

Why We Don't Use The Altar Call

By Laurence A. Justice

An altar call is an appeal for an immediate public response to a sermon just preached. It is popularly called the invitation and as used in this context is an appeal for a public act of commitment and can involve hand raising, going to a counseling area or signing a commitment card. Most often it involves walking down the aisle to the front of a church auditorium. The altar call is tacked on to the end of a sermon and the invitation usually is to "come forward and accept Christ as your Savior." Various emotional techniques such as telling sad, tear jerking stories and playing mood-creating music in the background are employed to encourage response to the altar call.

Like many of you I grew up in churches which used the invitation system and in the early years of my ministry I used it myself before finally seeing its implications and its inconsistency with God's grace. In those years we sang verse after verse of invitation hymns like "Just As I Am" and we sometimes sang on for an hour or more trying to get people to come forward. I once had an evangelist in a church where I pastored and his entire program consisted of night after night telling sob story after sob story climaxing with the saddest one of all and then giving an invitation to come to the front and accept Christ.

So firmly entrenched has the altar call become in our modern churches that I have had people ask me on several occasions, How can people be saved if you don't give an invitation? Preachers who do not give altar calls are often criticized as not being evangelistic.

We do not have an altar call in the services of our church! We do not extend an invitation at the close of our services for people to make some kind of physical demonstration that they are trusting Christ. What I shall do in this sermon is explain just why we don't! First of all we do not do it

Because God's Word Does Not Teach the Altar Call

It is vitally important in this practice as in all others that we look closely at the scriptures to find what they teach about this practice. As we do we find that the invitation is never commanded in God's word. Search the scriptures as you will, there is no command in any scripture for us to use this method. Not only this, there is no precedent in scripture for using the altar call. The Lord Jesus never in his earthly ministry gave an invitation. The apostles of our Lord never in all their ministries used the altar call.

In Acts 2:36-37 we are told that at Pentecost 3,000 people were saved but no altar call was used. The saving of those 3,000 was the work of the Holy Spirit of God and not of clever emotional appeals to come to the front of the meeting place. Whatever reasons one may give for using the altar call, it is a fact that

it cannot be supported from the word of God.

As we have already pointed out, some people believe and teach that if one does not give an invitation in connection with his sermon he is not evangelistic. But we cannot be more evangelistic than the New Testament and the altar call or invitation system is not to be found in the pages of the New Testament. Actually having an altar call is a departure from scriptural requirements and practice.

In the New Testament and in Christian history up until the year 1820 AD sinners were invited to Christ, not to decide at the end of a sermon whether to perform some physical action. You will search Christian history in vain for an altar call or invitation before about 1820. George Whitefield, the greatest evangelist perhaps of all time never used the altar call. Charles Spurgeon under whose preaching more people were saved than perhaps any other pastor over the centuries never gave an invitation.

Well, where did the altar call come from if God's word doesn't teach it? The answer is that the altar call is a human invention that is less than 200 years old.

It is generally recognized that the altar call was invented by a Presbyterian evangelist named Charles G. Finney who lived from 1792-1875. Finney referred to the altar call as coming to the anxious seat or to the inquiry room and began using it in his evangelistic services in about 1820. Did the churches do it all wrong in the matter of evangelism until Finney came along in 1820 with his new system? How were people saved during the 1800 years of Christian history before the advent of Charles G. Finney? Evangelist D.L. Moody took Finney's altar call and refined it and in turn it was passed on to its modern champion, Billy Graham.

In a paper he wrote called "The Christian," Billy Graham defends his use of the invitation system by resorting, not to the scriptures but to psychology when he says concerning the invitation, "Many psychologists would say it is psychologically sound." Biblical practices do not need the endorsement of psychology! There is absolutely no biblical authority for this practice! Yet today virtually all evangelists and pastors and churches use the altar call or invitation system.

Second, our church does not use the altar call or invitation system

Because the Altar Call Contradicts the Great Doctrines of God's Grace

1. It contradicts the Bible doctrine of the depravity or the inability of man.

God's word teaches that because of the fall of Adam into sin man is by nature spiritually dead. As Paul states it in Ephesians 2:1 man is "dead in trespasses

and sins." A man who is spiritually dead can do nothing spiritual. He can't even will to repent of sin and trust in Christ. He is dead!

God's word teaches that because of their depravity men are helpless to save or help save themselves. This means that there is absolutely nothing a sinner can do to save himself or prepare himself for salvation. Spiritually dead sinners can never come to Christ until God calls them with a special, powerful, effectual call. This is what the Lord Jesus is talking about in John 6:44 when He says, "No man **can** come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him..." or literally, No man **is able** or has the power to come to me except the Father draw him."

