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# **The Sinner's Prayer: An Inappropriate Ritual for Thai Christian Culture and a Suggested Replacement**

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## **Abstract**

*The practice of encouraging seekers to say the sinner's prayer has become commonplace in Thailand. However, the practice is relatively recent and has developed out of Western individualistic assumptions. It is not an explicitly biblical practice and has serious practical problems, producing decisions for Christ that often do not result in a long-term commitment to Christianity. The practice also runs counter to many Thai cultural norms and can be harmful to evangelism and discipleship in Thailand. This article suggests a different approach, the prayer challenge.*

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## **Introduction**

Several years ago, I had a disturbing discussion with a young woman. She claimed her brother was a Christian. I asked if he went to church. He did not. I asked if he was walking with the Lord. He was not. His life choices demonstrated very clearly that he was not in a right relationship with Jesus or the Christian community. However, this woman insisted that her brother was a Christian because he had said the "sinner's prayer." In her mind, the very act of saying the prayer sealed his eternal fate. She is not alone in her conviction.

Evangelists in Thailand will often report, after conducting a revival meeting or preaching a sermon in a village or town, that many people have been “saved” or “made a decision for Jesus.” Some of these claims run into the hundreds or thousands of people who have prayed a prayer of commitment to Jesus. I have been present for many of these events, in schools, in remote villages, and even in large cities. Usually, the event will last several days with a foreigner preaching the gospel through a translator. At the end of every sermon, at least in the evening service, the foreigner will call for people to raise their hands as a sign of commitment to follow Jesus. These people are then asked to pray with the preacher a prayer that is commonly referred to as the “sinner’s prayer.” Thai Christians have adopted this practice, encouraging seekers to pray the prayer to become a “Christian.”

The purpose of this article is to explain why this practice is, at best, inappropriate for the Thai cultural context. Some scholars have suggested that this practice, in any cultural context, has biblical, theological, and practical issues that need to be addressed (Bennett, 2011; Chitwood 2001; Dahlfred, 2020; Hulse, 2006; Martin & Visser 2012; Murray, 1973). Scholars with experience in Thailand have also noted that the practice can be counterproductive to Thai evangelism and discipleship (Dahlfred, 2020; Martin & Visser 2012). Chitwood (2001), in his dissertation on the topic, has argued that the practice has produced many “converts,” but very few disciples (p. 109). My concern for the ritual arose through my own experiences of its failings and flaws as a long-term missionary, pastor, and now seminary professor in Thailand.

At a large university in Bangkok, Thailand, a young Western woman from a well-known campus ministry was sharing the gospel on campus. On one typical hot and humid Bangkok day, this eager and sincere woman was sharing the gospel with a female Thai university student who had a rudimentary grasp of English. The young Thai woman listened patiently to the Western missionary as she explained the Four Spiritual Laws and the need to invite Jesus into her heart. At the end of the presentation, the devout Western missionary boldly invited the young Thai woman to pray the sinner’s prayer with her and to become a Christian. With bowed head and while holding hands, the Thai woman repeated after the missionary the words of the prayer. After declaring the amen, the missionary explained to the young Thai woman that she was now a Christian. She should turn her back on her old ways, on the ways of Buddhism, find a Christian church, and grow in Christ.

Later that same day, this young Thai woman, who had prayed the sinner’s prayer, found a Thai friend of hers who happened to be a Thai Christian and a member of my Bangkok church. The new “convert” expressed plainly how she now hated Christians and wanted nothing to do with Jesus. This woman felt used and abused by the Western missionary. She had been forced to pray to a god she did not know and change her religion. She renounced her prayer and

this foreign religion.

Why did this happen? The Western missionary was, with a sincere heart and passion for the lost, trying to explain the gospel. In her mind, she did not force the young student to pray a prayer against her will. What went wrong? Cross-cultural ministry is a minefield and without a full understanding of the cultural context and language, many missionaries can step into very explosive situations without ever realizing what went wrong. I doubt that this Western missionary ever realized that by saying the sinner's prayer with this Thai woman, she had not won a convert but created an enemy.

In analyzing what went wrong, we must understand that Thai people are imbued from a young age with the concept of *krengjai*. This cultural affect is hard to explain to foreigners. However, in simplistic terms, a Thai person will always error on the side of politeness and submission in an interpersonal situation. Foreigners may see this as dishonest because a Thai person will not always tell you what they are thinking. Thai people see it as being polite and respectful.

