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Reaching the lost. Together.

Are You a Rotten Fish?

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YOU ARE NOT ALONE

There are gazillions of people who once claimed to be Christian, but who no longer identify as followers of Jesus Christ. There are gazillions more who still claim to be Christians but are not acting like it. Both of these scenarios are very, very dangerous.

Jesus warned that on the Day of Judgment, many will say to Him, “Lord, Lord,” and He will say, “I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws” (Matthew 7:22,23). Even though these people professed to be Christians, Jesus doesn’t agree with their assessment.

Jesus preached on the subject of true and false conversions relentlessly and repeatedly. He spoke of wheat and tares, good fish and rotten fish, wise and foolish virgins, sheep and goats (Matthew 13:24–29,47–50; 25:1–13, 31–33). Jesus was very concerned about spiritual self-deception.

One of Jesus' longest parables was about true and false conversions (Matthew 13:3–23). In the parable of the sower, He described four types of people who hear the gospel:

1. The first hearer does not truly understand the gospel and therefore doesn't respond.
2. The second responds with joy but only temporarily; as soon as the going gets tough, this "convert" gets going.
3. The third hearer falls away due to worldly worries and a desire for wealth.
4. The fourth hearer understands, believes, and produces genuine fruit.

Jesus explained that only the fourth type of hearer was actually saved; the others may have had some sort of religious experience, but they were not genuinely converted. Please notice, the fourth hearer understood, believed, *and* bore fruit. In other words, true converts act like Christians because they *are* Christians.

Jesus spelled out one way to know whether a person is soundly saved: “Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God” (Luke 9:62). That is a rather colorful way of saying that a person who backslides is one who never genuinely slid forward in the first place.

When Jesus enters the new convert’s heart, He stays there permanently (Romans 8:38,39; 1 John 5:11,12). People who are genuinely saved will act saved and stay saved until they die.

This means that anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun! (2 Corinthians 5:17)

If you feel like you really, really believed in Jesus at one point, but now you don’t, the biblical explanation is unflinching: your faith was false. It may have felt sincere, but the Bible insists that you were sincerely wrong. So, my friend, if you are no longer a Chris-

tian, it is because you were never a Christian in the first place.

There are scads of verses that tell us those who once claimed to be Christian, but walk away from the faith, were never truly Christian at all.

These people left our churches, but they never really belonged with us; otherwise they would have stayed with us. When they left, it proved that they did not belong with us. (1 John 2:19)

Please don't be offended, but the Bible is emphatic: if you are not a Christian now, it is because you were never a Christian to begin with. This is staggeringly common.

A major U.S. denomination reported that in 1991, 11,500 churches obtained 294,784 decisions for Christ. Unfortunately, they could find only 14,337 in fellowship. This means . . . they could not account for approximately 280,000 (95 percent) of their "converts."

Another leading U.S. denomination reported that during 1995 they secured 384,057 decisions but retained only 22,983 in fellowship. They could not account for 361,074 supposed conversions. That is a 94 percent fall-away rate.¹

These shocking “fall away” statistics apply to virtually every Christian festival, evangelistic outreach, Christian concert, church, and major denomination. Perhaps you are one of those statistics.

Maybe you grew up in the church, but you became one of the 60–80 percent who attended youth group, only to run off to college and run away from the faith.

If you are one of the millions who once considered themselves to be Christian, but lost your faith somewhere, thank you for reading this booklet. You are brave.

Additionally, if you claim to be a Christian, but your life looks more like you are a rotten fish, it is because you *are* a rotten fish.

If your life is marked by an ongoing, unrepentant lifestyle of sin with no remorse, the Bible is brutally honest: “When people keep on sinning, it shows that they belong to the devil” (1 John 3:8). If your fruit is rotten, it is because your root is rotten.

Sorry for the punch in the nose, but please know, I just hit myself too. You see, I was a

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false convert of the worst sort. I actually studied to be a pastor, but I wasn't a genuine believer. A true Christian doesn't study about Jesus during the day but

live like the devil at night. My lifestyle simply did not match my profession of faith. I was a rotten fish masquerading as a good fish.

The Christian life is marked by a radical change from an old man to a new man; from a lover of darkness to a follower of the light. Christians are by no means perfect, but genuine believers increasingly demonstrate that

they are being transformed into the image of God's beloved Son. If you're not growing in holiness, then you, my friend, are a false convert on the AC/DC highway.

While understanding the reality of false conversions explains why so many people are fake or former converts, it does not give us the *reason* they were not soundly saved. So now that we have the hard part out of the way, let's jump into the deep end and figure out *why* you are a rotten fish.

YOU HEARD THE WRONG GOSPEL

Imagine an automobile factory that doesn't know how to make cars, or a farmer who doesn't know how to harvest crops. As ridiculous as that sounds, there are far too many churches that do not correctly teach the very basics of the Christian faith. There is a very good chance that you never heard the true gospel presented rightly; therefore, you were never truly converted.

You genuinely responded to what the person or preacher said, but it was not the right response because you were not placing your faith in the right thing. This is shockingly common.

Before we can determine if you heard a false gospel, we need to understand what the true gospel is. It is almost certain you have never heard what you are about to read.

