

# ***Letting In Or Getting In:*** **Have We Got the Gospel Backwards?** **Bible teaching By** **Jim Kerwin**

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## **Prologue: A Confession Sparks A Quest**

Way back in 1973, about the time the “Jesus Movement” peaked, I was a five-year-old Christian, co-pastoring a church. My favorite Bible teacher, the delightful and spiritually sagacious Englishman Percy Gutteridge, the man whom I consider to be my “grandfather in the Lord,” was staying with us and ministering in our church. Percy had proved to be someone to whom I could turn for wise, godly, Scriptural counsel. Yet I was embarrassed to seek him out during this visit because of the question with which I was wrestling. (My impression was that Pastor Gutteridge didn’t suffer fools gladly.) But finally I plucked up my courage and confessed to him during a private time together, “Percy, I’ve been a Christian for five years, a pastor for two years, but I don’t know what the Gospel is. I think I know what it *isn’t*, but I don’t know what it *is*.”

I averted his face and waited for the rebuke I thought must be forthcoming. How could I be a pastor and still be asking this question? What excuse could a Christian leader have to not know such an important basic truth? Would he tell me to go back to *The Four Spiritual Laws* booklet? What would he think if I told him I strongly suspected those “laws” were inadequate and that some of their directions weren’t strictly Scriptural? I appreciated this little witnessing tool and had used it—I had even been led to Jesus by somebody sharing it with me — but the more I read and understood the New Testament, the more inadequate and unbalanced its message seemed. It dawned on me that some of the Scriptures used were taken out of context, indeed, that we were at certain points preaching the opposite of what Jesus preached. Worse, for all those who came to Christ by means of such a presentation of the Gospel, many more fell by the wayside. Was this really the Gospel Jesus preached?

After a minute had gone by, I finally looked his way, wondering why he hadn’t responded. His sometimes serious face was wrinkled with a cherubic smirk of good humor and his eyes twinkled, as only Percy’s could. Now I was nonplussed. Seeing my uncertainty, he smiled and said, “That’s good, brother. *Most* Christians don’t know what the Gospel is.”

In those days, an encouraging word from Percy was the next best thing to being approved by God Himself. I was both encouraged and intrigued. In his wisdom he didn’t try to outpace God by telling me everything. Instead, he exhorted me to seek the Lord, study the scriptures carefully, and to be guided by what I found written in God’s Book. Since that day it has been my burden to challenge my brethren to seriously consider the question, ***What is the Gospel?*** My heart breaks over the many spiritual abortions, miscarriages, and premature births that fill our

North American pews. So many seem to have been conceived by a parent with a genetic defect. That parent, I fear, is the modern gospel we evangelicals preach.

I address part of my burden in another article entitled [\*That Uncomfortable Word—Conviction!\*](#) In this article I want to address those parts of our gospel presentation that have been called “closing the deal” (as though it were a sales transaction) and providing “assurance of salvation.” Careful study of the Scriptures reveals that it is at these very points where we find ourselves fundamentally at odds with Jesus’ declaration of the gospel. I believe that none of my readers would willingly or knowingly contradict our Lord’s teaching and example. Nevertheless, is it possible that our “simplified” methods of presenting the gospel have become so familiar, so accepted, so comfortable that it doesn’t occur to us that we might not be rightly dividing the word of truth?

May the Lord use this study in some way to hasten the day when His *whole* Gospel, the glorious, God-honoring Gospel of the Kingdom of God, free of compromise and Madison Avenue slickness, is preached fully, fearlessly, and fruitfully. And may the Holy Spirit bear witness to that full and restored Gospel of Christ with signs and wonders following, leading up to our Lord’s return.

## ***Letting In or Getting In?***

There is a startling contrast between our modern gospel presentation and Jesus’ message. It can be glimpsed in the conflict between how we utilize [Revelation 3:20](#) and [John 1:12](#) in soul-winning, and what Jesus taught about entering the Kingdom of God in such passages as [Luke 13:23-30](#). We tell people that Jesus is at the door of their heart waiting to be received. But Jesus told people that they must find the door into the Kingdom and strive to enter it. How can it be both ways?

### **Revelation 3:20 & John 1:12: Our Linchpin Verses of Closure and Assurance**

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me.

#### [Revelation 3:20](#)

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.

#### [John 1:12](#)

Most of the popular, modern methods of evangelism employ the two verses above. In conjunction with each other they serve as the climax of the message presented to the sinner: ‘Receive Jesus. Ask Him into your heart.’

## Revelation 3:20 in the Process

The general method of bringing a sinner to a “point of decision” follows a fairly common pattern. There are four steps familiar to almost everyone who has ever heard a modern gospel message or taken a witnessing seminar. The chart which follows summarizes these steps from the three most popular gospel-presentation booklets, published by Campus Crusade for Christ,<sup>1</sup> The Navigators,<sup>2</sup> and the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association (BGEA),<sup>3</sup> respectively.