The young Thai woman could not culturally refuse the invitation to pray with the female Westerner without being rude. The missionary was a religious worker. Therefore, the missionary had status. The young Thai woman prayed the prayer to be polite and to show deference to the foreign religious worker. However, she was enraged by the encounter.

In another example, missionary Karl Dahlfred (2020) wrote about his experience of church planting in a small town in Thailand. Over the course of two weeks, fifteen Thai Buddhists with no prior knowledge of the gospel came to the new church and prayed to receive Jesus. The Thai pastor was ecstatic. Small groups were formed to disciple these "new believers." But over the course of two months, all those "new believers" stopped attending the small groups and church. Had they lost their salvation? Were they not saved to begin with? The Thai pastor was now devastated. What had gone wrong?

During revival meetings in remote villages and towns, Thai people will automatically raise their hands when a call for a decision is made. The hands are raised so the foreigner will not lose face or feel embarrassed. They will pray with the evangelist out of respect for his learning and to honor the sacrifice made to travel to their village. Hands will rise all over the assembled crowd. The evangelist will be elated that so many people have now become Christian.

Most villagers have little to no concept of who Jesus is. In their worldview, Jesus is a powerful god, but a god of the foreigners, not the Thai. They may believe that Jesus answers prayers and even heals disease, but most attendees raising their hands are not instantly changing their religious allegiance. I am not saying that God is not working among those listening to the message nor am I limiting the power of God to change lives through the hearing of the gospel message. All I am saying is that the raising of hands or the saying of the sinner's prayer is not a good indication of true salvation or commitment to

Jesus. Jesus might be received as another god that the villagers consult if they have a problem, but no commitment has been made to Jesus as Savior and unique Lord. Those responding may not even understand those concepts.

One ministry in Thailand has claimed over 200,000 decisions for Christ since 2007. Although I support this ministry and believe that people are becoming Christian and churches are being started through their work, I believe their numbers are misleading. Thailand has approximately 505,000 evangelical Christians in the country as of April 2021 (eSTAR Foundation). If over 200,000 people chose to follow Christ through their ministry, then this one ministry is responsible for almost 40% of all Christians in the kingdom.

Before we fault this ministry, most ministries in Thailand report “decisions for Christ” in a similar fashion. Many churches supported by foreign mission organizations require churches to report the “number of salvations” each month or year. Raised hands are counted. People are encouraged to say the sinner’s prayer. Numbers bring funding which is necessary for the ministry to continue.

In the best of circumstances, a skilled local Thai pastor will follow up with people after a sermon or evangelistic event to help seekers understand more. However, without follow-up and discipleship, most of these Thai “converts” simply do not have enough information to become a Christian by responding to a single sermon or presentation of the gospel. Follow-up and relationship development are needed.

This ritual is not just practiced by foreign missionaries. Thai pastors and Thai Christians have also adopted this practice. Seekers who show interest in learning more about Jesus are encouraged to pray a prayer of repentance and acceptance of Jesus. This prayer is called “*atithaan rap chua*” (อธิษฐานรับเชื่อ) in the Thai language, literally, a prayer to believe.

I cannot count the number of times I have heard someone say in a Thai church, “she said the prayer! She is a Christian now.” The assumption is that saying the prayer is what brought salvation. The belief among many is that these ritual words bring someone from death to life. It is my conviction that this Western ritual should not be endorsed by the Thai church as it can be misunderstood and misinterpreted in a Thai context. Some scholars have suggested the practice lacks biblical foundations as well (Bennett, 2011; Chitwood 2001; Dahlfred, 2020; Hulse, 2006).

### *Definition*

According to Bennett (2011), the sinner’s prayer is directed to God or Christ and many Christians assume the prayer, if prayed sincerely, will be immediately effective in producing salvation. The prayer typically includes a component of repentance and a request to God for the forgiveness of sins.

Jim Elliff (2021) proposed a harsher definition:

The typical sinner's prayer as evangelicals have come to express it, has three elements: (1) a mere acknowledgment of sin, which is not the same as repentance, (2) a belief in the act of Christ's death, which is far removed from trust in his person and work, and (3) an "inviting Christ into the life." The last phrase hangs on nothing biblical (though John 1:12 and Revelation 3:20 are used, out of context, for its basis.) It is considered, nonetheless, to be the pivotal and necessary instrument for becoming a true Christian (para 9).

