

Have You Studied the ABCs?

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One of my concerns about the church is the use of the ABCs of Salvation as the primary witnessing tool to lost people, especially children.

Just a brief search on Google will reveal that this plan is almost universally accepted as the means by which a person may be born again. Cokesbury sells a kit entitled "[The ABCs of Salvation Kit.](#)" According to the [version from Lifeway](#), the ABCs of salvation represents "God's plan of salvation." The problem is that there is nothing remotely resembling this plan in the New Testament.



One online ministry wrote, "To begin a new life and be 'born again' follow the ABCs." Whatever happened to "follow what thus saith the Lord"? Not only does this ministry have an inadequate concept of the meaning of "born again," but so will everyone who listens to and follows their teaching.

ADMIT

In almost every version of the ABCs of salvation that I read, the letter A stood for Admit, though some used Accept. In addition, every version included a reference to [Romans 3:23 and 6:23](#). Yet why would anyone choose these two verses as proof texts for admitting? Neither of these verses make any mention of any requirement of admitting one is a sinner before salvation can become effective.

In fact, there is no Scripture that requires anyone to admit they are a sinner **before** they can be saved. There is nothing required for us to experience salvation other than the grace of God. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. Where does the church get the authority to add a requirement before a person can experience the grace of God?

When the Philippian jailer cried out to Paul and Silas asking what he must do to be saved, they never mentioned sin. They put the emphasis of salvation on Christ, which is where it belongs, not on us and our behavior. ([Acts 16:25-34](#))

The Lifeway article says in part, "Admit to God that you are a sinner...Admitting that you are a sinner and separated from God is the first step of repentance, which is turning from sin and self and turning toward God." The article then uses these same two verses from Romans as proof texts, even though repentance is not mentioned in the context of either of these verses.

The article is correct in that the recognition that one is a sinner is an essential part of the repentance process, but there is no biblical evidence that admitting one is a sinner is the first step in repentance.

Repentance does mean turning from self to God, but no person can make that turn until He first knows that there is a God to turn to and that there is a way in which that turn can be made. That does not happen according to the will of man, but according to the will of God.

John 1:12 *But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.*¹

John 6:44 *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*

John 6:65 *Jesus said, "This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father."*

There may be acceptable arguments that can prove me wrong on this, and I am very willing to consider those arguments. However, as I read these verses, they very clearly state that salvation begins with the will of God, not the will of man. Before a person can ever come to Christ as Savior, God the Father must first draw that person to Him. God must grant the individual the right to come to Jesus.

Many will argue that since God is love, He will never reject a person who seeks after Him, and this is very true. However, the Bible makes it clear that such a thing has never happened and never will happen.

First from the Old Testament:

Psalms 14:2 *The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. 3 They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.* (See also [Psalm 53:2-3](#))

In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul quotes from this psalm in his letter to the church at Rome:

Romans 3:10 *As it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."*

The Bible says three times that not even one person seeks after God of his own volition before having been confronted by God through revelation. These verses would seem to confirm the argument for me.

Furthermore, no person can get close enough to God the Father to even hear Him call unless God the Son chooses to reveal the Father to that person.

Matthew 11:27 *All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.* (See also [Luke 10:22](#))

Of course, this implies that there are people to whom Christ may choose not to reveal the Father. Some might ask in desperation, "Why would Christ do that!" And the answer is that the Bible gives us no answer as to why this might be. Furthermore, God owes us no answer. He is God

Psalms 115:3 *Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.*

Other versions of the ABCs of salvation add something like "Admit you have done wrong and made mistakes."

This seems to imply that the separation of humankind from God results from our behavior. An unconverted person might conclude, "I have done bad things, which makes me a bad person, therefore, I am separated from God." Yet the Bible teaches that our separation from God is the result of our sin nature, not our bad behavior. We do bad things because we have bad hearts.