<b>Summary of the Main Points of Three Popular Gospel-Presentation Tools</b>			
<b>The Points Summarized</b>	<b>Four Spiritual Laws (Campus Crusade)</b>	<b>Bridge to Life (The Navigators)</b>	<b>Steps to Peace with God (BGEA)</b>
1) God loves man.	God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.	The Bible teaches that God loves all men and wants them to know Him.	God loves you and wants you to experience peace and life — abundant life.
2) Sin separates man from God.	Man is sinful and separated from God. Thus he cannot know God's love and plan for his life. <u>Romans 3:23; 6:23</u>	Man is separated from God by sin. <u>1 Timothy 2:5; Isaiah 59:2; Romans 3:23</u>	We chose to disobey God and go our own way. We still make this choice today. This results in separation from God. <u>Romans 3:23; 6:23</u>
3) Jesus is God's provision for man's sin.	Jesus is God's only provision for man's sin. <u>Romans 5:8; 1 Corinthians 15:3-6; John 14:6</u>	Jesus Christ, Who died on the cross for our sins, is the way to God. <u>1 Timothy 2:5,6; 1 Peter 3:18</u>	Jesus Christ is the only answer to this problem [of sin]. <u>1 Timothy 2:5; 1 Peter 3:18a; Romans 5:8</u>
4) Receive Christ	We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives. <u>JOHN 1:12; Ephesians 2:8, 9; John 3:1-8; REVELATION 3:20.</u>	[People must] personally receive Jesus Christ into their lives, trusting Him to forgive their sins. <u>JOHN 1:12; REVELATION 3:20</u>	We must trust Jesus Christ and receive him by personal invitation. <u>REVELATION 3:20; JOHN 1:12; Romans 10:9</u>
An excerpt from “the sinner's prayer.”	I open the door of my life and receive you as Savior and Lord.	n/a	I now invite you to come into my heart and life.

Even the casual reader sees that they are nearly identical, and Billy Graham confirms their common source:

“Four Things God Wants You To Know” [was a tract published] by an English writer. I often used those four points in my earlier preaching, and they were excellent. Years later, Bill Bright of Campus Crusade developed “The Four Spiritual Laws” which have been widely used

throughout the world in helping people to understand how to be born again. Our own organization developed what we called “Four Steps to Peace with God.”<sup>4</sup>

Note that in each booklet summarized in the chart above, [Revelation 3:20](#), [John 1:12](#), and the concept of asking Jesus into the heart, are a part of the concluding “step four.”<sup>5</sup>

### **John 1:12 and the Climax**

On the basis of [John 1:12](#), the sinner is assured that new birth is a matter of receiving Christ. Receiving Christ, he is told, means asking Jesus into the heart, appealing to the supposedly Scriptural picture of Jesus standing at the door of the heart of the sinner and waiting to get in.<sup>6</sup> The inquirer is asked to repeat each phrase of a “sinner’s prayer” that the soul-winner prays, during which Christ is invited into the heart.

### **Revelation 3:20 and Assurance**

Then, in the process of follow-up and giving “assurance of salvation,” [Revelation 3:20](#) is often appealed to again, especially if the “new convert” is uncertain about what is supposed to have just happened. For example, in the final section on *assurance*, the BGEA’s *Four Steps to Peace with God* asks the reader, “Did you sincerely ask Jesus Christ to come into your life? Where is He right now?”<sup>7</sup> The appropriate conclusion to the second question has to be drawn from the seeker’s understanding of [Revelation 3:20](#).

The following dialogue between the Soul Winner (SW) and the New Convert (NC), is drawn from personal soul-winning experiences. The method of employing [Revelation 3:20](#) in assuring someone of their salvation goes something like this:

SW: Now that you've prayed the prayer, where is Jesus at this moment?

NC: Umm, in heaven?

SW: Well, of course. But we just read a verse, Revelation 3:20. In it, Jesus says that He’s knocking at the door of your heart. He says that if you open the door of your heart, that He’ll come in. Now is God a liar?

NC: No, of course not.

SW: And does He keep His promises?

NC: Yeah, I guess so...

SW: You’re right. He does. And as I mentioned earlier, the Bible is God’s Word, and He speaks to us through it. Here Jesus promises to come into your heart if you ask Him. Now when we prayed, did you ask Jesus to come into your heart?

NC: Yes...

SW: Well, then, where is he right now, on the basis of God’s Word and His promises?

NC: Um, in my heart?

SW: That's right!