### **A Short History**

Although some believe the sinner's prayer is a biblical practice, the origins of this prayer ritual are relatively recent and can be traced back to American Puritanism and its emphasis on personal religious experience (Leonard, 1985). The individualistic assumptions that undergird the prayer are foreign to the majority world's more collectivist cultures. Large meetings and calls for repentance originated during the Great Awakenings in the United States and England, but the sinner's prayer was unknown to preachers like Wesley, Whitfield, and Edwards. Preaching focused on repentance and a personal reflection on the state of the soul before God (Bennett, 2011, Dahlfred, 2020).

During the Second Great Awakening, Finney and other preachers established the practices of calling people forward, the anxious bench, and the altar call. But those who came forward were counseled and taught, not encouraged to say a ritual prayer. The sinner's prayer was still unknown. Seekers were encouraged to ask God to soften their hearts, to beg God for forgiveness, to ask God to have mercy upon them that he might accept them (Bennett, 2011, pp. 71-75). The onus or burden of salvation rested upon God and not the person saying the prayer. The assumption in these revival meetings was that most people had at least a rudimentary or nominal understanding of God, Christ, and Christianity.

The sinner's prayer ritual did not appear until well into the twentieth century (Chitwood, 2001) with the advent of mass evangelism and a systemized approach to sharing the gospel to large numbers of people. Workers and evangelists were trained in a new method of sharing the gospel and gaining converts. The goal of this new systemized evangelistic process with tracts and standardized presentations focused on encouraging people to say the sinner's prayer, to become "saved" or "born again." The goal is worthy. Many people have made a commitment to follow Jesus through saying a prayer of repentance and dedication to Jesus. However, in Thailand, the context is very different. The level of understanding among the populace is different. Very little is known or understood about repentance, Jesus, or the gospel.

Evidence suggests that the prayer was popularized by Billy Graham and Bill Bright (Chitwood, 2001). Billy Graham's *Steps to Peace with God* and Bill Bright's tract, *the Four Spiritual Laws*, both contain the sinner's prayer at the

end of their booklets. The steps to salvation are easily memorized by anyone who wants to “lead someone to the Lord.”

Bill Bright admits that his tract has similarities with a sales pitch (Bright, 1985, p. 25). The goal was to lead a person, not to a sale, but to a commitment to follow Jesus. This was an effective methodology in the American cultural context at that time.

However, the culture of the West has changed and the basic knowledge needed to respond to a simple gospel message has decreased. Some Western evangelicals are not supportive of the practice of the sinner’s prayer. J.I. Packard declared that the sinner’s prayer is a development of “the American production line mentality applied to evangelism” (Chitwood, 2001, p. 69). Leonard (1985) also expressed, “American evangelicals, generally speaking, have moved from an emphasis on conversion experience...to a stress on conversion event - a decisive, often transactional, moment which provides immediate salvation, once and for all” (p. 113). Leonard complains that the focus on the sinner’s prayer may place the seeker at the center of the salvation process. Say the prayer sincerely and God is obligated to save. The older model was one of repentance and seeking God’s mercy.

Since the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the promotion of the sinner’s prayer has spread beyond the United States (Chitwood, 2011). While many people may see the sinner’s prayer as their entry point into salvation, and I do not deny that God can use anything to draw people to Him, the prayer has many difficulties and drawbacks, especially in non-Western contexts. The prayer may be acceptable for those who come from at least a nominal Christian background, who have a basic understanding of Jesus and the Christian faith, or who have strayed from the faith into sin. However, in a Buddhist context, few people have any concept of Yahweh or the Messiah who died for our sins. A sermon or simple gospel presentation followed by a prayer may cause more misunderstanding than enlightenment.

## **Biblical and Theological Problems**

### ***Soteriological Assumptions***

Salvation is a work of God and is not dependent on human words or actions. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8, ESV). God initiates salvation and God completes the act. For a strict Calvinist, this proposition is axiomatic. God elects those who will be saved and that election is irrevocable. For an Arminian, the action of God is also essential to salvation. “Arminians believe that if a person is saved, it is because God initiated the relationship and enabled the person to respond freely with repentance and faith.” (Olsen, 2006, pp. 159-160). From either perspective, God must save us. We cannot earn our salvation and God must open our hearts to Him. The human response to God’s grace is faith or trust in the one offering salvation.