From the moment of conception, every human born into the world is born in a lost condition and destined to suffer the penalty of death because of the sin of Adam. ([Rom. 5:12, 15, 18](#)) The only thing that has to happen for a person to be condemned to the wrath of God is to be born, and no individual has control over his or her own birth.

We did not do anything to be lost, we cannot do anything to be saved, and those who are saved by the grace of God cannot do anything to get unsaved. The reason is that our lostness is not determined by our behavior but by our nature. Christ did not come simply to rescue us from the consequences of our bad behavior, but from the wrath of God.

One thing that baffles me is why the majority of evangelistic training begins with sin. I have heard the saying, "You can't get them saved until you convince them they are lost." Yet I can't find any Scripture to support that idea.

John the Baptist declared, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matt. 3:2) This is the exact message that Jesus preached in the first of His sermons recorded by Matthew. ([Matt. 4:17](#)) This is also the message Jesus commissioned the disciples to preach on their first missionary journey. ([Matt. 10:7](#))

This message called for repentance as a direct response to the presence of the kingdom. Since there was no physical kingdom per se to present to the people, I submit that when Jesus referred to the kingdom's presence, He referred to himself as the King. "Here I stand, the very kingdom of God in the flesh." Therefore, the first step in repentance is not admitting one is a sinner, but having a personal encounter with the living Christ.

Jesus would later explain ([Luke 17:20-21](#)) that the kingdom of God would not come with outward demonstrations of pomp and circumstance, but that it existed in the hearts of men. In fact, He pointed out that the kingdom was already at work in the world. Since the Pharisees to whom

Jesus addressed this answer were not saved and thus not part of the kingdom, the phrase in verse 21, “the kingdom of God is within you,” (KJV) is better translated “the kingdom of God is among you,” (CEB) or “in your midst,” (ESV, NIV).

Matt. 12:28 supports this interpretation. In this verse, Jesus once again addressed the Pharisees concerning the kingdom saying, “But if it is by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.” The word “come” in this verse means “to come suddenly or unexpectedly.”² For that reason, the Amplified Version adds “before you expected it.”

The point is that in Matthew 4:17, Jesus called people to repent, because they were now standing face-to-face with the living kingdom of God. Thus repentance begins, not with admitting one is a sinner, but with a personal encounter with the living Christ.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul declared the substance of his primary message to lost people was not so much about sin as it was about the Savior.

1 Cor. 1:23 ...we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,

1 Cor. 2:2 For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

This raises a question: Why don't we begin our evangelistic presentations with Christ? He is the ultimate objective.

When the banking system trains people to spot counterfeit money, they do not begin with counterfeit money, but real money. When the person handling the money becomes fully familiar with the real thing, they have very little problem spotting that which is fake.

I do not know of any evangelistic training that teaches those who would witness to the lost how to start with Jesus instead of sin. Admittedly, if evangelicalism were to adopt a “Jesus-first” plan of evangelism, the world may very likely reject such a plan as readily as they reject the “sin-first” plan.

However, we may find that when we present the perfect Son of God before there is any mention of sin, trusting in the convicting power of the Holy Spirit, those who listen may see themselves and judge themselves “in the light of the righteousness and love of God.”³ Then there would be no need for us to convince the world of its sinfulness.

I know you have heard teachers and preachers speak of the personal nature of salvation by asking, “What is in the middle of sin?”

The answer they are looking for, of course, is the reference to the letter “I,” signifying that humankind has an “I” problem. We are more concerned with ourselves than with the things of God. “All have sinned...”

While I confess that there is truth in this, I also submit that to begin an evangelistic presentation with the sinfulness of the individual simply reinforces the misconception that humankind is the center of the Universe.

By our dependence on the “sin-first” approach to evangelism, our efforts to redeem people from the bondage of their own sin may have led them into a different kind of bondage of egocentric religion where they believe that they are the center of everything including the kingdom of God.