## A Disturbing Discovery

So on the basis of [John 1:12](#) and [Revelation 3:20](#) countless sinners have gone forward, prayed “the sinner’s prayer,” and signed decision cards. Often [Revelation 3:20](#) is used in securing “assurance of salvation.” Thanks and praise be to God that some of this activity results in genuine, lasting conversions; but these limited results may have far more to do with God’s love and mercy, and may come *despite*, not *because of*, our methods. I say this because in looking more closely at these two Scriptures, we see a serious problem—[Revelation 3:20](#) has nothing to do with evangelism, soul-winning, the new birth, or salvation and [John 1:12](#) is not about “receiving Jesus into the heart”! I believe that one of the great ironies of our modern evangelical church—this church that puts great stock in “rightly dividing the word of truth” ([2 Timothy 2:15](#))—is that it “*wrongly divides*” these two verses on which so much of its evangelism depends. To show that rather than rightly dividing these verses, we are instead reading something into them that isn’t there, let’s consider [Revelation 3:20](#) and [John 1:12](#) in their respective contexts and then contrast what we claim their message to be with the gospel Jesus preached.

### Context and Background of Revelation 3:20

[Revelation 3:20](#) is found in the context of the message of the exalted Christ to His church in Laodicea ([Revelation 3:14-22](#)), which concludes the greater context of His messages to the seven churches ([chapters 2-3](#)). The theme of the communication is Christ’s displeasure with the church because of their lukewarmness, complacency, and self-satisfaction. It is a strong word of rebuke and a call to repentance which is heightened by the urgency of a certain judgment to follow if the church doesn’t change.

The Laodiceans are called to a zealous repentance ([v. 19](#)). Immediately after this follows the statement of [Revelation 3:20](#). Consider these three aspects of the verse:

1. **The Sad Irony of Jesus at the Door:** First, it is important to note that nothing is said of the “door of the heart.” Christ is speaking to a *church*, not to individuals seeking salvation. The sad irony is that, living in their illusion of spiritual prosperity and sufficiency, the Laodiceans fail to see that they have left the Son of God *out* of their church, its directions and its activities.
2. **At the Door: An Idiom for Danger and Judgment:** Recall the Laodiceans have been confronted with the threat of divine judgment ([v. 16](#)). Judgment is also implied in Christ’s words, “I stand at the door.” Aside from the contexts where the meaning *physical portal* is clear, “at the door” is used idiomatically in the Bible to convey *nearness*.<sup>8</sup> Further it seems from various contexts specially to express the nearness of danger, judgment, or [eschatological eschatology](#): [from the Greek word \*eschatos\*, meaning \*last\*; hence, “the study of last things.”](#) [Eschatology is the branch of Christian theology concerned with death, the end of the](#)

[world, and the destiny of mankind; thus it also covers the doctrines relating to the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, and the Last Judgment.](#) upheaval. The phrase first appears when God uses the phrase in warning Cain about his murderous intentions ([Genesis 4:7](#)).<sup>9</sup> Jesus uses the phrase to indicate the nearness of His return ([Matthew 24:33](#); [Mark 13:29](#)). Peter uses the phrase to speak metaphorically about Sapphira's impending judgment and death ([Acts 5:9](#)).<sup>10</sup> James' use of it is the clearest of all:

Do not complain, brethren, against one another, that you yourselves may not be judged; behold, **the Judge is standing right at the door.**

### [James 5:9](#)

While the opportunity to sup with Christ is also offered, then, there is an alternative implied by “at the door”—*judgment*.

3. **An Allusion to an Eschatological Parable:** Of all the Scripture passages dealing with doors, [Luke 12:35-38](#) is unique. In the others (e.g., [Matthew 25:1-13](#); [Luke 13:23-30](#)), men and women are shut out, with no further hope of entering. But in the [Luke 12](#) passage, it is *the master* who waits to get in. The parable speaks of Christ's return and of those who are waiting for Him. Considering the strong parallel between the returned master serving a meal to his servants ([12:37](#)) and Christ dining with the one who opens the door of repentance in [Revelation 3:20](#), could any Laodicean Christian familiar with these parables have missed the allusion here?

Considering the context of [Revelation 3:20](#), where neither salvation nor assurance of salvation is in view, is it wise to use this verse in evangelism? There is no New Testament preaching or witnessing example where anyone is instructed to ask Jesus into their hearts in the process of becoming believers. Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles and the epistles were all penned prior to the canon-closing Apocalypse, so no reference *could* have been made to this verse.

Taking into account that these words of exposure, judgment, and hope were spoken to backslidden *believers*, we would be well-advised to avoid using this verse in evangelism. Overlooking the need to rightly divide the Scriptures, some might still contend for the “convenience” of this “open the door to Jesus” analogy; but, as I will show shortly, this presents exactly the *opposite* picture that Jesus wishes to portray to people seeking to enter the Kingdom of God. I will attempt to develop this thought further after considering [John 1:12](#).

## **The Context and Meaning of John 1:12**

Since we have seen that there is no Scriptural basis to instruct sinners to “ask Jesus into their hearts”, does this also mean that sinners shouldn't receive Christ? No... and yes. No, they shouldn't “receive Christ” if, by that phrase we seek to perpetuate an unfortunate and misleading metaphor of asking Christ into the heart. However, the answer may be affirmative, so long as we give people to understand what John means by *receiving*.