Charles Finney, the inventor of the altar call, was a Pelagian in theology. Pelagianism is a damnable heresy which teaches that the fall of man in sin did not actually make him dead in sin. It is true man was damaged by the fall but he was not ruined by it this heresy says. Finney's idea was that man is just sick in sin but he still has within him the ability to obey God and be pleasing to Him.

In his book "Systematic Theology" Finney says that man can do anything God requires of him and that all he needs to do so is to be induced to do so. Thus according to Finney man has a free will and has within him the ability to repent and to believe. This thinking of course squarely contradicts the Bible doctrine of man's inability.

2. Secondly the altar call contradicts the biblical order of salvation.

The whole question of the altar call or invitation can be reduced to the order of salvation. The word of God teaches that in the order of salvation, regeneration precedes conversion. In John 3:3 for example the Lord Jesus says that only those who are born again can see or comprehend or understand or appreciate the kingdom of God or spiritual things. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man **be born again, he cannot see** the kingdom of God." God's word makes clear that the Holy Spirit in the new birth **enables** a sinner to trust in Christ.

Arminians on the other hand say that one must believe or be converted **in order to be regenerated**. In his great booklet "The Invitation System" Iain Murray quotes Billy Graham as saying that we are "made alive by trust in Christ." This of course is just the opposite of what God's word teaches about the order of salvation being regeneration and then faith and conversion.

In the same booklet Murray quotes Graham concerning Graham's own conversion. "They were singing the last verse of the song when I went forward. That first step was the hardest I ever took in my life. But when I took it, God did the rest" and "the rest" in Graham's thinking is the new birth! In this way of thinking poor God can't do anything for a sinner until the sinner takes the first step!

If, as God's word clearly teaches, regeneration must come **before** conversion

in the order of salvation then the invitation system must be given up as contradictory to God's word!

3. Thirdly, the altar call contradicts the gospel way of salvation by coming to Christ.

The gospel **is not**, do something physical and if you will, you will be saved! The gospel is, **Believe** on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved!" The duty of sinners is not to come to the front of the building but to believe in Christ! To be saved sinners must come to Christ which means believe in Christ.

The Lord Jesus Himself says in Matthew 11:28, "**Come unto me**, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Think about it! No one can now come to Christ with his feet because Christ is no longer physically present on this earth. Christ is not down here at the front of this church auditorium anymore than he is back there in the pew or outside in the parking lot or out on your back porch. As someone else has said, the fountain of life is not in front of the pulpit in some church building. The fountain of life is Christ Himself!

We don't have to move a muscle to totally commit ourselves to the safe keeping of Christ the Savior for salvation. The altar call implies at least and it is often specifically stated that by coming to the front of a church building or some other auditorium at some preacher's invitation, the one who comes becomes a Christian.

To those who practice the altar call salvation is equated with getting people to occupy a certain piece of geography at the front of a building. In doing this they effectively limit the sphere of God's saving activity to a few square feet at the front of some building. My friend John Hunter of Anniston, Alabama calls this **locational salvation** because it makes the front of the church auditorium the location where people must go to be saved.

At Billy Graham's first London Crusade he said one night in giving the invitation, "Don't let distance keep you from Christ. It's a long way but Christ went all the way to the cross because he loved you. Certainly you can come these few steps and give your life to Him." God's word however does not teach that one is saved by changing his location but by believing in his heart!

4. Fourthly, the altar call contradicts the Bible doctrine of salvation by grace without works.

Biblical salvation is not of works. It is not by doing something, anything at all. Instead it is by grace through faith according to Ephesians 2:8-9. "For **by grace** are ye saved **through faith**; and that not of yourselves: it is **the gift of God: Not of works**, lest any man should boast." Faith itself is the gift of God and not the accomplishment or contribution of man to salvation. Colossians 2:12 calls faith "the operation of God" and Philipians 1:29 calls it a gift given.

“For unto you it is **given...to believe** on him...”

Under the invitation system the idea constantly presented by the preacher is that the step forward is of great spiritual importance. Faith is presented as something a man does in order to be saved. Believing in Christ is identified with coming to the front of the church building in response to the preacher's appeal. But making an outward response the same thing as receiving Christ adds a condition of salvation that Christ Jesus never appointed. Works is the necessary **evidence of** salvation, **not** the **prior condition** of it. The altar call satisfies man's natural desire to do something to save or help save himself.

5. Fifth, it contradicts the Bible doctrine of Sola Scriptura.

Sola Scriptura means the scriptures only and it recognizes that God's written word gives us **everything** we need for all matters of faith and practice. There is nothing God wants us to know or to do that is not found in His written word. According to II Timothy 3:16-17 God's word is sufficient or completely adequate for all our spiritual needs. The altar call is a way of promoting religious experience by other means than those clearly appointed in God's word so it is a denial of Sola Scriptura and of the sufficiency of God's word.