Salvation or deliverance from eternal death does not mean there are no consequences for our actions after acknowledging Christ. Scriptures make it clear that we will be judged according to what we have done with what God has provided (Matt. 25:14-30; Luke 19:11-27; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Cor. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:17; Revelation 20:12) and some will suffer loss while still being saved (1 Corinthians 3:15). Salvation is passing from death to life, escaping the just penalty for our rebellion against God which is eternal separation from him (2 Thess. 1:9). Salvation is not earned. It is a gift of God, freely given. As the Apostle John wrote, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16, ESV). Those who have faith in the Messiah Jesus will not be condemned but pass from death to life.

This salvation is received through faith or by trusting in the Messiah whom God has sent. But salvation requires more than just an acknowledgment of certain facts. Salvation requires a change of allegiance. Matthew Bates (2017) argues that the Greek word for faith *pistis* (πίστις) is broader than mere belief or assent. The term contains a range of concepts "such as reliability, confidence, assurance, fidelity, faithfulness, commitment, and pledged loyalty" (Bates, 2017, p. 3).

Josephus often used the Greek term *pistis* to mean allegiance to a king or ruler. (See Josephus, *Antiquities* 12.47; 12.147; 12.396; *Jewish War*, 1.207; 2.341). Also, outside the New Testament, the writer of 3 Maccabees uses the term to mean "unswerving loyalty" to the Ptolemaic Dynasty (3 Maccabees 3:3, RSV). Bates argues that translating *pistis* as allegiance in Paul's letters fits the apostle's understanding of how believers should relate to Jesus.

This grounded understanding of faith (*pistis*) as allegiance rather than simple belief is a better description of conversion in the Thai context. The call for faith in Jesus is not merely an acceptance of certain theological beliefs or acknowledgement of Jesus as Yahweh God, but a reorientation of allegiance from Buddhism to Christ. Paul's message to the Thessalonian community profoundly reflects the Thai context.

For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. <sup>9</sup> For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and *how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God* (1 Thess. 1:8-9, ESV, italics mine).

We might, therefore, paraphrase the passage in Ephesians, "For by grace you have been saved through allegiance, trust, and fidelity to Jesus" (Eph. 2:8). Salvation cannot be reduced to a single prayer. The response is more complex and goes beyond the mere saying of certain words. Salvation is not something



that depends on humans and is only observed through an examination of spiritual fruit (Matt. 7:20).

Furthermore, the Great Commission does not call us to make decisions or converts but disciples. “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you” (Matt. 28:19-20, ESV). Jesus calls us to lead people into a lifelong journey of learning and growth in relationship with Jesus and His body. In the New Testament, the entry point of that commitment was not prayer, but baptism (Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:16; Acts 2:41; 8:12, 8:36-38, 10:48, 16:31-33, 22:16; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12; 1 Peter 3:21).

Baptism indicates incorporation into the body of Christ, spiritually and physically, as part of a community with all its obligations. “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Corinthians 12:13, ESV). Salvation was not only an individual experience with God but incorporation into the family of God, a communal experience highlighted in baptism and the acceptance of the eucharist or communion. Community and relationships are central to the Thai experience. It is, therefore, all the more important in the Thai context for conversion to be a communal event and not just an individualistic experience, an incorporation into a new family and community.

As the early church grew and moved into a more pagan societal context, repentance, instruction, and an evaluation of life were required before a public proclamation was made in baptism (Canons of Hippolytus, 10-17). Phillip did not hesitate to baptize the Ethiopian eunuch, but the Ethiopian eunuch “had gone to Jerusalem to worship” (Acts 8:27, NIV). The man was a convert to Judaism, or at least a God-fearer, and was well familiar with the Scriptures (Acts 8:26-40). As the church incorporated people from Greek and pagan cultures, more time for instruction was needed. Thai people also have a radically different worldview and need instruction and time to evaluate the claims of Christianity.

### ***A Biblical Examination of the Sinner’s Prayer***

Several accounts in the Bible have been suggested as types or examples of a sinner’s prayer. According to Luke, the thief on the cross declared his trust in Jesus as the Messiah before he died. “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom” (Luke 23:42, ESV). Jesus responded to that expression of allegiance with a promise of entrance into paradise. “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43).