Consider the context of the verse in the first chapter of John's Gospel. John establishes Christ's deity, eternity, and creatorship in [the first three verses](#). The Apostle then declares Him to be the Light and introduces John the Baptist as the witness of that light ([vv. 4-9](#)). Finally he approaches the verse which we now consider:

He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.

### [John 1:10](#)

The Logos, the God and Creator of the world, became incarnate (as John goes on to show in [v. 14](#)) and entered the world, yet the world wasn't even aware of Him.

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him.

### [John 1:11](#)

"His own" are Israel, His chosen people. One wonders if there is any significance to the fact that John *doesn't* say that they didn't know Him. Perhaps there is an implication that they knew and didn't care. Regardless, what John *does* say is that God's people didn't receive Him; that is, they rejected His Messiahship and deity.

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.

### [John 1:12](#)

In this verse John has narrowed his focus. Christ came, yet the world didn't know Him, and even His people didn't receive Him and His claims. But, John says, there is a group who *did* receive Him. They believed that He was God, Creator, Messiah, and Savior *and* they accepted and submitted to the implications of what they believed. In return, the Logos gave them the privilege to become children of God.

Vincent, writing on [v. 11](#), says that the sense of "received" is "accepting or acknowledging one to be what he professes to be..."<sup>11</sup> Receiving Christ, then, in the context of [John 1:12](#), deals with accepting His Messiahship, Lordship, and His claim to Deity. John, who also penned Revelation, says *nothing* about "receiving Jesus into the heart."

## **Another Door, A Different Side**

It is serious enough to inaccurately divide and apply Scripture passages; it's far worse when, in so doing, we contradict the clear teaching of Christ in a matter. In this case, we have been pointing sinners to a "door" that does not exist. We tell the sinner that he is on the inside and Christ is on the outside waiting to come in. What Jesus taught, however, is that there is a very different door. He is on the inside and the sinner is on the outside and must seek to get in.

Quite a contrast results when we juxtapose the image of the knocking, “Holman Hunt Christ” with this illustration Jesus presents:

<sup>23</sup>And someone said to Him, “Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?” And He said to them, <sup>24</sup>“**Strive to enter by the narrow door**; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able. <sup>25</sup>Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, ‘Lord, open up to us!’ then He will answer and say to you, ‘I do not know where you are from.’ <sup>26</sup>Then you will begin to say, ‘We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets’; <sup>27</sup>and He will say, ‘I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from me, all you evildoers.’ <sup>28</sup>There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out.”

### [Luke 13:23-28](#)

This is similar to His teaching in another place:

<sup>13</sup>“**Enter by the narrow gate**; for the gate is wide, and the way broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. <sup>14</sup>For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.”

### [Matthew 7:13-14](#)

What double-think allows us to overlook the contradiction between these two ways of thinking? Jesus told people that in order to be saved, *they* needed to strive to enter a door before they were locked out. *We* tell people that Jesus is locked out by the “door of our hearts” and needs us to let Him in.

## **Agonizing to Enter the Kingdom**

The word *strive* in [Luke 13:24](#) is of special interest because of its strength in the Greek. It stands starkly over against the picture of a near-passive act of “opening the door of one’s heart.” Ἀγωνίζομαι (*agonidzomai*), the word translated as *striving*, means *the exerting of a concentrated strength, to contend as for the mastery*.<sup>12</sup> It implies an intense personal struggle.<sup>13</sup> The word is used elsewhere in the New Testament of an athlete *competing* for a victory ([1 Corinthians 9:25](#)), of “*fighting* the good fight of faith” ([1 Timothy 6:12](#)), and of a Christian worker who *labors fervently* in prayer ([Colossians 4:12](#)).

The root word ἀγωνία (*agonia*) is used to describe Christ’s sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane ([Luke 22:44](#)).<sup>14</sup> This leads commentator William Barclay to remark, “The struggle to enter in is so intense that it may be described as an agony of soul and spirit.”<sup>15</sup> Apparently, entering the Kingdom is not as easy as we have been advertising.

Why is this “agonizing” necessary? Jesus makes it clear in the [Luke 13](#) passage that the danger of *not* entering in is very real. He says “many...will seek to enter and will not be able” ([Luke 13:23](#)). Again, of this entrance: “few are those who find it” ([Matthew 7:14](#)). This theme of the difficulty of being saved is present in other gospel passages. The most significant may be [Luke](#)

[18:18-27,16](#) wherein a young man, earnestly seeking salvation is turned away by Jesus. The unexpected results of the encounter flabbergasted the apostles, as did Jesus' response to their inquiry:

<sup>26</sup>And they who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?" <sup>27</sup>But He said, "The things that are impossible with men are possible with God."

[Luke 18:26-27](#)

## Areas of Striving and Agonizing

Of what does this agonizing (striving, fighting, fervent laboring) consist? What are the difficulties to be overcome?

