

**52 LIES
HEARD IN
CHURCH
EVERY
SUNDAY**

STEVE McVEY



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Answering the Obvious Question

When you see the title *52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday*, your first question may be, What makes me think I'm qualified to make the judgment on what constitutes a lie? My main qualification is that I taught all these lies myself—before I began to experience a radical paradigm shift as I began to learn more and more about the meaning of grace. After two decades of travel on six continents, meeting with groups of people of every doctrinal and denominational perspective, I have come to know with certainty that I'm not alone in having taught the things addressed here.

The lies I list in this book are things I taught as a pastor at a time when I was passionate about the truth. I believe that the overwhelming majority of pastors are sincere believers who love God, the Scriptures, and the church. I have often said of myself that my heart was in the right place. It was my head that was wrong. I think that many people are in that same condition.

Frankly, I've been so wrong about so much for so long that I don't have any rocks in my pocket to throw at anybody. On the other hand, my concern and love for the church of Jesus Christ causes me to write plainly. I call these “shake 'em up to wake 'em up” statements *lies* to

make the point that there has been a widespread—though admittedly unintentional—dilution of the truth. I was taught as a child that a half-truth is a whole lie. I think that applies here. When it comes to the gospel, diluted truth is polluted truth, and polluted truth is no gospel at all.

Some people will say that I'm making a big deal over nothing, arguing that my observations are nothing more than a matter of semantics. My response is that it's "only semantics" to those who don't see a difference between what I'm saying and the way it is commonly said. Words do mean something, and when ideas are put into words in such a way that they lead to or reinforce fallacious notions, it is appropriate to challenge the use of those words. Too much is at stake to risk faulty communication about the truth.

The ultimate goal? My desire is that all of us would embrace and express the pure grace of God. Pure grace points to Him, not us. It declares that whatever good may come to us is all because of His goodness, not because of anything we do or don't do. It gives Him all the credit, and us none. With that viewpoint in mind, I offer these 52 chapters in the hope that this book will cause your perception and appreciation of God's grace to grow bigger than they have ever been.



Salvation Is Giving Your Life to Christ

Beginning a book about lies taught in church presents the challenge of knowing where to start. I suppose the best place to start is at the beginning, with the most basic subject of Christianity—*salvation*. You might think it's impossible to mess this one up, but you would be wrong. I know because I messed it up for many years in my role as a senior pastor who taught the Bible every week. As I look back on how I presented the subject of salvation, I now realize I taught something seriously off base.

What was this blunder I made on so basic and fundamental an issue? I taught that the condition for salvation is “giving your life to Jesus Christ.” At first glance, you may wonder how there could be anything at all wrong with that idea. After all, it's repeated from thousands of pulpits. I hope that as you consider my objection to popular teaching on the subject, you might end up agreeing that there is something wrong with it—in fact, very wrong.

Salvation is not a matter of you giving your life to Christ. In fact, it has nothing whatsoever to do with what *you* have given God. Grace revolves around what *He* has given us, not what we give to Him! You receive eternal life not because you gave Christ *your* life. You receive

eternal life because He gave you *His Life!* The distinction might seem subtle, but it's important.

It is the nature of the religious perspective to focus on what we do instead of what our gracious God has done. Religionists like to think that when they behave in a certain way, God reacts to them.

Now, before I go further, let me give you a quick explanation of what I mean when I write about *religion* in this book. I have in mind the system of living by which human beings try to make themselves acceptable to God through their own actions. I realize that the apostle James used the word positively (see James 1:26-27), but as happens with many words over time, *religion* has come to mean something very different now than it did in James' time.

The English word most likely comes from the Latin *religare*, a word that actually meant "to bind fast" or "restrain." Originally, *religion* sometimes referred to people being bound together by shared beliefs. Sometimes it referred to the idea of being bound by a particular set of moral obligations. Search the definitions, and you'll see that they all have to do with the concept of being bound up.

Today, *religion* almost universally refers to a set of behavioral standards derived from a person's religious beliefs. Keep in mind this contemporary use of the word. It is this kind of religion that I'm criticizing in my observations.

I said above that religious people like to think that they can control God by their actions—that they can make God react to them. However, the truth is that the Sovereign God of the universe doesn't react to man to cause our salvation (or anything else, for that matter). He's not sitting there, on His throne in heaven, hoping with all His might that we will be so kind as to invite Him into our lives. That's the kind of religious foolishness I believed and taught for many years. I know that many others believe that way, but to hold that view isn't just a lie—it's an insult to Him. We didn't start the ball rolling regarding our salvation. He did, and to suggest otherwise diminishes Him and exalts us.