Defenders of the sinner’s prayer may refer to the Roman Centurion Cornelius who was seeking God in prayer (Acts 10). No sinner’s prayer is recorded in this passage, but we know that Cornelius was already a God-fearer, someone who had knowledge of the Torah and had already aligned with Yahweh and the Jewish religion. After hearing the gospel, Cornelius and his whole household accepted the message of the Messiah. They shifted allegiance

from the Jewish religion to trust in the Messiah (Acts 10:44-47). The sign that they believed was the “gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 10:45, ESV). However, the response to their belief was baptism (Acts 10:47-48).

Peter quotes the Septuagint version of Joel 2:32 on Pentecost, “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21, ESV). However, Peter is not making the point that certain words are salvific or that a prayer must be said. Peter is speaking to Jewish believers in Jerusalem and from the diaspora, urging them to accept the Jewish Messiah. The ritual of allegiance was again baptism (Acts 2:41).

Paul declares, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:11, ESV). Surely, this verse is evidence that one must verbally confess trust and allegiance to Jesus. Absolutely! However, Paul is not creating a model for prayer but stating that we must be ready to declare our allegiance to Jesus publicly, perhaps in baptism or as a witness to others. This confession is a brave declaration, especially in a cultural situation where Christians are a minority and where changing one’s religion can bring opposition from family and community. My argument is not that the sinner’s prayer is not appropriate in some contexts or situations. My argument is that the prayer should not be seen as a portal to salvation. An invitation to discipleship followed by instruction with the goal of public baptism is a more appropriate response to a decision to follow Jesus in the Thai context.

### ***Biblical and Theological Summary***

In summary, we have no biblical mandate for encouraging people to say the sinner’s prayer. This does not mean that we cannot encourage people to commit to following Jesus through prayer. However, we must not assume that this prayer is salvific. The sinner’s prayer ritual comes from an individualistic cultural context that is foreign to Thai culture. The biblical process is to call people into discipleship, learning, and community leading to baptism. Salvation is the work of God. Our job is not to judge who is saved or not saved, our job is to teach, love, and disciple. As the Apostle Paul wrote,

Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God” (1 Cor. 4:5, ESV).

The responsibility of all Christians is to call the lost to discipleship, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ taught us (Matt. 28:19-20). The true result will not be seen until the end of time. Those who have persevered to the end are those who will be saved.

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil

deeds, <sup>22</sup> he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, <sup>23</sup> if indeed you continue in the faith (Col 1:21-23, ESV).

For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Hebrews 3:14, ESV).

## Practical Problems

If the number of hands raised is an indication, thousands are being saved monthly in Thailand. While the number of churches in Thailand is growing, the best statistics indicate that evangelical Christians are still less than one percent of the population (eSTAR Foundation). Counting hands raised and words recited as indications of genuine faith in Christ may be naive if they do not reflect actual church growth.

While Cru has recorded thousands of decisions for Christ over the years, only 3% of those decisions are ever incorporated into a local congregation (Bennett, 2011, loc. 607). Bennett concludes that “it seems highly probable that most of the remaining 97% were not truly converted, and that may also apply even to some of the 3%” (Bennett, 2011, loc 613). Statistics can be misleading, but we must acknowledge that decisions are not a good measure of true conversion. McIntyre (2005) recounts that Billy Graham admitted that the number of actual conversions from his crusades was only around 25% of those who came forward (p. 4).

One should examine research methodology before fully trusting statistical reports. According to McIntyre (2005), 84 to 97% of those who say the sinner’s prayer do not continue in the faith (p. 12). Whether these numbers are accurate or not, all reports show that only a small percentage of people who say the sinner’s prayer continue to follow Jesus. Some may note that this percentage still represents many people who come to faith in Jesus. That is true. However, my point is that saying the prayer does not immediately translate to incorporation into the body of Christ and discipleship. Furthermore, McIntyre (2005) asserts that “the modern altar call is deceptive if it implies that everyone who comes forward and repeats a formula ‘salvation prayer’ is saved at that moment” (p. 30).

In 2009, the Billy Graham association sponsored a major evangelistic effort in Thailand called the “My Hope Thailand project.” Just before Christmas, a television program was broadcast several times throughout Thailand. The program, recorded on DVD, was also widely distributed to households throughout the kingdom. Over half of all Christian churches in Thailand participated in the three-night event by inviting people to watch the program either on television or on the DVD recording. The program included preaching by Billy and Franklin Graham dubbed into the Thai language. Several well-known Thai celebrities and pop stars gave their testimony. At the

end of the program, people were encouraged to decide for Christ and pray the sinner's prayer. Almost 12,000 decisions for Christ were reported.