1. **Conviction of Sin:** Someone who would enter the Kingdom of God must undergo deep and thorough conviction of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said:

<sup>8</sup>"And He, when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin, and righteousness, and judgment; <sup>9</sup>concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; <sup>10</sup>and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer behold Me; <sup>11</sup>and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.

[John 16:8-11](#)

Such conviction is necessary, <sup>17</sup> for if a sinner does not feel the depths of his sin and offense against God, what appreciation does he have for the finished, atoning work of Christ on his behalf? Paul's understanding was that God's work brought about a state in which sin became "exceeding sinful" ([Romans 7:13](#)); that is, that the sinner came to an understanding of sin's monstrosity and soul-destroying power. Seeing oneself in this light is something from which men usually run away ([John 3:19,20](#)). Truly, there must be great striving here.

2. **Repentance and Its Fruit:** In preparing people's hearts for the coming of Christ, the main word in the preaching vocabulary of John the Baptist was *repent*. To the Hebrew understanding of repentance (*nechâmâh*, desistance) and the Greek conception (μετάνοια, a change of mind), John added a powerful element: "Bring forth fruit in keeping with your repentance." Part of the striving and agonizing here is that in each area of conviction, the sinner must answer the question, "Do I want to continue in this sin as much as I want to be accepted by God?" This was the message that John the Baptist used to prepare the hearts of the people for Christ. A good example of the fruit of repentance and its acceptability with God can be seen in the life of Zaccheus ([Luke 19:8,9](#)). To those who would argue that faith alone is sufficient, J. I. Packer asserts, "God has joined faith and repentance as the two facets of response to the Savior and made it clear that turning to Christ means turning from sin and letting ungodliness go."<sup>18</sup>
3. **The Lordship of Christ:** Every sinner by nature is rebellious against God. Part of the striving to enter is the heart-wrestling over submitting forever as slave to a sovereign, pledging fealty and unswerving obedience. The Holy Spirit plays a vital part in this

arena, for Paul says in [1 Corinthians 12:3](#), "...no one can say "Jesus is Lord," except by the Holy Spirit." Jesus equates love for Him with obedience to Him ([John 14:15, 21, 23](#)) and He appraises the reality of submission to His Lordship by the measure of obedience ([Luke 6:46](#)).

4. ***The Cost of Following Christ:*** To be a Christian means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. Discipleship requires following a master; thus to each one He calls, Jesus says, "Follow Me." Yet He issued several warnings and qualifying statements during His ministry.
- a. *Count the cost:* Once, when Jesus' followers numbered in the "multitudes," He turned to them, admonishing them with two parables to "count the cost" ([Luke 14:25-35](#)). Christ desires that each person reckons up what discipleship will cost him or her. Once that cost has been established, is there a commitment to pay it? In a strongly-worded conclusion, Jesus declares that those who have not counted the cost and remained "salty" are fit for the spiritual dung heap.
  - b. *Sell all:* Another pair of pithy parables sets an equally high standard:

<sup>44</sup>"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field.

<sup>45</sup>"Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, <sup>46</sup>and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it."

[Matthew 13:44-46](#)

Any would-be disciple must ask, "Are Christ and His Kingdom worth *everything* I am and have?" Only an honest, affirmative answer qualifies a man or woman for entry into the Kingdom. No others need apply.

- c. *Deny yourself, take up your cross:* Long before His crucifixion, Jesus used the hated, torturous cross as the symbol of death to sin, the flesh, the world, and self-interest. He also made this a requirement for discipleship:

<sup>24</sup>Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. <sup>25</sup>For whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it. <sup>26</sup>For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

[Matthew 16:24-26](#)

In keeping with the theme of difficulty and absolute commitment that we have seen in Jesus' gospel, it is not surprising to find here as well the possibility of forfeiting one's soul. The impact of these words is greater when we realize that Jesus spoke them to those who already had an interest in Him, disciples and would-be disciples.

5. ***Trusting God to Provide Assurance of Salvation:*** The one seeking entrance must press on until he receives assurance from God, and none other, that he is accepted in the Beloved. Though this writer's research has by no means been exhaustive, it has become an ever-increasing point of interest that *none* of the books read on evangelism and preaching mentioned the Holy Spirit as the Author of Assurance of Salvation. Not a single author of books in this category mentioned this passage in Romans:

<sup>14</sup>For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God. <sup>15</sup>For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, "Abba! Father!" <sup>16</sup>**The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God...**

#### [Romans 8:14-16](#)

The *Spirit* bears witness that we are children of God, that is, born from above; that is, *the Holy Spirit is the one who gives assurance of salvation*. This is the teaching of Scripture. Not a single instance of Scripture-employing psychological assurance of salvation occurs in the New Testament to the best of my knowledge. It seems that with muddle-headed good intentions we have relieved the Blessed Paraclete, the One sent to bear witness of Christ ([John 15:26](#)), of this vital role in the process of salvation and rebirth.

