

Giving a Clear Gospel Invitation

Because the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only message that can save people, we want to be as clear as possible in explaining how someone can have eternal life. Once we have shared the good news of who Jesus is and what He has done for us through His death and resurrection, we should invite people to believe in His promise of eternal life. But a clear gospel explanation can be undone by an unclear invitation. When we explain that Jesus Christ has done everything necessary to provide us salvation, we do not want to give any impression that anything else must be done. Only by *believing* in Jesus Christ for eternal life are we saved. Here are some invitations and practices that will confuse people who need only to believe.

Give your heart (or life) to God.

The issue in salvation is not what we give to God, but what He gives to us—eternal life (John 4:10). This invitation better reflects the issue in sanctification. It is a good exhortation to the Christian on how to live for and serve God. But it will confuse the unbeliever.

Make Jesus the Lord of your life.

Put Jesus on the throne of your life.

Surrender (or commit) your life to Jesus as Lord.

While these invitations recommend something commendable for the Christian, they do not speak to the non-Christian. They assume that an unbeliever understands enough about God's will to make a decision to give Christ control of all areas of his life. Second, they do not speak to the issue in salvation, which is believing in Jesus Christ as one's Savior from sin and Giver of eternal life. To believe is not to surrender, yield, or commit one's life to Christ; it is to be convinced that Christ's promise to give eternal life is true for the one who trusts Him for it.

These invitations fall short of what is required for eternal salvation. They also offer no assurance of salvation because of the impossibility of knowing if Jesus Christ is indeed the Master of all of one's life. The Bible teaches that our obedient surrender to God is a response to God's saving grace, not a requirement for it (Rom. 12:1; Titus 2:11-12).

Ask Jesus into your heart.

Open the door of your heart.

Invite Christ into your heart (or life).

These three invitations reflect a misunderstanding of Revelation 3:20 "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and dine with him, and he with Me." A couple observations about this verse: 1) Jesus doesn't say he is knocking at the door of one's heart. More appropriately, Jesus is knocking at the door of the Laodicean church to whom this letter is addressed. 2) Because they are a church, the issue is not eternal salvation, but restoration of fellowship between Christ and the church, or individuals in the church. Eating together is a common biblical picture of fellowship (Acts 2:42, 46).

Though these invitations recognize the heart as the essence of our being, the issue of believing in Jesus Christ for eternal life is hardly communicated. The issue in salvation is not us inviting Jesus Christ to do anything. Rather, it is He who invites us to believe in Him.

Finally, the imagery of a door to the heart or the spatial concept of Jesus dwelling in the heart organ could easily confuse young children who tend to think in concrete terms.

Repent of your sins.

While it could be argued that when one believes in Christ he repents (changes his mind) about a number of things (e.g., his sinful condition, who Jesus is, what Jesus offers, that the offer is true for him), repentance in the sense of turning from all sins is not a condition for eternal salvation. Not only does this confuse the root (change of mind) with the fruit (change of conduct), but it makes one's conduct a condition for salvation. We are not saved by what we do or no longer do, but by believing. A person could turn from their sins and yet not be saved because they have not believed in Christ.

Confess your sins.

This can be very confusing to an unbeliever. How many sins need to be confessed? What about sins which can not be recalled? Some might even think they would have to go to a priest.

The word *confess* means to *agree with*. One can agree with God that he has sinned, but that is not enough to save him. The sinner must agree with God that He has provided for his sin's penalty through the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ, and that He will then give him eternal life. And that is exactly what it means to believe in Jesus Christ as one's Savior.

Receive (accept) Jesus Christ as your Savior.

There is some biblical support for this language (John 1:12; Col. 2:6), but receiving Christ in these passages describes the *result* of believing in Him, as the contexts show. "Accept Christ" is not used in the Bible for believing in Christ.

Pray this prayer.

This can give the impression that a certain prayer is necessary for salvation. But prayer is not the condition for receiving eternal life. If someone is willing to pray a prayer that expresses their belief in Christ as Savior, then it stands to reason they have *already* believed in His promise of eternal life. A prayer expressing this faith or thanking God for His gift would be appropriate, but the distinction between this and what it means to believe should be made clear. No prayer or any other practice or ritual can save.

Come forward.

At least two false impressions can be left by an invitation to "come forward" in a church or Christian meeting. First, one could think that the physical action of coming forward is what saves. Second, one could think that the public confession of Christ is what saves. Neither one is the biblical condition for salvation. If someone is willing to go forward in a church or publicly confess Christ as their Savior, then they have obviously believed in Him *already*.

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? We are left with the Bible's own language. The invitation in the Bible is to believe in the finished work of Christ for eternal life. After explaining who Christ is and what he has done for us, we might ask an unbeliever, "Do you believe this?" We may have to explain that believe means to be convinced or persuaded that what God promises is true, and that "This promise is true for you." But it is *only* believe. Nothing could be simpler or clearer when we give an invitation to the gospel.