THE TRUE GOSPEL

Here is an undeniable fact: people sin and do terrible things. If you don't believe me, just visit a Chuck E. Cheese restaurant. Children are vipers in diapers and we never seem to outgrow the ability to do bad things. Bad things like hatred, slander, racism, elitism, sexism, dishonesty, stealing, cheating, fornicating, bullying, murder, cruelty, etc.

While all of those sins are atrocious, there is an even more wicked sin that outranks them all: not worshiping, obeying, and loving the God who made us and sustains us.

This is a lame analogy, but I think you'll get the point. Imagine you rescued a dog, cleaned up his mange, spent scads of money on vet bills, brought him into your home, fed him, walked him, and even picked up his messes every day. Now imagine that dog not only disobeys your commands, but he bites your hand when you try to feed him. How would you feel about that pooch?

Now imagine how God feels. He knit you together in your mother's womb and gave you life (Psalm 139:13; Job 33:4). He has fed, clothed, and provided shelter and every good thing for you (James 1:17), yet you bite His hand. You and I haven't just made mistakes, we have committed cosmic treason.

- Instead of praising God, we use His name as if it were a four-letter filth word, or treat it uselessly, like "OMG."
- Instead of thanking God, we live as if we are responsible for keeping ourselves alive and well.

- Instead of being obedient, we overrule our consciences and do whatever we please.

If you would not tolerate a naughty dog, how much more should God not tolerate rebellious humans made in His image? God would most certainly be justified for being very, very angry with sinners. And that is precisely what the Bible says:

God is an honest judge.

He is angry with the wicked every day.

If a person does not repent,
God will sharpen his sword;
he will bend and string his bow.
He will prepare his deadly weapons
and shoot his flaming arrows.

(Psalm 7:11–13)

Like I said, you have probably never heard about God's settled, justified, and righteous indignation with sinners. Most likely, you have never heard a preacher explain why a loving God should and *must* punish sinners.

God is just plain different than we are. We are outraged by atrocities like a Holocaust or mass shooting. God is too, but He is also indignant at every sin because He is just that much holier than we are. We see a few sins as being awful; God sees all sins as being damnable.

Think of it like this: when you stand in Los Angeles and stare at the sky, it looks blue. But if you board a plane at LAX and ascend above the clouds, you would suddenly see a thick layer of smog hanging over the city. You would also observe that the sky above you is much bluer than you thought when you were on the ground. What happened?

Your perspective changed because your vantage point changed. The higher up you fly, the better you are able to see. Now, can you understand why God is so angry at sin? His holy perspective is *way* higher than ours. We tend to see sins as “human nature,” or mere mistakes, but God sees sin as “terrible” (Romans 7:13). Because His nature is holy, holy, holy (Isaiah 6:3), He sees every single sin as wicked, wicked, wicked.

SCARY STUFF

To be clear, God isn't a simmering pot ready to boil over. God is not stewing at 211 degrees just waiting for you to make one misstep and zing you. His righteous indignation is reasonable, under control, and exactly right.

You hate rape and child abuse, and rightly so. So does God, but His standard is higher than just violent crimes. God hates all sin. A lot.

Because the foundation of God's throne is righteousness and justice (Psalm 89:14), He must and will punish all lawbreakers. Because God is good, He will see to it that every criminal is brought to justice for every crime ever committed.

No stone will be left unturned by our omniscient God. The One who made the eye also sees; the One who made the ear also hears (Psalm 94:9).

- Every lie has been written in God's books.
- Every pornographic perusal has been documented.

- Every angry word has been heard, and every sinful thought and deed recorded.
- Every failure to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength has been archived.

When God's gavel is slammed on Judgment Day, He will proclaim every criminal "guilty as charged," and Jesus will thunder, "Depart from Me" (Matthew 7:23) as He sends them to the eternal punishment that criminals deserve.

Jesus Himself will sentence guilty criminals to eternal conscious torment. *Eternal, conscious, torment.* No relief. No naps. No daydreams. No reprieve. No acquittals. No happy memories. No water. No light. No comfort. No joy. No hope. Nothing but the relentless wrath of God poured out on every sinner for every sin ever committed.

All of creation will stand and applaud as God sends people to hell because of their sinful rebellion. Why must God treat sinners so severely? A crime committed against the

state is one thing; a crime committed against the Creator of the universe is another thing altogether.

Every willful act of disobedience is not just an “oops”; it is a high-handed crime against our Sovereign. Our offenses demand eternal, conscious torment because our offenses have been committed against Moral Perfection and Goodness. Consider this analogy.

If I lie to my son, nothing is going to happen to me. Should I lie to my wife, I will be spending the night on the couch. If I lie to my boss, I could get fired. Lying to the government could land me in jail. Same “crime,” different punishments.

Think this through: I committed the same crime in each scenario, but the punishment for the exact same crime increased. Why? Because the one against whom I committed the crime increased in authority. And that is why sinners are worthy of eternal damnation—we have committed sins against the highest authority and the holiest, best Being in the entire universe.