It might be argued that all of these areas of striving amount to trying to earn salvation by works. Far from it. The best illustration I've ever encountered about this subject comes from the pen of John Fletcher, dubbed "John Wesley's designated successor." In his well-reasoned *Checks to Antinomianism*, Fletcher's response to this same charge was put very well:

...the king says to four rebels, "Throw down your arms: surrender, and you will have a place both in my favour and at court." One of them obeys and becomes a great man; the others, upon refusal, are caught and hanged. What sophister will face me down that the pardon and place of the former are not *freely* bestowed upon him, because he did something in order to obtain them?<sup>19</sup>

Striving to enter the Kingdom in accordance with the commandment of Jesus is not "salvation by works."

## **Fruit of The Approaches Contrasted**

When looking at these two gospels which we have been considering, we ought to consider, finally, the fruit which each bears. We may quickly consider the fruit of Jesus' gospel, when it was preached in its purity, by looking at the Book of Acts. What we see there is a Church which flourishes in all conditions, possessed of Spirit-fired zeal to preach a world-changing gospel in every land.

The fruit of the "Revelation 3:20 gospel" is noteworthy, too, but, alas, for more sobering reasons. Undoubtedly it has brought forth *some* good lasting fruit, but perhaps this may be

attributed more to the love and mercy of God than to that gospel's content. It is disquieting to hear, for example, that only six percent of those who come forward and "register decisions for Christ" at large evangelistic crusades are still following Christ after a year's time.[20](#)

There is something else which should be brought to our attention. Consider one very undesirable, albeit subtle, assumption of presenting the Gospel backwards: If Jesus is coming to *me*, waiting outside the door of *my* heart, waiting for *me* to receive Him, then *I* am the center of the transaction. Thus my initial transaction with God, whether it results in true regeneration or not, *centers around self* and sets the precedent for all my future interactions with God. How unlike the teaching of Jesus: "Whosoever will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me." ([Mark 8:34](#))

John MacArthur, in his excellent and challenging book *The Gospel According to Jesus*, cites another area of objectionable fruit:

One of the most malignant by-products of the debacle in contemporary evangelism is a gospel that fails to confront individuals with the reality of their sin. Even the most conservative churches are teeming with people who, claiming to be born again, live like pagans. Contemporary Christians have been conditioned never to question anyone's salvation. If a person declares that he has trusted Christ as Savior, no one challenges his testimony, regardless of how inconsistent his life-style may be with God's Word.[21](#)

It is sad enough that such people can make the claim to be disciples of Jesus Christ, but worse still is the blindness which prohibits real believers from voicing, or even considering, the possibility that all who claim to be saved are not. It may well be that some of the people most in danger of hell sit in our pews. They are unaware of their peril because of the repeated "assurances of assurance" they have received about their so-called salvation. They have been measured by a man-made standard, and not by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

## **We Must Change the Gospel We Preach**

In all that I have said to this point, it might be easy to ascribe to this writer a critical spirit towards those who are doing the work of evangelism. I pray that this is not true. The last thing I want to do is to tear down those all-too-few saints who are actively evangelizing. Despite the disheartening numbers of those who fall away after being exposed to the "Revelation 3:20 gospel," we must admit that God has chosen to bring many into the Kingdom by this means. I myself was "led to Christ" by someone using a *Four Spiritual Laws* booklet. No, I am not seeking to discourage, but to empower the Church with the gospel and "the faith once delivered to the saints" ([Jude 3](#)).

Nevertheless, seeing our meager percentages, as well as the carnality and spiritual lethargy that permeate our churches, it is time to repent of our slick, inoffensive, re-worked gospel. We need to ask God for mercy and revelation as we open our New Testaments and seek to understand and preach the gospel of Christ.

There will be a price to pay for doing this. Those who preach a gospel that demands something more than mere assent and easy-believism will be criticized, particularly from the Christian

community which identifies itself with the gospel according to Revelation 3:20. The temptation to remain wedded to the easy, “convenient” way will be very strong. However, if we persevere in preaching truth obediently, we may expect God’s blessing. Preaching what Jesus did about entering the Kingdom will open a door for the Holy Spirit to deal with sin in the Church. That in turn may lead to the genuine conversion of many of our “saved” members. With the church beginning to walk in true discipleship, living and proclaiming the true gospel, we may expect to see the true and lasting conversion of sinners. Because it is a gospel which He can own, I believe the Lord will confirm this word with signs and wonders following ([Mark 16:20](#)).