The third reason our church does not use the altar call is

Because It Does Great Damage to the Cause of Christ

What have been the results of 200 years of using this unbiblical method called the altar call or the invitation? I submit to you that the results of the use of the altar call have been disastrous! There are at least three things that the invitation system does that cause great damage to the cause of Christ:

1. It produces great numbers of obviously false professions of Christ.

I say **obviously false** because so many converts of this system refuse to do the very first thing that Christ the Lord demands of his people and that is submit to scriptural baptism. There is a vast difference in the number claiming to be saved and the number actually baptized in this type of evangelism.

The other day I came across some statistics put out by Jim Elliff, a professor at Southern Baptists' Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary here in Kansas City. By their own statistics Elliff says that among Southern Baptists out of every 100 professions of faith only 30 are later baptized and out of that 30 only 10 will show up at church on a given Sunday morning and of that 30 only 4 will show up on a given Sunday evening.

One well known altar call evangelist held a revival meeting in Oklahoma City in which 47 people professed to have been saved. A few weeks after that meeting I called the pastor of that church and asked him how many of those

47 he had baptized and he said, Three!

2. A second thing the altar call does which causes great damage to Christ's cause is it fatally deceives many who respond to it.

Walking the aisle and giving the pastor one's hand often gives people doing so a false hope of salvation. These people believe that they are spiritually right with God simply because they have made the required step down the aisle though they have never truly come to Christ in faith trusting in Him as Lord and Savior. On any number of occasions I have asked people, when were you saved? only to have them respond, I went forward when I was 18 or when I was a child or at some other time.

Large numbers of those who have come into the churches with such counterfeit conversions have stayed there as formal, dead and deceived professors. I have known some such persons who have been awakened after years of such deception to realize that in their trips to the altar they did not come **to Christ**! How many people are in hell today because of this deception?

3. Thirdly, the altar call causes much damage to the cause of Christ because it produces skepticism and bitterness in many who respond to it.

Many people who have sincerely and honestly gone through the invitation system have recognized that nothing actually happened to them. They tried it and it didn't work and they know it is not real. They may also think that others who have tried it know that it doesn't work and that they just don't have the honesty to admit it to themselves. If their own experience is not real it is just natural for them to conclude that the experiences of others are false also.

Many converts of the invitation system feel that they have been tricked by the evangelist and their Christian friends into making such a move down the aisle. Ultimately this has produced skepticism and hostility toward the gospel and because of this realization many have fallen away from Christianity altogether.

In another city where I was pastor our church decided to knock on every door in our neighborhood and ask people if they were Christians. I was amazed to find that virtually all people responded that they were or used to be Christians but either were no longer so or did not now go to church. They all claimed to have been saved in some crusade or revival service.

Such results of the altar call can be seen in the two Southern Baptist churches I pastored in Oklahoma City. One had over 600 members, 300 of whom we could not find. The other had over 900 members, 750 of whom we could not find.

In his day Charles Spurgeon commented on the damage done to the cause of Christ by the use of the altar call. Iain Murray in his book "The Forgotten Spurgeon" quotes Spurgeon as saying, "I should like to go to the inquiry room. I dare say you would, but we are not willing to pander to popular superstition. We fear that in those rooms men are warmed into a fictitious

confidence. Very few of the supposed converts of inquiry rooms turn out well. Go to your God at once, even where you are now. Cast yourself on Christ, at once, ere you stir an inch!"

Conclusion

Why do the churches keep on using this unscriptural practice of giving an altar call?

1. For one reason they fail to measure all things by God's word. All of us have a tendency to accept things as being right without comparing them with God's word to find out if they really are.
2. Another reason is the desire on the parts of many pastors and churches to report numbers because they see numbers as equal to success in the church. Counting large numbers of converts is irresistible to these pragmatists. Some of them don't care if the invitation cannot be found in God's word. It works and they say that is what is important in God's work.
3. Thirdly the use of the altar call in a church indicates a failure to trust God to do His work in this world. These people do not really believe that God can do His saving work in this world without the wisdom and methods of man to help.

But how are people to be saved if we do not "give an invitation" at the close of the sermon? **Christ's** invitation is found in Matthew 11:28 where he says to sinners, **not**, Come to the front of the church but "**Come unto me** all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest."

If we are to be true to God's word we must direct sinners to Christ and not to the aisles in the church building. The messages of God's preachers are filled with invitations for all men everywhere to come to Christ and be saved. We must be careful not to give the impression that a sinner's eternal destiny hangs on the movement of his feet. Let us determine to stay with biblical methods of evangelism and plant, water and trust God for the increase in seeking the salvation of souls.

Recommended Reading:

Adams, James E. *Decisional Regeneration*
Chantry, Walter *Today's Gospel, Authentic Or Synthetic?*
Dabney, Robert L. *An Exposition Of I Corinthians 3:10-15*
Murray, Iain *The Invitation System*

SOURCE: <http://www.victorybaptist.us/show.wc?msgaltarcall>