A clever lawyer will not deceive God on Judgment Day. God Himself will be the prosecuting attorney who is the meticulous eyewitness to every crime that has ever been committed. There will be no escaping the sentence of the Just Judge of all the earth who will judge the world in righteousness (Psalm 96:13).

If that sounds a bit scary, that's because it is scary. The Bible assures us, "It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). We are doomed. Rightly doomed.

Summation: Our Maker is not happy with us. May I make it more personal? God is not happy with you. His sword is sharpened, and His arrows are aimed directly at you.

Your biggest problem is not finances, job security, naughty children, sickness, debt, or disease. Your biggest problem is... God. You and I are headed toward a scheduled show-

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down with the God who will open the books of our lives and sentence us accordingly.

Unless God Himself intervenes and rescues us, we are without hope. Unless God Himself pays our debt, we must pay the eternal price for our sins. Unless someone takes our punishment for us, we must receive the just dues for our sinful labors.

GOOD NEWS

God, however, is not just holy, righteous, and angry; God is love. He is good and filled with mercy. He is benevolent and He delights in forgiving sinners. But this leads us to a massive conundrum; God must condemn sinners, but He delights in forgiving and saving them too.

“Do you think that I like to see wicked people die? says the Sovereign LORD. Of course not! I want them to turn from their wicked ways and live.” (Ezekiel 18:23)

Here's the rub: if God merely waves a magic wand and declares guilty criminals "innocent," He would be no better than a corrupt judge who lets convicted felons go free. God is not corrupt; He *must* punish sinners, yet He desires to show how merciful He is by saving sinners from their plight. But He can't simply let guilty sinners off the hook or He would be unjust. Do you see the conundrum?

How can God reconcile His holy demand to punish lawbreakers and yet graciously forgive them? Thankfully, God has a solution.

THE PLAN

Before the universe was created, God had a plan to rescue condemned sinners. God predetermined to send His only beloved Son to be our representative and take the punishment on behalf of sinful humans. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, volunteered to come to this wicked world and take on human flesh, live a perfect life, and die a violent death. Jesus Christ volunteered to receive the wrath of God that you and I deserve.

Jesus Christ became our representative when He took on human flesh, and He satisfied the wrath of God the Father because He sacrificed Himself. Here is how Isaiah the prophet said it seven hundred years *before* Jesus was born. What you are about to read is the “forbidden chapter” for Jewish people because it so accurately portrays the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ seven centuries before He entered our world.

He was despised and rejected—
a man of sorrows, acquainted with
deepest grief.

We turned our backs on him and
looked the other way.

He was despised, and we did not
care.

Yet it was our weaknesses he carried;
it was our sorrows that weighed him
down.

And we thought his troubles were a
punishment from God,
a punishment for his own sins!

But he was pierced for our rebellion,
crushed for our sins.
He was beaten so we could be whole.
He was whipped so we could be
healed.
All of us, like sheep, have strayed away.
We have left God's paths to follow
our own.
Yet the LORD laid on him
the sins of us all.

He was oppressed and treated harshly,
yet he never said a word.
He was led like a lamb to the slaughter.
And as a sheep is silent before the
shearers,
he did not open his mouth.
Unjustly condemned,
he was led away.
No one cared that he died without
descendants,
that his life was cut short in mid-
stream.
But he was struck down

for the rebellion of my people.
He had done no wrong
and had never deceived anyone.
But he was buried like a criminal;
he was put in a rich man's grave.
But it was the LORD's good plan to
crush him
and cause him grief.
Yet when his life is made an offering
for sin,
he will have many descendants.
He will enjoy a long life,
and the LORD's good plan will prosper
in his hands.
When he sees all that is accomplished
by his anguish,
he will be satisfied.
And because of his experience,
my righteous servant will make it
possible
for many to be counted righteous,
for he will bear all their sins.
(Isaiah 53:3–11)

That is precisely what happened to the Lord Jesus Christ, God's Messiah, two thousand years ago. When Jesus hung on His cross, He bore our sins in His body and paid their penalty in His life's blood. The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23), which Jesus willingly endured on our behalf. We have broken God's laws, and Jesus Christ, our representative, has paid our fine through His death on the cross.

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OF KING JESUS.

Jesus, who never sinned, became our sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21). Our conundrum is solved. Because of Jesus' sacrifice on our behalf, God can be just and the justifier of those who repent and trust Jesus (Romans 3:26).

Every epic tale pales in comparison to the true narrative of the life, death, and resurrection of King Jesus. He who is a King became a pauper to die for beggars to make them kings.

Wretched, vile, wicked, hateful, fist-shaking rebels can be reconciled to this gracious King. That is amazing grace and breathtaking love.

You and I are guilty criminals facing the death penalty for our crimes. Jesus Christ lived a perfect life and died a brutal death as payment for our sins, saving us from the eternal death that we deserve. That is the *only* way God can be just and forgiving at the same time.

A good judge cannot issue a blanket amnesty for all criminals, but if someone enters the courtroom and pays the fine for the guilty criminal, the judge can forgive the criminal's debt because another has paid it.

That is precisely what Jesus has done. Your pardon is now available. Your court case can be dismissed because Jesus has satisfied justice on your behalf. *That is good news indeed.*

God does not want to crush you; God wants to forgive you, and save you from the wrath that is to come. But wait, the good news of the gospel is even more amazing than that.