## Conclusion

It seems a great irony to use [Revelation 3:20](#) in our day for evangelism. On the shaky basis of our modern interpretation of this verse, we tell unbelievers that Jesus is knocking at the door of *their* hearts, waiting to come in, and that [John 1:12](#) encourages them to “receive Jesus into their hearts.” We never challenge them with Jesus’ words, telling them that *they* are the ones who need to strive to pass through the door, giving their all to do so. Thus we have the matter exactly backwards. We avoid declaring God’s holiness, decrying and exposing sin, and we avert the deep and often time-consuming work of the Holy Spirit in conviction of sin. We rip a verse from Jesus’ message to the Laodicean church out of context, but we, in a real sense, are Laodicea—wretched, miserable, poor, naked, and blind—so blind that we don’t know that Jesus is knocking on *our* door and demanding that we repent.

Perhaps our greatest need for repentance lies in the gospel we preach. Compared with the gospel of Christ and His apostles, our “good news” is a pale shadow of the Gospel preached in apostolic days. Let us proclaim the *whole* truth, that sinners need to strive to enter through the narrow door into the Kingdom of God. Let us abandon this dilution of the Kingdom message and seek God, that we might know how to preach the *whole* gospel, that word which God loves to honor with signs and wonders following. That word, and that alone, will honor God, produce the results He desires, and see this last generation transformed.

## Epilogue: Margaret's Story

In the Prologue of this article I related my “What is the Gospel?” encounter with Percy Gutteridge. Please “fast forward” with me about ten years in my life’s story. By God’s grace I had grown in my understanding of the Gospel, but I was still pursuing the subject. During the week in question I was wrestling with the ramifications of what I was learning. I had spent a considerable amount of time in [John’s first epistle](#), noting especially the verses that detail the characteristics of those who are born of God.<sup>22</sup>

There was a young woman who occasionally came to the church I pastored. I will call her Margaret, though that is not her real name. She had been “saved” for eight years, yet her moral and spiritual life was a veritable roller coaster of inconsistency. She fell into sexual sin for considerable periods; then she’d be back in fellowship somewhere for a while.

One summer day, Margaret came to our home for counseling. Her cry was that she had failed God again. We walked to a nearby park, and we sat on a bench that gave us a view of a lovely fountain. Her roller coaster had hit another low and she wanted to “find her way back to God” after having failed Him for “the millionth time.”

As she poured out her heart, the nudging voice of the Spirit was quite clear in my heart: “You know you’ve got to tell her.” Yes, I knew I had to tell her the truth, but I was afraid. When Margaret was “doing well” she usually attended a large, successful megachurch where she had first been saved and where she had gone numerous times for counseling. My fear was not so much Margaret’s reaction to my announcement, but of how it would play once it got back to her megachurch.

When my turn came to respond, I shared with her what I had been learning in [First John](#). I described what the inspired writer declared to be the characteristics of someone who is born of God. Then I asked, “Margaret, do *any* of those characteristics show in your life?” She responded in the negative. Determined to be obedient to the Lord and let the consequences fall as they would, I overcame my fear, and shared in a gentle, uncondemning, yet uncompromising way, “Well, Margaret, that’s your problem. On the authority of God’s Word, I can tell you that you’re not born again, and you never have been. Well-meaning people have given you an ‘assurance’ of a salvation and a new birth you never had. Unwittingly, you’ve been trying to live the Christian life without the new birth ever since.”

I waited for her shock, an ensuing fury of denial, and a denunciation. Instead *I* was the one who was shocked, for she responded with a massive sigh and said, “Pastor Jim, I’m *so* glad you shared that. Because if this is the ‘abundant life,’ I want to *die*. It means that God has taken His best shot at me, and I’m even beyond *His* ability to do anything.”

She went on to share how many times she had doubted her salvation, and how various pastors at her church had always assured her that when she had “come forward and prayed the sinner’s prayer” that “Jesus had come into her heart” and that He would never lie and go back on what He promised in Revelation 3:20. I pointed out to her that [Revelation 3:20](#) had nothing to do with salvation, and I opened to her the work of the Spirit in [Romans 8:16-17](#), explaining that it was

*His* job to assure her of her salvation. When she had the real thing, no one would have to convince her—she would *know* in her own heart and spirit.

A day later, reflecting on the encounter, Margaret's sigh loomed large in my mind. That sigh expressed the lifting of a heavy, depressing burden that had been long-borne. And I wondered at the amazing irony of it all: for Margaret, **it was “good news” that she *wasn't* born again!**

The story would be much tidier if I could report that Margaret immediately sought God with all her heart and entered the Kingdom because she at last received the genuine New Birth. Actually there was no visible difference in her lifestyle for a time. But at last she did have a deep, permanent heart-encounter with God and her life bore the fruit of someone who is truly God's child until the day of her death. She married a fine Christian man, and they went on in the things of the Spirit. In fact, several years after our encounter Margaret rang me up long-distance to thank me for being honest with her and helping to set her free.

I'm happy for Margaret, but ever since that day by the fountain, I have wondered: how many millions of Margarets are out there? These supposedly “born-again Christians” need someone to share the truth with them about their spiritual condition. It will take brave men and women to proclaim Christ's Gospel in the face of the Church's status quo. Happily, because of that proclamation, some may respond like Margaret.

