

The Sinner's Prayer in Thai Churches

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Every year there are hundreds, if not thousands, of Thai people who pray to receive Christ but never become involved in a church. Or if they do, it is only for a very short time and then they are gone. Many people have suggested possible reasons, such as they need more follow-up or more encouragement in order to start and continue with the Christian life. Granted, following-up new believers is important but what if a majority of these "new converts" were never converted to begin with? What if they had received a superficial Gospel and were prematurely led to say a prayer of conversion that they didn't understand? Is it possible that the sinner's prayer, which is supposed to signal conversion to the Christian faith, actually fails to challenge the animistic worldview of Thai people? What if instead of helping them find new life in Christ, it confirms them in their basically animistic worldview, but merely adds a temporary Christian veneer on the top of their existing beliefs?

I am convinced that many, if not the majority, of Thai people who pray the sinner's prayer and are regarded as new converts by the Christians who evangelized them, are in actuality not converted at all. How is this possible? In this first post, I'd like to take a brief look at what is the sinner's prayer and how it is often used in evangelism in Thailand.

In Thai churches, it is almost universally accepted that the way to become a Christian is through reciting the sinner's prayer. By "sinner's prayer", I mean the practice of saying a short formulaic prayer in order to become a Christian. The sinner's prayer is usually some variation on "God, I believe that you exist and are holy but that I am a sinner in need of you. I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive my sins. Please forgive my sins and come into my heart to be my Lord and Savior. In Jesus' name, amen." In the thinking of many Thai Christians, it is necessary to formally say the sinner's prayer in order to become a Christian. Biblically speaking, there is no requirement that someone say a certain prayer or be able to point to a definite point in time when they "invited Jesus into their heart." Biblical salvation is by grace alone through faith alone by Christ alone (Eph 2:8-9). Such faith will certainly be expressed in both a verbal profession of faith (Rom 10:9-10, 13) and good works (Eph 2:10, James 2:14-26) but there is no indication in the Bible that a certain prayer needs to be said in order to bring about salvation.

Some Thai believers realize that not everyone who prays the sinner's prayer is genuinely converted, but many do not. And in many places there is simplistic evangelism that prematurely calls Thai Buddhists to make a "decision" for Christ by saying the sinner's prayer. I have heard evangelism that goes something like this: "God made the world and he made you and me, and we're all sinners. If you want to go to heaven and not go to hell, then believe in Jesus because he died on the cross for your sins and can take you to heaven when you die. He can also help you with your problems if you pray to him. Do you want to believe in Jesus?" And upon a nod of the

head or some kind of verbal affirmation that the prospective convert wants to believe in Jesus, the evangelist then leads that person in the sinner's prayer and declares them "saved". The new convert is then often assured of their salvation with verses like Romans 10:13 and John 1:12. The outward recitation of a certain prayer is presumed to be evidence of internal change.

I have seen lots of this "sinner's prayer" type evangelism in Thailand although it is hardly unique to Thailand. You can find the same kind methodology on every continent, and probably every country where there are evangelical Christians. I am embarrassed to say that the majority of this simplistic decision-point evangelism is imported from the West, originally devised by early 19th century revival preachers on the American frontier. These perhaps well-meaning but confused evangelists didn't trust the Spirit of God to convict and convert sinners in His own time, but wanted reportable results and big numbers now. And eventually this instant decision type of evangelism won the day in Western Protestant evangelicalism and has been subsequently exported to the rest of the world.