EVEN BETTER

Sinners who repent and trust Jesus not only are forgiven for their sin debt, but are also credited with every good deed that Jesus performed. You give Jesus your sins, and He gives you His résumé.

Jesus bore the punishment for your sins when He was scourged, beaten, and crucified. His suffering is the satisfactory payment for our crimes against God.

Jesus also kept every law and performed every good deed possible and thus fulfilled all righteousness (Matthew 3:15). When a person believes in God, the righteousness of Jesus is credited to that sinner's account. Not only are guilty criminals forgiven, they are seen as righteous because Jesus fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf.

Think of it like this: you, a vile, guilty criminal, can stand before the just Judge who not only proclaims you are forgiven for your crimes, but He hails you as "Citizen of the Century" because of the work of His Son.

That is the glorious gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. That is the gospel, or good news, of the Bible.

So now that we know what the true gospel is, let's take a look at some of the false gospels that you may have heard and responded to.

Life-enhancement Gospel

This is the false gospel that claims your life will be better if you just become a Christian. Perhaps you heard a preacher proclaim, "You have tried sex, drugs, and rock and roll, but none of them satisfy. Try Jesus and your life will be fulfilled."

While it is true the Christian life is fulfilling (John 10:10), life enhancement is not the gospel. Life enhancement is a *result* of the gospel, but we must know what kind of enhancement the Bible does, and doesn't, promise.

Do our lives get better when we become Christians? Maybe, maybe not. The Bible doesn't promise that life will be a thorn-less rose garden for the true convert. In fact, Jesus

taught that the Christian life is filled with trials, toils, and tribulations (John 15:18–20; 16:33).

Becoming a Christian does not make life better; becoming a Christian makes you acceptable to God. Therefore, the true convert can endure rotten things with joy because our biggest problem has been solved. That is biblical life enhancement—the peace that surpasses all understanding the Bible promises to believers (Philippians 4:7).

This raises a big question: did you believe in Jesus for the right motive? Did you come to Him seeking Him and the forgiveness He offers? Or did you believe in Him because you wanted your life to be enhanced? If that describes you, then it's no surprise you never became a Christian. You were lied to, and I am truly sorry for that.

DID YOU BELIEVE IN
 JESUS FOR THE RIGHT
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 HE OFFERS?

Prosperity Gospel

Maybe you heard a prosperity gospel that promises you will be wealthy and perfectly healthy if you become a Christian. That is a whopper of a lie. Those who teach that are false teachers who have three wicked motives: they want to be rich, be powerful, or live a licentious life (2 Peter 2). These men and women should not be in pulpits, they should be in jail. I am sorry if you were hoodwinked (and maybe even had your money stolen) by one of those crooks.

Social Gospel

If you grew up in a mainline Protestant church (Lutheran, Episcopalian, Methodist, Presbyterian), this is the gospel you likely heard. The social gospel teaches that Christians live to make the world a better place by helping, giving, and serving. If you do all those things, then God will be pleased with you. There are two really big problems with this false gospel.

First, helping, giving, and serving are actually works, and no amount of works will ever save anyone (Ephesians 2:8,9). We don't do works to earn a golden ticket to heaven; as Christians, we do works because Jesus has purchased heaven for us.

The second problem with the social gospel is that these works are laws, and perfect adherence to these laws is unattainable. The social gospel demands that you love everyone perfectly and God will be pleased with you. That is an impossible burden to bear as none of us loves, helps, gives, or serves perfectly.

Social gospel preachers may sound nice because they never talk about sin and wrath, but they are actually quite cruel because they impose a standard that cannot possibly be attained. The social gospel is not good news at all.

If you responded to that pseudo-gospel, I suspect you might be a bit angry that you were working hard for God and then ran into a rough patch only to conclude, "I worked

hard for God, and He doesn't even return the favor." Your anger is understandable.

"Escape Hell" Gospel

This is the reason I was a false convert for years. As a child, I was terrified to die. When I was taken to church in eighth grade, I heard that I could live forever if I would just "believe in Jesus." That was very good news for a frightened fourteen-year-old. But there was a threefold problem:

1. All I desired was a Get Out of Hell Free card. I didn't desire the God who provided my rescue.
2. I was a fear-filled follower, but I was not a tear-filled convert who wept because Jesus died for me while I was yet sinning (Romans 5:8).
3. I lacked repentance. I simply believed in God, but I never turned from my wicked ways. That is a problem because the Bible says that without repentance we will perish (Luke 13:3).

Perhaps that third point surprised you. Did you know that someone can believe God exists, yet not be saved? If we simply acknowledge God's existence (as I did), that does not make us fit for heaven. And that leads us to the next possible reason you are a false convert: you were given wrong salvation instructions.

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Before we can examine the wrong response to the gospel, we should understand the right response. Here it is: over thirty times the New Testament commands repentance and faith. If you want your sins forgiven by God, you must repent of your sins and put your faith in Jesus Christ alone. Both are essential.