Other Margarets, I'm afraid, will resist. Some will do so fearing to “deny God” by turning from what they have imbibed as “truth;” after all, they were told by someone in spiritual authority that, having “walked the aisle” and mouthed a “sinner's prayer,” they have been born again, even though they lack the witness of the Spirit. It is probably a mere fancy to believe that we can avoid an ensuing maelstrom as it sweeps through the Church, exposing all that is not God-birthing and dividing very brethren before it at last purifies us.

But at this point, the only thing worse for the Church of Jesus Christ than that maelstrom is no maelstrom at all.

*Lord Jesus, forgive us for our ignorance of Your message. Forgive us for diluting it with well-intentioned, ill-conceived “improvements.” Help us to seek You earnestly that we might without shame point the way to the strait gate and narrow way. Heed the plight of Your Margarets and restore to us Your unflinching Gospel, lest You return and not find true faith on the earth. Amen.*

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## Endnotes for *Letting In or Getting In*

<sup>1</sup> Bill Bright, *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?* (Arrowhead Springs, CA: Campus Crusade for Christ International, 1965)

<sup>2</sup> *Bridge to Life*. Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1969

<sup>3</sup> *Steps to Peace with God* (Minneapolis, MN: World Wide Publications, n.d.)

<sup>4</sup> Billy Graham, *How to Be Born Again*, (Waco Books: Waco, TX, 1977), p. 200.

<sup>5</sup> How thoroughly permeating is this concept of asking Jesus into one's heart may be seen by a curiosity encountered in the Messianic Jewish clone, *Have You Ever Heard of the Five Jewish Laws?* Law Five says, "You must ASK Messiah Yeshua INTO YOUR HEART AND LIFE... (The Messiah will not force His way into your life; he DESIRES to be INVITED.)" [Revelation 3:20](#) is not invoked, because only Old Testament Scriptures are used in this tract. Yet whereas all the other laws and statements of this gospel booklet are backed by scriptural quotes, no substantiating verse is given showing the need of inviting Messiah into the heart. The writer's assumption is the common eisegesis of Revelation 3:20. (Messianic Jewish Movement International: Bethesda, MD, n.d., p. 12) The ensuing prayer is the same as well: "Messiah Yeshua, please come into my heart and life..." (p.15).

<sup>6</sup> Indeed, one of the better-known images in Western Christendom is Holman Hunt's painting of Jesus knocking at the door of the heart.

<sup>7</sup> *Steps*, p. 13.

<sup>8</sup> Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1985), p. 340.

<sup>9</sup> Musings about this particular verse have posed an intriguing thought. Did the "first family" even have doors to their dwellings? Were they required even back then for physical or environmental security? If the answer to both those questions is negative, did Moses under divine inspiration translate or interpolate what God *did* say to Cain (i.e., to steal a phrase from the editors of the NIV, was he allowed to employ "dynamic equivalency"?) If the answer to that question is also negative, yet another remains: did the first human beings possess a seminal spiritual concept of a door?

<sup>10</sup> I would not argue the possibility that the "young men" were literally "at the door" when Peter spoke those words. In that case, however, given the context of Sapphira's imminent judgment and the subsequent fear that fell upon all who heard of the incident ([Acts 5:11, 13](#)), I believe that Peter was employing a *double entendre*.

<sup>11</sup> Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament, Volume II*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1887), p. 47.

<sup>12</sup> Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI, 1951), p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> John F. MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (Word of Grace: Panorama City, CA, 1988), p. 182.

<sup>14</sup> A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament, Volume II* (Broadman Press: Nashville, TN, 1930), p. 190.

<sup>15</sup> William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (The Westminster Press: Philadelphia, PA, 1975), p. 183.

<sup>16</sup> Because the scope of this article has been limited to a contrast of the two doors, I cannot further elaborate on this story of the rich young ruler. However, I recommend to the reader a most helpful, enlightening, and provocative little book, *Today's Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* by Walter Chantry. The question posed in the book's title is answered based entirely by an examination of this Scripture passage.

<sup>17</sup> This subject of conviction is covered in far more depth in a related article on our website – [\*That Uncomfortable Word – Conviction.\*](#)

<sup>18</sup> J. I. Packer, writing the introduction to John MacArthur's *The Gospel According to Jesus*, p. ix.

<sup>19</sup> John Fletcher, *The Works of the Reverend John Fletcher, Volume I* (Schmul Publishers: Salem, OH, 1974), pp. 37, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Dr. Peter Prosser, lecture from *Jesus Christ and Salvation*, Regent University College of Theology and Ministry (now known as the School of Divinity), September 23, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> MacArthur, p. 59.

<sup>22</sup> Specifically, [1 John 2:29](#); [3:7](#), [9](#), [10](#); [5:1](#), [4](#), [18](#). As the Lord allows, another article focusing on these very points will appear on the Finest of the Wheat web site in the future.

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