The “sin-first” approach makes man the focus of the plan of redemption when the focus should be the glory of God. That is the message of Romans 3:23: All are sinners and can never, by their own will or efforts, give glory to God and enjoy Him forever, which is the chief end of man according to the Westminster Shorter Catechism. (See [1 Cor. 10:31](#))

If we believe that the only reason God created man was so that God could have fellowship with us...

If we believe that the primary reason for the plan of redemption was to rescue us from hell and provide a blissful eternity free from pain and suffering and filled with beautiful music and streets of gold...

If we believe that the focus of salvation and the kingdom God is all about us...

...then it is no wonder that we as a church exhibit so little power and are so ineffective in our efforts to make a positive impact on the world around us. We have a distorted view of the gospel.

The answer to sin and death and hell is not repentance, belief, or confession, but Christ. The main message of the gospel is not forgiveness, but Christ. And the primary call of Christ is not to salvation, but to obedience and worship.

Another ministry that ascribes to the ABCs of salvation is Teen Missions. Below is an excerpt from an article on their website entitled the [ABCs of Salvation](#).

How can we be led to repentance? The first step toward repentance is true sorrow for what we've done wrong. "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death." – 2 Corinthians 7:10 NKJV. Worldly sorrow is more like the regret of a criminal who's just been caught whereas godly sorrow is the deep remorse or conviction that produces a change in direction. Have you ever felt convicted after doing something wrong? The Bible says that the Holy Spirit is the one that convicts us of our sin. (John 16:7-8)

Teen Missions made the same mistake that Lifeway and others made by identifying our sorrow for sin as the first step in repentance. I remind you that there cannot be sorrow for what one does not know. The knowledge of sin in a biblical sense comes from a personal encounter with the word, or the Word, of God. The first step in repentance is revelation – a decision made, not by man, but by God.

One thing that Teen Missions *did* get right is their use of the phrase “true sorrow,” a phrase they use in parallel to the godly sorrow of 2 Cor. 7:10, which they quote in their article.

In this verse, the Apostle Paul contrasts godly sorrow with worldly sorrow. The contrast seems directed towards point of origin. The sorrow that leads to death originates in the world – in the heart of man. In contrast, the sorrow that produces repentance leading to salvation and ultimately to life originates in eternity – in the heart of God.¹

The King James Version says, “godly sorrow *worketh* repentance.” The word *worketh* means “to work out, to bring about, to accomplish, to carry out a task until it is finished, to be the cause or author of.”⁴ Godly sorrow finds its origin in the heart of God and produces or brings about repentance that leads to salvation. This is in accordance with other scriptures that refer to the origin of repentance.

Rom. 2:4 *Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*

Acts 5:31 *God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.*

Acts 11:18 *When they heard these things they fell silent. And they glorified God, saying, “Then to the Gentiles also God has granted repentance that leads to life.”*

For godly sorrow to be found in the heart of man requires that it be planted there by God the Father himself. Alfred Barnes said that godly sorrow was “sorrow according to God...That is, such sorrow as has respect to God, or is according to his will, or as leads the soul to him.” Ellicott’s Commentary says that godly sorrow is “the sorrow which is after the will of God.”⁵

The Lexham English Bible translates godly sorrow as “grief according to [the will of] God.” The Amplified Version begins the verse, “For godly grief and the pain God is permitted to direct...” I have some reservations about the word “permitted,” but the general idea behind this and the previous commentaries is that they all agree that the source of godly sorrow is not found in man, but with God.

Another idea that Teen Missions gets right concerns the conviction of sin. The quote above adds, “godly sorrow is the deep remorse or conviction that produces a change in direction...” But what is the origin of this “deep remorse and conviction”? Fortunately, the article answers that question. “The Bible says that the Holy Spirit is the one that convicts us of our sin.”

Now follow the chronology of this explanation.

1. The Holy Spirit of God brings “deep remorse and conviction” within the heart of a lost person.
2. Godly sorrow follows conviction, leading to repentance.