Jesus went into Galilee, where he preached God's Good News. "The time promised by God has come at last!" he announced. "The Kingdom of God is near! Repent of your sins and believe the Good News!" (Mark 1:14,15)

That is precisely what Paul preached to unbelievers: “the necessity of repenting from sin and turning to God, and of having faith in our Lord Jesus” (Acts 20:21). Let’s tackle them one at a time.

Repentance

The famous pastor Charles Spurgeon said, “Sin and hell are married unless repentance proclaims the divorce.” God commands *all* people everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30), and He “does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent” (2 Peter 3:9).

This is how one distinguished Greek scholar defined repentance:

The predominantly intellectual understanding of *metanoeo* (repent) as a change of mind plays very little part in the New Testament. Rather the decision by the **whole man to turn around** is stressed. It is clear that we are concerned neither with a purely outward

turning, nor with a merely intellectual change of ideas. (Colin Brown)²

Here is another Greek scholar who defines repentance as far more than a mere change of mind:

The term demands **radical conversion**, demands a transformation of nature, a **definitive turning** from evil, a resolute turning to God in total obedience. This conversion is **once for all**. There can be no going back, only advance and responsible movement along the way now taken. It effects the whole man; first and basically, the center of personal life, then logically his conduct at all times and in all situations, his thoughts, words and acts.

The whole proclamation of Jesus is a proclamation of **unconditional turning** to God, of **unconditional turning** from all that is against God, not merely that which is downright evil, but that which in a given case makes total

turning to God impossible. (Gerhard Kittel)³

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones offers this vivid and practical definition of repentance:

Repentance means that you realize that you are a **guilty, vile sinner** in the presence of God, that you deserve the wrath and punishment of God, that you are **hell-bound**. It means that you begin to realize that this thing called sin is in you, that you long to get rid of it, and that you **turn your back on it in every shape and form**. You renounce the world whatever the cost, the world in its mind and outlook as well as its practice, and you deny yourself, and **take up the cross** and go after Christ. Your nearest and dearest, and the whole world, may call you a fool or say you have religious mania. You may have to suffer financially, but it makes no difference. That is repentance.⁴

It's Logical

Aside from being biblical, repentance is also logical. Consider this:

If you caught your son hitting his sister or mother, you would want him to stop it, apologize, and never do it again, right? What about an employee who calls you “boss” but never does what he is told? You want him to discontinue his disobedience.

Would you forgive your unfaithful spouse who returned to you and said, “Honey, I have been sleeping with others, but I want to be married to you. Now if you don't mind, I have someone waiting for me in a motel room.” Not only would you not forgive, you would think your spouse was crazy.

We expect people to repent; God expects no less. You see, repentance is logical. And to those who would argue that this definition of repentance is a “work,” and not faith alone, repentance is a gift from God; we get no credit for something God gives us (2 Timothy 2:25).

If a man had a heart attack and dialed 911, would anyone think he worked for his salvation? His call for help did not save him; the paramedics saved him. If a man had an affair and returned on his knees begging and pleading with his wife to forgive him, would anyone say he earned forgiveness?

To stop sinning, feel remorse, and ask for forgiveness is not a work, it is merely the right response of a guilty criminal.

To Be Clear

Make no mistake: God does not expect sinless perfection before you get saved. No Christian will ever be perfect until God glorifies us, but God does expect a change of heart, mind, emotion, and will. Repentance is not perfection, but it is thinking and moving in a new and godly direction.

Think of it like this. You arrive home after work and get out of your car, put your briefcase strap on your shoulder, and carry in your laptop bag from your car. Suddenly your be-

loved child appears, running toward you squealing, “Hi, Daddy/Mommy!”

Suddenly, your business papers and laptop take on very low significance because you love something profoundly more. You throw off your briefcase and drop the bag so you can embrace your child. That is repentance.

Six Components of Repentance

Imagine you and I are in Nebraska and I invite you to join me on a road trip to Florida. After eight hours of driving, you notice some troubling signs: lots of pine trees but no palm trees, bank thermometers in the single digits, and a large sign that reads “Canada: 89 miles.”

I suspect you would like me to:

1. Agree with you that I am going in the wrong direction.
2. Stop.
3. Apologize.
4. Turn around.

5. Start going in the right direction.
6. Not stop until we arrive at the right destination.

That is biblical repentance. We expect it when someone sins against us, so why would we think God's standards are lower than ours? May I ask, have you ever repented? Perhaps that is why you are a rotten fish. I know I was.

Faith

The other side of the salvation coin is faith. The type of faith that God requires is not mere acquiescence to the truth about Jesus; genuine saving faith is a full-fledged staking one's eternity on the Lord Jesus Christ.

If you were about to experience a plane crash, you wouldn't just believe the parachute could save you; you would put it on. The Bible says you must put on the Lord Jesus Christ (Romans 13:14). It is not enough to acknowledge that Jesus died for your sins—you must wholeheartedly trust Him as if your life depended on it. Because it does.

The kind of faith that is acceptable to God is a wholehearted trust in Him. You plant your flag and stake your claim that Jesus is indeed the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but through Him (John 14:6). Faith is a conviction that you are relying on Jesus Christ to be who He says He is and to do what He has promised to do. A genuine saving faith then demonstrates its veracity by doing good works out of gratitude for Jesus' work (James 2:14–26).