Salvation is God's work. Our response to Him is because He initiated

the whole thing. We love because He first loved us. Grace means we are merely *recipients* of what He did through Jesus Christ. He is the initiator, activator, and perpetuator of our salvation. From start to finish, it's Him. We contributed nothing toward our salvation. After all, we had nothing to contribute.

The Truth Is So Much Better!

I know you may think you're a Christian because you made a decision for Christ. I thought that too—for a long time. I decided for Jesus. I asked Him into my life. It sounds noble, doesn't it? The reality, however, is that nothing could be further from the truth! I'll say it again and hope you internalize this truth: *God is the initiator of salvation*. Read the following verses, and notice how the initiation was all on God's part:

God so loved the world, that *He gave* His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life (John 3:16).

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19).

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that *He loved us and sent His Son* to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).

Do you see the consistent theme? It's not about us. It's about Him and what He has done because of His love for us. The gospel has nothing to do with mankind reaching up to God to give Him anything. It's about the Godhead, moved by love, compassion, and mercy, reaching down to us and providing a salvation we could never have accomplished on our own. God took on flesh in the body of the Son, and empowered by the Spirit, the Son came to give us salvation. There's nothing for us to do except believe it and say, "Thank You very much!" Through faith, the objective reality of His finished work becomes our subjective reality. Consider what Paul wrote to the Ephesians:

By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Ephesians 2:8-9).

We don't deserve, earn, or work for salvation. We simply come to experience it through faith. According to what Paul said about the matter, we can't even take credit for the faith, for it too "is a gift of God" and not something that we work up by our own resolve.

Clarify Your Thinking

My intention is not to plant doubt in the minds of people who've been taught that they became Christians through giving their lives to God. To the contrary, I want you to see that before you ever wanted Him, He wanted you! I suspect that many—if not most—of us didn't clearly understand all that happened when we began to follow Christ. That's okay, though, because He has it all under control. He knows the truth, and we can catch up in our understanding, as we are able.

I wonder if *any* of us understood how wonderful salvation really is when we first began to follow Jesus. We can be grateful that salvation doesn't require perfect understanding on our part. God looks at the hearts of people. He is looking for sincere hearts, not perfect heads. Wrongheadedness on the subject may have caused us to think that becoming a Christian means we give Him our lives, but the reality is just the opposite. He didn't come into our lives, but we entered into His life. That's a much better arrangement in every way—don't you agree?

A misunderstanding in this area can keep you from living out your life as intended by your Father. We are so much better prepared for life when we begin our journey as followers of Jesus Christ by giving God all the glory for His work, living humbly by faith in Him. Then our daily lives become a natural extension of the way we began—a true grace walk!



Christians Are Just Sinners Saved by Grace

Most likely, we have all been told that we are just “sinners saved by grace.” We probably hear no error repeated in church more often. The people who have believed this lie have experienced serious consequences as a result. The lie has caused devastating damage, and it has influenced countless Christians through the centuries to fall terribly short of the kind of lifestyles the Bible tells us we can live.

How could this belief cause such drastic effects? Here’s why: *People will not act consistently in ways that are contrary to what they believe about themselves.* This is a foundational issue in life because it’s an identity issue. The bottom line is that—over the long haul—you’ll act like who you think you are. Your self-assessment will affect what you expect. Psychologists call it a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If you believe you are fundamentally a sinner, your default setting will be to act like a sinner. To behave in any other way would be to act inconsistently with the person you perceive yourself to be. After all, what do you expect a “sinner” to do? *Sin.* Sinning is simply the normal behavior for a sinner. That’s one of the reasons why many of us have so often fallen woefully short of the possibility of the victorious living the

Bible teaches we can enjoy, and it's why critics of our faith have so often scoffed at our claims of transformed lives. Our walk doesn't match our talk, but how can it when we see ourselves at the core as sinners?

Constantly trying to behave in a way that doesn't seem natural will wear anybody out. That's why we must know the truth about who we are. Truth is not determined by our feelings, the opinions of others, or our behavior. It's determined by who *God* says we are!

The Truth Is So Much Better!

