

Syncretistic Use of the Sinner's Prayer in Thailand

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I couldn't believe my ears. A founding member and leader of a large church in Bangkok was telling me about "The Salvation Room" (ห้องรอด) at his church. Each Sunday, visitors are encouraged to come to a special room on the side of the sanctuary during the service and over the course of a few weeks (assuming they come back), current church members explain the Gospel to them and try to get them to say the sinner's prayer. I asked, "Is it effective? Not everyone who says the sinner's prayer really becomes a Christian, you know." His answer surprised me. "No, that's not right. Eventually, they all become Christians. We know that not everyone who prays is converted yet, but if we can get them to say the prayer, then that is the foot in the door." "But," I replied, "how do you know that they will come to faith eventually?" With a gleam in his eye and a smile on his face, this respected church leader asserted confidently, "They just do. Saying the sinner's prayer is what breaks Satan's power and guarantees that they will eventually be saved."

I don't know for certain how this church leader came to the conclusion that he did but his understanding of the effectiveness of the sinner's prayer doesn't square with reality. As I have written in a previous post, tons of people pray the sinner's prayer each year and show no signs of conversion and never become involved in a church. Are we to believe that because they have gone through the motions of praying the sinner's prayer (regardless of understanding or motivation), God is now obligated to eventually save them? Does praying a certain prayer trigger a chain reaction in the spiritual realm that causes salvation?

I suspect that there are two important factors that contribute to such an understanding of the sinner's prayer among perhaps otherwise well-meaning Christians. The first is leftover baggage from an humanistic and animistic understanding of how people interact with the spirit world. The second is a superficial reading of [Romans 10:13](#), isolated from the context of the rest of the Bible. Let's take a look at each of these in turn.

Bargaining with the Spirits

Some who use the sinner's prayer would (rightly) say that any outward expression of faith is meaningless unless accompanied by an inward change. In tracts and altar calls, this is often expressed in words such as, "if you have truly believed" or "if you prayed this prayer today from the heart". Even though I would object to these folks using the sinner's prayer at all, I would commend them for emphasizing that coming to Christ is not merely an outward ceremony. However, the church leader mentioned above seems to believe that a certain outward action is able to bring about a particular result in the spiritual realm - regardless of whether there is true understanding or desire for the Gospel in the heart of the one praying. Simply put, this belief says, "I do this, therefore God must do that." The problem with this belief is that it is much closer to animism than it is to Christianity. Thailand is a country of Buddhists who are largely influenced by animistic beliefs and practices and it is this understanding of spiritual reality that they

often bring with them when they come to Christ.

In his book *Inside Thai Society*, Niels Mulder describes the animistic process of bargaining with the spirits at their respective shrines, and the beliefs behind it:

“In order to invoke the benevolent attention of [saksit](#) forces, the worshipper must initiate the transaction by paying respect and making a small offering. The supplicant then offers his terms of contract: if the concerned entity will fulfill his wishes, he will return and offer a feast, a pig’s head, flowers, or perhaps even a theatrical performance... The ritual of the invocation is always the same: one first pays respect and makes a small offering of burning incense in order to attract attention, then one states one’s wish and makes a vow, and finally, after being granted one’s wishes, redeems the vow. According to Phraya Anuman Rajadon, ‘If a [thewada](#) does not want to give what has been asked for, but the ceremonial way in which it has been supplicated was correct, then it must without reservation fulfil that wish.’ The contract between a supplicant and a protective spirit or [thewada](#), or any other thing classified as [singsaksit](#), is largely mechanical, for a specific purpose, and of relatively short duration. The [saksit](#) forces respond to presentation, such as right ceremony, proper words, appropriate movements and formulae, and people generally know how to perform their side of the contract.” (Niels Mulder, [Inside Thai Society: Religion, Everyday Life, Change](#), Silkworm Books, Chiang Mai, 2000, p.27-28)

The spirit world is supposedly obligated to respond to the right mechanical actions, regardless of the wishes of the spirit or any other factors in the life of the one making the request. Might this well-meaning church leader be unknowingly importing this animistic understanding of spiritual reality into his Christian faith?

Misunderstanding of [Romans 10:13](#)

From my observations, the favorite Bible verse used to justify the sinner’s prayer is [Romans 10:13](#), “For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” On an initial reading, it makes sense to conclude that if someone has called on the name of the Lord by praying the sinner’s prayer, then they will be saved. Case closed, right? Well, if it is that simple, then what do we do with Bible passages that indicate that NOT everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved? Jesus said:

““Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” ([Matthew 7:21-23 ESV](#))

So how do we reconcile these two passages? Is God contradicting himself? Does our salvation depend upon whether God is in a good mood on the day we appear before His judgement throne? Hardly. Just a few verses before [Romans 10:13](#), we find this statement:

“...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 10:9 ESV)

A confession of faith is the natural outward result of an inward change. What is happening in a person's heart is essential to salvation. Many times in the Old Testament we see God rebuking his people for fulfilling the technical requirements for sacrifice but failing to turn to him with their whole heart.

When King Saul did not wait for the prophet Samuel to come and offer sacrifices, he took matters into his own hands, performing the religious rituals that God had assigned to Samuel. *“And Samuel said, ‘Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams.’” (1Samuel 15:22 ESV)*

Right action must always flow from a right heart. Right actions for the wrong reasons count for nothing, as David points out in Psalm 51, *“O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. For you will not delight in sacrifice, or I would give it; you will not be pleased with a burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” (Psalms 51:15-17 ESV)*

Later on the prophet Jeremiah records God's discontent with a nation who has the outward trappings of faith but lacks the genuine article, *“Yet for all this her treacherous sister Judah did not return to me with her whole heart, but in pretense, declares the Lord.”” (Jeremiah 3:10 ESV)*

Throughout the Scripture, it is evident that God is not pleased with mere external conformity or going through the motions of being a believer when people are watching. Commenting on the Pharisees' external piety, Jesus says, *“And when you pray, do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” (Matthew 6:7 ESV)*. However, when people pray the sinner's prayer out of anything but a truly believing heart, they are guilty of doing exactly what Jesus condemned in the Pharisees. We can not fool God into giving us what we want by going through the motions of belief. And it is a great tragedy that some Christians think that they can coax God into saving people merely by getting them to repeat a rote prayer.

Confusing the Gospel

How common is this understanding of the sinner's prayer? I know many Thai Christians who understand full well that one must believe from the heart and not just give lip service to God in order to be saved. Yet I also know many Thai Christians who think that once someone has said the sinner's prayer, that's it. That person is “in the kingdom” and should be counseled to not doubt their salvation because they “prayed the prayer.”

I would like to assume the best about evangelical churches and evangelical Christians

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in Thailand but when I meet someone (a church leader at that!) with such a confused, seemingly syncretistic, understanding of how someone becomes a Christian, then I must stop and wonder. Churches are growing and being planted but what Gospel are they proclaiming? How many Thai people each year are being transferred from the works-oriented mechanistic world of Thai Buddhism to a works-oriented mechanistic world of syncretistic Christianity? How much of this type of pseudo-evangelism is going on in other parts of Asia? Africa? around the world?