IF YOU WERE ABOUT TO
EXPERIENCE A PLANE
CRASH, YOU WOULDN'T
JUST BELIEVE THE
PARACHUTE COULD
SAVE YOU; YOU WOULD
PUT IT ON.

May I ask, have you ever trusted in Jesus like that?

False converts can be a rotten fish because they failed to repent and/or believe. Some actually repent but are not saved because they do not have faith. Others believe but do not repent (that was me). We must both re-

pent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved.

WRONG SALVATION INSTRUCTIONS

Now that we know the correct way to be saved, let's see if you responded to one of the many wrong ways preachers instruct people to be saved. Here are some of the Christian clichés that are *not* correct salvation instructions. This may well explain why you are not a good fish.

Accept Jesus

Were you told to “accept” Jesus? Here's the glitch with that well-worn phrase: Jesus does not need our acceptance, we need His (Romans 15:7). The great news is, He will accept us—if we obey His command to repent and trust Him.

A. W. Tozer had this to say:

Hell-deserving sinners are coming in droves to “accept” Christ for what they

can get out of Him; and though one now and again may drop a tear as proof of his sincerity, it is hard to escape the conclusion that most of them are stooping to patronize the Lord of glory much as a young couple might fawn on a rich old uncle in order to be mentioned in his will later on.⁵

Imagine pulling up to a private country club and announcing, “I have accepted you. I will be teeing off in twenty minutes.” Security would be called and they will tee off on you. Instead, you must submit your application, and those in authority accept you! The same thing is true with God. We submit our “application” of repentance and faith, and He accepts us. No exceptions, ever. He saves all who come to Him in genuine repentance and faith.

Make Jesus Your Lord and Savior

This Christian cliché is used regularly, and it is deceptively wrong. Jesus isn't in heaven biting

His nails longing for someone to make Him Lord. He *is* the Lord, seated on His throne, and He commands everyone everywhere to repent. Jesus doesn't need to be made Lord and Savior; He already is, and we need to surrender to Him in repentance and faith.

Make a Decision for Jesus

Do we need to make a decision in order to be saved? Yes, we need to decide that we are wretched sinners and Jesus is an amazing Savior; but that is as far as our decision goes. A decision does not save us; Jesus saves us when we repent and trust Him.

If your legs were caught in a bear trap, would you decide to call 911? Yes, but if you don't call them, they won't rescue you. The same thing is true with Jesus. Mere mental ascent does not save anyone. We must call out to the Lord in faith, and He rescues us.

Say "Yes" to Jesus

If you merely say "yes" to a police officer who commands you to stop, you are in big trou-

ble with the law. Ditto with Jesus. Judgment Day is coming, and God's terms of peace are repentance and faith, not paying mere lip service.

Try Jesus

Pastor Rick Warren famously told Fox News cohost Alan Colmes to give Jesus a sixty-day trial. "See if He'll change your life. I dare you to try trusting Jesus for sixty days. Or your money guaranteed back."⁶

Jesus is not a used car hoping someone will take Him for a test drive. Jesus Christ is the Sovereign King who commands us to humbly bow before Him with a broken spirit and a repentant heart (Psalm 51:17).

Commit to Jesus

This sounds like a great response to the gospel, but it too is very wrong. We are not commanded to commit to Jesus, we are commanded to repent and trust Him, and then He commits to us! That is a far more secure relationship. You can lose your grip on Jesus,

but He will never let go of you (John 10:28).

If the police tell a lawbreaker to surrender, but the criminal says, “I commit to you,” that crook is in hot water. The authority doesn’t want the lawbreaker to “commit”; the law wants the lawbreaker to submit. So does Jesus.

The Sinner’s Prayer

Untold numbers of people have been led in a “sinner’s prayer,” only to backslide, then say the sinner’s prayer again. Wash, rinse, repeat. There is a reason that this response has generated so many rotten (and possibly angry) fish.

Imagine your spouse commits adultery and you discover the misdeed. Your infidel returns to you with a complete stranger standing directly behind your sinful spouse.

The stranger whispers into your spouse’s ear, “Dear spouse.”

Your spouse repeats the words, “Dear spouse.”

The stranger whispers again, “I am really, really sorry.”

Your spouse parrots, “I am really, really sorry.”

Stranger: “Please come into my heart.”

Spouse: “Please come into my heart.”

Stranger: “And this time, I really, really mean it.”

Spouse: “And this time, I really, really mean it.”

How would you feel? Probably the exact same way God feels when someone is led in a “sinner’s prayer.” You want to hear your spouse’s heartfelt expression of genuine sorrow and commitment to not stray again. God wants the same from sinners.

This is not to say that nobody who has uttered a sinner’s prayer has ever been saved, but this is to say that God doesn’t want someone to act like a ventriloquist’s dummy in order to go to heaven. The Lord isn’t seeking an articulate speech. He seeks a broken heart and contrite spirit that can barely mutter, “I am Yours, save me.”