However, Martin and Visser (2012) reported no significant increase in baptisms or church attendance as a result of the event. The church in Thailand has an annual growth rate of 4%. The growth rate that next year did not increase. A significant amount of money and effort was invested in an event that had no discernable impact on church growth. More than that, according to Martin and Visser (2012), "The strong emphasis on the three nights leading up to a decision was counter-productive" (p. 137). Thai culture is relational. More time is needed for people to examine the claims of Christianity and the people who claim to follow Christ. Expecting Thai people to "make a decision" for Christ based on a recorded sermon by a foreigner is unrealistic.

Many people attend my Thai church for months, often six months to a year, before making a confident decision to follow Christ. In my church, where the sinner's prayer is not encouraged, it is common for a person to join in worship, prayer, small group, and discipleship before finally deciding to become a Christian. During the process, the person may unashamedly say, "I am Buddhist" or "I am Buddhist/Christian." We don't contradict them, at least not directly. That person is "counting the cost," examining the community, and considering the claims of Christ. To encourage such a person to pray a prayer of commitment to Christ before he or she is ready can be harmful to the natural process of coming to an informed and confident commitment to Christ.

According to Jim Elliff, the pattern of the sinner's prayer "has been passed down and repeated because few are taking the necessary time to examine both its flight from scriptural precedent and its dismal effect" (Elliff, 2021). This practice does not work in Thailand and it may not work any longer in the Western context which is drifting from Christian foundations. The Thai church should discard these practices for ones that fit within the Thai cultural context. At the very least, Thai leaders should acknowledge that the sinner's prayer in itself is not salvific. Rather than leading to salvation, promoting the sinner's prayer often leads to problems, disappointment, and confusion.

## **Cultural Problems**

Western culture values individualism and independence while Thailand is a more collectivist culture. Thai people value long-term relationships and commitment to the group. Thai people are, in general, less competitive, and less assertive in relationships than those in the West (Punturaumporn, 2001). Calling for a change of loyalty from one group to another, from the Buddhist community to the Christian community, takes time and patience. Rushing to call for a commitment to a new community runs counter to cultural norms and practices.

The sinner's prayer was developed in an individualistic culture that was, at the time, at least nominally Christian. Most people in Thailand have very

little knowledge or experience with Christianity. One member of my church recounted how she heard the gospel for the first time in a university class. The teacher read the portion of scripture where Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek. The whole class laughed. The concept sounded absurd. Many Christian ideas sound absurd to the Buddhist mindset: allegiance to Christ alone, salvation as a free gift that cannot be merited, no cycle of death and rebirth. Thai people have much to understand and process before a commitment can be fully and freely made.

Earlier, I discussed in simplistic terms the concept of *krengjai* which is “an emotion of deference and avoidance of conflict” (Hilderbrand, 2019, p. 3). This foundational Thai concept is important to understand if one is to communicate the gospel effectively. According to Punturaumporn (2001), “The Thai emphasis on smooth and pleasant interpersonal interactions is closest in meaning to the concept of *krengjai*” (p. 51). *Krengjai* is a reticence to bother another person unless it is absolutely necessary (Klausner, 1981). In a study of moral motivation among religiously committed persons (Hilderbrand, 2019), *krengjai* was found to be a significant factor in Thai moral identity. In other words, violating *krengjai* in Thai culture can be perceived as disrespectful or even immoral. Therefore, Thai people will often raise their hands and pray the sinner’s prayer out of a sense of *krengjai* or obligation, not sincerity. Encouraging people to pray before that person is ready can be seen as a violation of Thai culture. Furthermore, in an ironic twist, it could be that the Christian church in Thailand has adopted the practice of the sinner’s prayer mostly out of *krengjai* and a sense of obligation to foreign missionaries and teachers.

A common complaint among Thai Buddhists is that Christianity promotes immorality. One can escape karma and punishment by repeating a simple prayer. All sins are forgiven, past and future. No change is needed, Jesus forgives it all. Unfortunately, I find this belief in the Thai Christian community as well. If one says the prayer, all will be forgiven. Sin boldly because Jesus will forgive everything. Without proper instruction, seekers may think that the sinner’s prayer is simply a talisman against karma and that sin has no consequences.