3. Repentance leads to salvation.

Teen Missions seems to agree that repentance cannot take place before a person has a personal encounter with God, in this case, the person of the Holy Spirit. Thus sorrow – even godly sorrow – is not the first step in repentance. Revelation and an encounter with God is the first step.

There is another way of contrasting godly sorrow and earthly sorrow. Earthly sorrow may refer to the kind of sorrow we feel when we know that we have been discovered in wrong doing. We are sorry that everyone will come to know that we have done wrong and our reputation is at risk. We may be sorry because, now that the sin is out, serious and unavoidable consequences may follow.

On the other hand, according to *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, godly sorrow is “sorrow for sin as an offence against God.”⁶ In other words, we do not sorrow over the consequences of sin, but over the fact that we have committed an offense against a holy and righteous God.

Yet even using this as the interpretation of the contrast between godly and worldly sorrow, we reach the same conclusion: One cannot sorrow over what one does not know. Before one can sorrow over an offense against God, one must know that there is a God who is holy and righteous and who is capable of being offended.

Once again, the first step in repentance is not sorrow for our sin, but the revelation of God.

When we center our evangelistic efforts on sin, the focus is on man. When we center our evangelistic efforts on revelation, then the focus is on God.

That brings us back to the original question asked earlier: Why don't we begin our evangelistic presentation with Christ?

Instead of Admit, maybe the A in the ABCs of Salvation should be “Acknowledge one's relationship with Jesus.”

I had much rather start a spiritual conversation with a lost person with a discussion about the perfect Christ than to begin by trying to convince the lost person that he is an imperfect sinner.

BELIEVE

The second letter of the ABCs is B, and in every example that I have seen the B stands for believe.

Different versions of the ABCs expressed this in different ways.

- Believe Jesus died on the cross for your sins.
- Believe that Jesus is God's son.
- Believe Jesus is Lord and Savior.

- Believe God's promise.

All of these are fair and accurate expressions of what happens during the process of salvation. No one would argue that believing is not a vital part of the process. The problem comes in understanding what is meant by believe, how believing takes place, and who is able to believe.

The word believe is the verb form of the noun faith. Faith is something we possess, but believing calls for action. The Bible makes it very clear that where there are no actions, no good works, no obedience to Christ, there never was faith, and therefore, no salvation.

I won't include the whole text in this article, but take time to read [James 2:14-24](#), then come back to this article.

If you read the text in James, you should notice that faith without words is dead. In verse 24, James said, "A person is justified by works and not by faith alone." That seems a direct contraction to what Paul wrote in [Eph. 2:8-9](#), but there is no contradiction.

Both Paul and James agree that where there is true saving faith, there will be works. Where did they learn such a profound truth? They learned it directly from Jesus.

Over and over, Jesus taught that the person who truly loved Him is the person who obeys His commandments. We are fond of quoting Jesus' invitation in [Matt. 11:28](#), "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." But Jesus did not stop there. In the first words of the next verse, He continued, "Take my yoke upon you..." Christ calls us, not just to give us rest, but because He intends to make something out of us.

Matt. 4:19 *And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men."*

Here are some other texts where Jesus taught the same idea, relating works (obedience) to salvation. [Matt. 7:24-27](#); [Matt. 12:50](#); [Mark 8:34](#); [Luke 11:28](#); [John 13:17](#); [14:15, 23-24](#); [15:10, 14](#).

To simply believe that Jesus is Lord or is the Son of God is not sufficient to gain salvation. There are thousands or maybe millions of people in church (and not in church) who profess to be Christians bound for heaven simply on the basis that they believe.

Recently, a friend, who is a faithful and active church member, and I discussed the subject of salvation. He said to me, "All you have to do is believe to be saved."

I replied, "Believe what?"

He answered, "Believe in God, that He exists, that He created everything."

First, I explained to him that nowhere in the Bible does God promise salvation to those who simply believe in God. The only means of salvation is belief in Christ.