Just Believe

Yes, we are commanded to believe, but the type of faith we must exercise is a repentant faith. Puritan Thomas Watson said, “The two great graces essential to a saint in this life are faith and repentance. These are the two wings by which he flies to heaven.”⁷

Ask Jesus Into Your Heart

Scores of people have asked Jesus into their hearts, but when they don’t feel or act any different they ask Him back in, and this cycle repeats itself countless times until they’re too discouraged to ask Jesus back into their hearts.

Upon conversion, Jesus does come and dwell in the human heart (Ephesians 3:17), but the trillion-dollar question is, “How does He get in there?” The biblical answer is, “Repentance and faith” (Mark 1:15).

When Jesus takes up residence through repentance and faith, He will never leave you nor forsake you (Hebrews 13:5). God finishes what He starts (Philippians 1:6). When you repent and trust Jesus Christ, He will be your

Savior and God forever (Romans 8:29–39).
Jesus doesn't abandon ship... or hearts.

A God-shaped Hole in Your Heart

Perhaps you have been told, "You have a God-shaped hole in your heart that only Jesus can fill. So come to Jesus and get that hole filled." While there is a grain of truth in that statement, it isn't the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

Because we are made by God to know Him and enjoy Him forever, we do not function rightly until we find our satisfaction in our Maker. When we live for pleasures other than God, we are like airplanes trying to find our purpose in swimming.

While Jesus most certainly makes us happy, if a person comes to the Savior seeking happiness, he comes for the wrong reason. This is akin to a college student who returns home on Christmas vacation only because his mom does his laundry. How would a mother respond to a son who says, "I'm home to have

my whites whitened, but I am not here because I love you”?

God is not a Cosmic Heart Filler; He is a glorious Savior. To instruct people to “ask

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Jesus into your heart to fill a God-shaped hole” is like a surgeon telling someone whose heart has stopped to take a multi-vitamin.

- People don’t need to fill their hearts; they need a heart transplant.
- People don’t need Jesus to warm their hearts; they need Jesus to rule their hearts.
- People don’t need Jesus to improve their hearts; they need Jesus to replace their hearts.

Contentment is a result of the gospel, but it is not the gospel itself. If you asked Jesus into your heart seeking contentment, perhaps that

is the reason you are a false convert; you came seeking the gift, but not the Giver.

Turn or Burn

While it is true we must turn or we will burn, that is not the correct response to the good news that Jesus died for sinners. Sinners should not turn to Jesus simply because they are scared of hell; they should repent and trust Jesus because God has been so kind to save them from hell. Do you see the difference?

Yes, you should be afraid of hell, but God doesn't merely want fear-filled conformists; God wants tear-filled converts. It is the kindness of God that should lead a sinner to repentance (Romans 2:4).

There are countless wrong ways to respond to the gospel, but there is only one right way: repentance and faith. Think long and hard. Did you respond wrongly to the right gospel? Did you respond rightly to the wrong gospel? Have you repented and trusted the Lord Jesus Christ who died for your sins?

Were you ever told that you must lay down your arms and surrender to the King? Were you ever told that you must turn from your sinful ways and place your complete trust in Jesus Christ alone? Perhaps this is why you are not a genuine Christian convert.

Those are some of the reasons that there are so many rotten fish, but sadly, there are more. If you haven't discovered the reason you are a false convert, perhaps one of these explanations will resonate.

You Repented of Only One Sin

Many rotten fish have felt burdened by a particular habitual sin like alcohol, drugs, pornography, or fornication. They reach a low point and call out to God for rescue from their self-inflicted wound. Frequently, their repentance is merely a sadness for getting caught, or for the consequences of their sin. Perhaps they genuinely repent, but it is only for their big sin, but not all of their sins.

Here is the problem: If we just say, "Sorry for the pornography, Lord," then we have failed

to repent of idolatry, blasphemy, dishonoring our parents, anger, lust, lying, coveting, slander, racism, sexism, pride, rebellion, etc.

Does this mean you have to repent of each and every infraction of God's laws before He will save you? No. But it does mean you repent of all *known* sins, and continue repenting as you are reminded of more and more sins. You do not have to remember how many times you hit your sibling, but you should repent like the tax collector who cried out, "O God, be merciful to me, for I am a sinner" (Luke 18:13).

You Were Never Introduced to the Right Jesus

It is entirely possible to repent, yet put your trust in the wrong Jesus, and therefore not be saved. This happens all the time. Jesus made it crystal clear, if a person does not understand rightly who He is, then that person will not be saved (John 8:19,23,24; 14:9–11; 1 John 2:23). The person who believes in the wrong Jesus is merely worshiping an idol, but

not the true and living God. Here are some of the wrong saviors that many preachers present.

Example Jesus

Liberal preachers proclaim that Jesus was a good example, no more, no less. Unfortunately for them, Jesus does not agree. Over and over again He claimed to be divine (John 8:58; 10:30). Jesus is far more than an example—Jesus is God incarnate, and we must repent and place our faith in Him alone.

Good Teacher Jesus

To call Jesus a good teacher is like calling Pavarotti a decent singer. Of course Jesus was a good teacher; He is God. To merely call Him a good teacher is to put His teachings on plane with other “good teachers” and demote Him to mere mortal.

If you were told that Jesus was just a Jewish rabbi who had some good things to say, then your faith was placed in a non-existent Jesus who cannot save you.