Dahlfred (2020), a missionary to Thailand, wrote that encouraging people to say the sinner’s prayer can reinforce animistic beliefs. “Though the sinner’s prayer is designed to help people become Christians, in many cases it has the opposite effect of confirming people in a fundamentally animistic worldview” (Dahlfred, 2020, p. 7). Thai Buddhism is very animistic with a belief in sacred relics, charms, fortunetelling, and sorcery. The prayer might be seen as a ritual that is required for God to grant the desired wish. In order to receive healing, financial blessing, or other requests, the Christian god appears to require that we first say this ritual prayer. Others may see the prayer as a magical incantation granting blessing. Without a firm understanding of the gospel message, “the words in the sinner’s prayer are automatically redefined by the

listener to fit their animistic worldview” (Dahlfred, 2020, p. 8).

## Solutions

We cannot simply replace the sinner's prayer with baptism. The image of immediate baptism upon belief is found throughout the book of Acts. But the early church quickly began requiring a significant time of training and teaching before baptism was allowed (Canons of Hippolytus, 10-17). People needed to understand the gospel message and have time to count the cost of following Jesus (Luke 14:26-33). For the early church, following Jesus might mean martyrdom. For Thai Buddhists, following Jesus might mean rejection from family and society. For Thai Muslims, who are increasingly coming to Christ, the cost truly could be their life.

In one church that had recently lost its pastor, I was asked to teach a class for baptismal candidates. I was surprised to find that most of the candidates had little to no understanding of Jesus or Christianity. I asked each person, “Who is Jesus?” One person proclaimed boldly that Jesus was the foreigner's god. When I asked why she wanted to join the church, her response was even more surprising. She wanted to join because the church was fun and her friends were Christian. Of the six who were in the class, only one person had an accurate understanding of the gospel that was appropriate for a baptismal candidate.

The Great Commission commands us to make disciples, lifelong followers of the Way, not simply people who have said a prayer. The Jesus model of discipleship is relational. “And he [Jesus] appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) *so that they might be with him*” (Mark 3:14, ESV, italics mine).

Jesus practiced a relational evangelism. He met with Nicodemus to teach and challenge (John 3). Jesus was not quick to incorporate seekers into his discipleship group. He tested and challenged them to think with his teaching and parables. The rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22; Mark 10:17-22; Luke 18:18-23) was seeking eternal life, but Jesus challenged his motivation and dedication. The goal was never to have a large gathering, although large crowds followed Him. The goal was to find those who were committed to the Way and willing to be true disciples.

As I wrote elsewhere:

Here is the distinction between making converts and making disciples. Conversion has a particular end point. A person crosses over from sinner to saint, unbeliever to believer, unsaved to saved. That is the work of God. I cannot fully discern when that event actually takes place or ever takes place in a particular person. Church attendance is no guarantee of salvation. Only God knows the heart. I certainly do not. My job, discipleship, is the unending process of guiding a person from where they are, saved or unsaved, to a close and personal relationship with God and

to travel with them in learning everything Christ has commanded us (Hilderbrand, 2021, p. 11)

I do not oppose large churches. Large churches have resources for evangelism and discipleship. Large churches create a significant pool of people from which we can find true disciples. Large churches attract those who are seeking Jesus and are interested in learning more. Large churches have programs that attract people. I support mass media or social media as an evangelistic tool. The message of the gospel must be taught and proclaimed with every tool available to us...videos, movies, YouTube. I support large evangelistic events. These events expose large groups of people to the gospel message.

However, we should not invite people to make a sudden commitment to Jesus through a ritualistic prayer. A prayer does not make someone a Christian. Our purpose should be to follow up on those who are interested in learning more. We must disciple people to the point where we are certain of their commitment to the Way and then baptize them as Jesus commanded. Baptism is still not the end of the process. Discipleship must be a lifelong commitment to teaching, learning, and growing in faith.

### ***The Prayer Challenge***

What to do about the sinner's prayer? Prayer should not be discarded, but a ritualistic set of words that can be misinterpreted and misunderstood in the Thai context should be abandoned as a practice in Thai churches.

So, what should we do? Recent research has shown that many if not most Thai people who become Christian make that switch of allegiance because they have had a profound, supernatural encounter with God (Hilderbrand, 2016, 2020, 2021). I have often counseled seekers to ask God to show himself, to prove that he is real and that he cares. "For whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Hebrews 11:6, ESV). I have never been disappointed in encouraging people to seek God.

A young Thai woman once asked me how she could know that God was real. I told her to talk to Jesus, "Ask Jesus to show himself real and powerful." She then told me that she wanted to go to a football (soccer) game that evening, but it was sold out. She wanted to know if God could get her tickets. I told her she could ask. It never hurts to ask.

