayer is typically used.

This work contends that the Sinner's Prayer is of recent origin. It reflects the theological and methodological shift in evangelism that occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theologically, most versions of the Sinner's Prayer fail to reflect the biblical directives for salvation. In the manner in which it is typically used, the prayer has become a barrier to effective evangelism. If evangelists will continue to make use of the prayer, reform is critical.