Prosperity Jesus

Entire churches are filled with rotten fish because the huckster in the spotlight preaches a Jesus who will fulfill their wildest financial dreams. That is not the Jesus of the Bible. Jesus is not a cosmic banker who deposits funds into our depleted accounts; He is the Son of God and Savior of sinners.

Believing in Prosperity Jesus will only lead to disappointment, bitterness, and utter shock when those people hear King Jesus say, “I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws” (Matthew 7:23).

Buddy Jesus

Jesus has indeed made His enemies His friends (John 15:14,15)—*if* they obey Him. But Jesus never intended to be a knock-around chum who longs to be our “bestie.” Consider the apostle Paul’s description of the world’s “nicest” teacher:

...when the Lord Jesus appears from heaven. He will come with his mighty

angels, in **flaming fire**, bringing **judgment** on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with **eternal destruction**, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power. When he comes on that day, he will receive glory from his holy people—praise from all who believe. (2 Thessalonians 1:7–10)

If that isn't sobering enough, here is the apostle John's description of Jesus when He returns to judge the world in righteousness:

Then I saw heaven opened, and a white horse was standing there. Its rider was named Faithful and True, for he judges fairly and wages a righteous war. His eyes were like flames of fire, and on his head were many crowns. A name was written on him that no one understood except himself. He wore a robe dipped in blood, and his title was the Word of God. The armies of heaven,

dressed in the finest of pure white linen, followed him on white horses. From his mouth came a sharp sword to strike down the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod. He will release the fierce wrath of God, the Almighty, like juice flowing from a winepress. On his robe at his thigh was written this title: King of all kings and Lord of all lords. (Revelation 19:11–16)

Paul and John were not the only politically incorrect preachers in the New Testament. Here are the words of Jesus Christ Himself:

“But when the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit upon his glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered in his presence, and he will separate the people as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will place the sheep at his right hand and the goats at his left.

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the creation of the world.’...

“Then the King will turn to those on the left and say, ‘Away with you, you cursed ones, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.’ ...And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous will go into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:31–34, 41,46)

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Clearly, Jesus is not a hippy-dippy peacenik. When the King returns, He is going to war. The first time Jesus came to earth, He was the

Lamb of God who surrendered His life for the sake of sinners. On His next visit, He will return as the Lion of Judah who will crush

sinners (Revelation 5:5). Everyone who has sinned (and that's everyone) will be tried, found guilty, sentenced to hell, and punished for eternity.

Anything less than the Jesus revealed in Scripture is a figment of the imagination. He doesn't exist.

Is it possible you are a false convert because you believed in an unbiblical Jesus? I am sorry you were never told the truth, because the true Jesus is beyond your wildest dreams.

THE CONCLUSION TO THE MATTER

Hopefully you have discovered why you are a rotten fish, but there is only one question that remains. What are you going to do with this newly discovered information? The Bible has your answer: today is the day of salvation (2 Corinthians 6:2).

So we are Christ's ambassadors; God is making his appeal through us. We speak

for Christ when we plead, “Come back to God!” For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ. (2 Corinthians 5:20,21)

You can become the righteousness of God through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ, but you must be born again (John 3:3). This is the greatest offer you will ever receive. Your God, whether you acknowledge Him as such or not, died for you. Why would you not want to be in a relationship with your Maker who loves you more than anyone or anything?

Call out to God now. Repent and place your wholehearted faith in God’s Son, Jesus Christ. When you do, many things will happen to you:

- You will be adopted by God.
- Your sins will be forgiven.
- Your conscience will be cleansed.

- You will no longer fear death.
- You will never backslide again.

This offer is not too good to be true. It is the truth. Repent and trust Jesus and you will never be separated from His love. Ever.

Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one—for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one—for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honor at God's right hand, pleading for us.

Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death?...

No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am con-

vinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:33–39)

Jesus Christ will not merely rescue you, He will save you forever (Hebrews 7:25). Be reconciled to God while you still have breath. You don't have to be lost and go to hell. You can be forgiven and go to heaven.

Do not delay. Do not let this opportunity slip away. If you hear His voice, do not harden your heart (Hebrews 3:15). Call out to God this moment and He will hear you, forgive you, justify you, and one day He will glorify you.

You are not too far gone. No matter who you are or what you have done, you are not beyond God's mercy. You cannot out-sin the Savior. If you come to Him with a repentant faith, He promises that He will not reject you. God will receive you as His beloved child (John 1:12).

Repent and trust Jesus today, and you will no longer be a rotten fish, you will be a good fish swimming for eternity in the sea of God's forgiveness.



NOTES

1. Ray Comfort, *God Has a Wonderful Plan for Your Life* (Bellflower, CA: Living Waters Publications, 2010), pp. 19, 77.
2. *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), vol. 1, p. 358.
3. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), vol. 4, p. 1002.
4. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), vol. 2, p. 248.
5. A. W. Tozer, *Born After Midnight* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1959, 1987), p. 21.
6. “Pastor Rick Warren Details New Book,” *Hannity & Colmes*, December 3, 2008, Fox News <tinyurl.com/yb6pf6ao>.
7. Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance* (1668).

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