Next, I pointed out to him what James wrote in his letter...

James 2:19 *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder!*

Satan and his minions all know who God is. They all know who Jesus is. They know that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died on the cross for sin and that He resurrected. They know that He is Lord of Heaven and earth. Yet neither Satan nor any demon has any hope of salvation. Their belief is insufficient and ineffective for salvation, because it does not lead to good works, which proves that they do not truly acknowledge the lordship of Christ.

In almost every case, the primary Scripture referenced in the B-Section of the ABCs of salvation was [John 3:16](#). This is a subject I will not pursue here, but what has happened is that the church – at least the evangelical church – has built its doctrine of salvation primarily around one single verse taken out of context.

John 3:16 is not the gospel. It is only one verse of the gospel that cannot be correctly interpreted, understood, or applied apart from all of the rest of the gospel message.

The person who truly believes in Christ unto salvation will love Him to the point that they will search for ways to be obedient and will not be complacent to simply sit in a pew each Sunday and never lift a hand for the kingdom.

CONFESS

The final word in the ABCs of salvation is the C-word, Confess. Once again, I do not believe that anyone would deny that confession is an integral part of what happens during the salvation process. The question concerns what we are called to confess.

Many versions of the ABCs said something similar to this: “Confess your faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord to others.” They typically follow this statement with [Rom. 10:9-10](#).

Read these verses carefully, and you will notice that there is nothing in these verses that require a confession of faith for salvation. We have already seen that a statement of what a person believes is insufficient for salvation unless accompanied by a zeal to be obedient. There is no salvation in simply confessing that I have faith in (believe in) Jesus Christ.

Instead, these verses call for a person to confess Christ as Lord. Notice that we are not called to make Christ our Lord. We have nothing to do with making Christ Lord. Jesus is Lord of all things in heaven and earth, of principalities and powers, of Satan and all demons, whether we confess Him as such or not.

The verses instruct us to confess Christ as Lord – to express audibly to others that we are the servants of Christ. A lord is someone who has absolute authority over another and the power to direct his or her every step. Such a confession implies a yielding as a slave to his master. The confession of Christ as Lord includes a willingness as well as a desire to serve Him as He directs.

Many other versions of the ABCs include something like “Confess your sins to God.” This expression is then supported by quoting [1 John 1:9](#).

I recently interviewed with a group of deacons, and the subject of evangelism came up. I asked them to quote a verse from the Bible that related sin to the salvation process. The most senior deacon in the group quoted [1 John 1:9](#). He was not happy when I challenged him on this.

Here is another example of building a theology around one verse of Scripture taken out of context. The Apostle John is not writing to lost people in his epistles, but to the church. He is addressing people who are already saved. In fact, a study of the New Testament will reveal that there is no scriptural reference that makes a direct link between confession of sin and the process of salvation.

People who object to this statement typically refer immediately to Peter's sermon in Acts 2 following Pentecost. There, Peter said, "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins..." Yet Peter never used the word "confess." Our problem is that we have confused confession with repentance. Many believe that confession is the same thing as repentance, but they are not the same thing.

Confessing my sins is not much different from admitting that I am a sinner, and we have already spent a good deal of time discussing that subject.

A third version of the C-word of the ABCs said, "Choose to allow Jesus to save you." I am not even going to go there, but I will write more about repentance and the salvation process in a later post.

I will close this posting by saying that there is no easy ABC formula for the salvation process. The process is not so complicated, but there is too much to boil down to some simple formula.

In *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote, "So let us leave behind all these boys' philosophies – these over-simple answers. The problem is not simple and the answer is not going to be simple either."

¹ Unless otherwise stated, all Scriptural quotes are from the English Standard Version.

² Complete Word Study Bible, Olive Tree Bible Software

³ [MacLaren's Expositions](#).

⁴ Complete Word Study Bible, Olive Tree Bible Software.

⁵ https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_corinthians/7-10.htm

⁶ Ibid.