To understand salvation properly, we have to first clearly understand mankind's need for salvation. Before we trusted Christ, our problem wasn't that we needed forgiveness. Instead, we needed to understand and believe in the resurrection power of Jesus Christ and God's ability to transform us by that power. *We were dead to the reality of His finished work and in need to believe in what He accomplished.*

Jesus came into a world of people who were surely in need of forgiveness, but that wasn't our only problem. In fact, it wasn't even our biggest problem. What do dead men need? There is only one answer—life! Paul described what took place:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, *made us alive together with Christ* (by grace you have been saved) (Ephesians 2:4-5).

In the process of making us alive in Christ, God didn't just revamp the old creation. He created something brand-new by causing our old life to die and giving us a new one in its place! "Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a *new creature*; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

The word *creature* has *create* as its root, which means "to bring something into existence out of nothing." In Christ, you are no longer a sinner. Paul told the Galatians that God put the sinner to death with Jesus Christ on the cross and created somebody brand-new:

I have been crucified with Christ; *and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me*; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me (Galatians 2:20).

What did Paul mean when he wrote, “It is no longer I who live”? He meant that God took old Sinner Saul, whose spiritual roots had come from the sinful family of Adam, and crucified him with Jesus Christ, putting that old man to death once and for all. Then through Christ’s resurrection, He raised him up, recreated him as Saint Paul, and put him into the righteous family of Jesus Christ.

The same thing happened to you. You were included in the work of Christ on the cross just as Paul was. You aren’t a sinner anymore. Nobody is suggesting that you never sin, but what you *do* doesn’t define who you *are*. I could act like a woman, but that kind of ridiculous behavior wouldn’t change the reality of who I am. I’m a man because I was born a man. It’s birth—not behavior—that gives us our identity. In Christ, you’ve been made a saint. You now have the righteousness of Jesus Christ as your own, and you have a new identity. You’re not a sinner anymore. The sinner is dead, having been crucified with Christ. Now you are a child of God!

Ephesians 2:10 says that you are God’s “workmanship.” The Greek word for “workmanship”—related to the later English term *poem*—often referred to a work of art of various kinds. The New Living Translation says that you are “a divine masterpiece,” created in Christ Jesus. The New Testament calls you a *saint* 63 times. *Saint* means “holy one,” the result of God’s work. Consider these two verses:

Paul...to the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been *sanctified* in Christ Jesus, *saints* by calling (1 Corinthians 1:1-2).

By this will we have been *sanctified* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Hebrews 10:10).

Calling us “sanctified” or “saints” is not a reference to behavior, but to identity. Make no mistake about it: You are a saint in Jesus Christ. If you want to walk in freedom, you must believe the Bible on this one. You are who you are—whether you believe it or not. But believing this truth will set you free to live the life you were created to enjoy.

You may wonder, then, why the apostle Paul said once that he was the chief of sinners. To answer that point, it’s important to realize this: If Paul were claiming to be a sinner in a “saved” state, he would be contradicting what he said about his identity in Christ in many other verses. So he couldn’t mean that.

What is the answer? Think of it this way: Throughout his boxing career, Muhammad Ali has claimed to be “the champion of the world!” Ironically, he maintains that claim to this day, even though he hasn’t boxed for years. But nobody calls him a liar. After all, they know he means that nobody has ever surpassed his record, which he still holds. He *is* the boxing champion of the world.

That’s what Paul meant when he said he was the chief of sinners. He wasn’t saying that he still out-sinned everybody. Because he was in Christ, Paul did not have the identity of a sinner, and he didn’t see himself that way. He simply meant that before he knew Christ, nobody had topped his sinning record. It was something he never forgot: As a Pharisee, he had persecuted Christians by putting them in prison even to death. After his experience on the road to Damascus, he never got over his sense of the amazing grace that saved him. Neither should we.

Clarify Your Thinking

The idea that you are just a sinner saved by grace is a lie. It falls far short of the truth of the New Testament, which repeatedly says that we are saints. It also says that we have been *sanctified* (made saints) by the finished work of Jesus Christ. We really need to get this one right. If we don’t, we’ll never live the triumphant life that is our birthright.

Over the long haul, our behavior tells a lot about what we believe about ourselves. When we recognize who we really are, our lifestyle will

glorify Him more and more. We aren't sinners! By Christ's work, we have been transformed into new creatures called saints.

Once we understand that, we become motivated to live saintly lives—not to be confused with religious lifestyles. You're not just a sinner saved by grace. Shake off that lie and affirm the truth about your identity in Christ.