She prayed, went to the game, and received tickets in a very surprising, miraculous way (Hilderbrand, 2021, pp.15-16). A Thai carpenter who was seeking God asked Jesus to heal his hand and it was supernaturally healed as he reached for his hammer. He recounted to me, "When I started to grab the hammer and then began to hammer nails, the swelling disappeared. I shouted to the people in the factory that God is real! This God will be my god for the rest of my life" (Hilderbrand 2020, p.7). I have many such stories from my experience as a missionary and pastor in Thailand. Those who truly seek God

will have an encounter with God. At least that has been my experience in Thailand. God desires to show seekers that he is real and more powerful than other spirits, powers, or gods. "For I know that the Lord is great, and that our Lord is above all gods" (Psalm 135:5, ESV).

My solution to the sinner's prayer ritual is to replace it with the prayer challenge. "A prayer challenge is a request for God to show himself, to give a sign or evidence of His power" (Hilderbrand, 2021, p. 15).

### ***A Defense of the Prayer Challenge***

Someone might object that we should not put God to the test. Did not Jesus rebuke people for seeking a sign? On the contrary, the whole ministry of Jesus was focused on giving signs of his identity as God and Messiah. The healings and exorcisms were signs of the arrival of God's kingdom in the person of Jesus. When John the Baptist was in prison, he sent messengers to Jesus. He was confused. He needed confirmation that Jesus was the Messiah. In response, Jesus pointed the messengers to "the signs." "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22, RSV).

Jesus rebuked the doubters not because they sought signs, but because they did not believe the signs that were already given. "Truly, truly, I say to you, you are seeking me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate your fill of the loaves" (John 6:26, RSV). Jesus confirms that he gave the people signs, but the people misunderstood or refused to believe those signs. Even when Jesus rebuked people for seeking a sign wrongly, Jesus still promised them one final sign, the resurrection (Matt. 12:38-39; Matt. 16:1-4; Luke 11:29). God does not hesitate to confirm his reality and love to those who seek Him. The author of Hebrews wrote, "This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles" (Heb. 2:3-4, NIV).

One might think that a prayer challenge is testing or tempting God. I am not suggesting that we tempt God. We must understand how the words, "to test" or "to tempt." are used in the context of the Scriptures. God commands us to test Him in the book of Malachi. "Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty" (Malachi 3:10, NIV). In the book of Psalms, we are told to "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (Psalms 34:8, NIV). Testing is not always a bad thing. What we are not to test is God's patience (Deuteronomy 6:16), and we are not to solicit God to do something that is against His Will or character (Matthew 4:5-10; Luke 4:1-12). King Hezekiah asked God for a sign that he would be healed, and God sent him a sign (Isaiah 38:22). Gideon humbly asked for confirmation that it was really Yahweh speaking to him and God answered his request (Judges 6:17).

Thai people must be convinced that Jesus is the supreme God who cares



for us and is worthy of our allegiance. Thai people need to have an experience with God to be convinced that Yahweh Jesus is God above all other gods. We cannot force this encounter.

Our task is to tell people about Jesus and invite them to ask Jesus to make himself real. Invite God, in his own way, to reveal himself so seekers might know Jesus is real and wants a relationship with them. We trust God to answer in his own way while we continue to teach, disciple, and pray for those who are interested to learn. But we must trust that God wants to reveal himself. I believe He does.

You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart (Jer. 29:13, NIV).

Seek, and you will find (Matt, 7:7, ESV)

Adopting this model may mean our “decision” numbers decrease, but we should focus instead on the number of people we are actively discipling. We should report those numbers or count responses to the prayer challenge. We might also report the number of people we are baptizing. These numbers are more accurate reflections of what God is doing in our midst.

### ***Practical Steps***

Practically, in church or in a large meeting, we should invite people to meet and pray with us after service. Train workers to pray for material needs, and for physical, emotional, and spiritual healing. Train workers to pray that the seeker would encounter God in a personal and significant way. Train workers to counsel and help people find a discipleship group where they can learn more and have a relationship with the body of Christ. We must help the seeker process their experiences and what they are learning in light of a Biblical worldview. Only after evidence of true understanding and commitment should we allow people to be baptized. Not every seeker will truly seek. Not every enquirer will follow through. Evangelism is the work of God, but we can point the way.

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