

A Close Look at Invitations and Altar Calls

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(Statements are adaptations, and in some cases exact quotations, from material by Jim Ehrhard, Jim Elliff, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, Iain Murray and others.)

INTRODUCTION

Scripture is clear: we are under divine command to call “all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

Inviting people to embrace the gospel and to follow Christ is at the heart of biblical ministry. It’s a *non-negotiable*.

We are to:

- Seek to bring the unregenerate to Christ with passion.
- Give a verbal call to Christ in a most serious way...we “compel” them.
- Explain the basis of assurance...but leave the actual assuring to the Spirit.

Erroll Hulse: *The preacher is free to exhort and command, to plead and implore, to reason and invite. He is an ambassador who speaks on behalf of the great King and whose purpose is to bring about reconciliation.* [The Great Invitation (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1986), 99]

DISTINCTION

Extending **God’s invitation** to all, however, is NOT necessarily synonymous with **man’s invitation system**.

I.e. *The altar call, public profession, public pledge, going down the aisle, going forward, etc.*

An altar call may include one or more of the following *techniques*:

- Music is played softly in the background while the preacher prays and talks to the congregation.
- Those who feel the pangs of conscience and know they need to respond to God’s work in their heart are asked to slip up their hands. All are reminded to keep their “heads bowed and eyes closed...no one looking around.”
- Those who slipped up their hands are possibly then asked to “look up” at the preacher so that he can talk directly just to them.

- If you have raised your hand and/or looked up, you are then asked to leave your seat and make your way down the aisle where the preacher or another counselor can greet you and talk with you further....“I don’t want to embarrass you; I just want to pray with you.”
- Designated counselors may at this time also leave their seats and make their way down the aisle to kneel or stand at the front (to *prime the pump?*).
- If you’ve come down the aisle, you are asked to go to a room off to the side where counselors are there to continue praying and talking with you.
- At any point in this approach, an invitation hymn may be sung (such as *Just As I Am, I Surrender All, Have Thine Own Way*, etc.). During this hymn you are invited to come to the front to kneel and pray, to rededicate your life, to receive Christ, to talk with the pastor or another counselor, or to join the church. (The altar call has many uses.)
- If several verses of the hymn have been sung, the minister may ask for the instruments to continue playing quietly. This gives those kneeling at the altar some time to finish, or those still resisting the Holy Spirit an opportunity to respond “before it’s too late.”
- Perhaps one final verse of the hymn is sung.
- If someone has “given their life to Christ” or has joined the church, they may be presented to the congregation at the close of the altar call.

There are many variations to this, some extreme, some very minimal. But generally the altar call is a time at the close of the sermon where, during some form of music, listeners are invited to come to the front in response to the message.

HISTORY

- While there is debate over the exact origins of this practice, most agree that it came into prominence in the 1830’s with Charles Finney (1792-1875), who popularized it through the *mourner’s bench*.

Prior to him it was used only here or there...occasionally. For example, another early eighteenth-century Calvinist preacher, Eleazar Wheelock, called upon the distressed to gather in the seats “just below the pulpit” that he might “more conveniently converse with them, counsel, direct, exhort them,” etc.

But Finney put it on the map.

- Billy Sunday, D.L. Moody, and Billy Graham are other evangelists who contributed to the widespread acceptance and use of the altar call.

Certainly, Graham is the one who is most related to the contemporary form of the altar call in use in many churches today.

DEFENSE

There are three primary arguments given in support of the altar call:

1. Scriptural Argument

Christ always called people publicly. This is confirmed by texts such as, “Follow Me...,” or “Whosoever shall confess me before men...”

2. Psychological Argument

Responding publicly to a gospel appeal “settles it and seals it.” The implied meaning seems to be that a step made publicly is more likely to be decisive and irrevocable. There is something about coming forward and standing in front of the congregation that helps the individual be confident that he’s made a decision that God honors.

3. Practical Argument

The altar call provides an easy, organized way to present new converts to the congregation, and to allow non-members to join. If there is no altar call, the argument goes, how can people publicly identify with Christ and with a local body?

4. Demonstration Argument

To both the saved and unsaved in the congregation, people responding during an altar call is a visual demonstration and proof of the power of the Word of God. This can be convicting to those who are not saved, and encouraging to those who are.

CONCERNS

In answer to the reasons given in support of using an altar call, and to the related issues mentioned above, the following concerns are offered:

1. There is no clear biblical precedent or command related to the modern public invitation or altar call.

As noted previously, some say, “Christ always called people publicly.” It is certainly true that Christ Himself did say such things as ‘Follow Me,’ or ‘Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father which is in heaven.’

But to conclude that Jesus gave altar calls on the basis of those passages is to fail to be honest with the text. No doubt Jesus called men to Himself. But there is no example where He (or the apostles) appealed for people to “come forward” as either a testimony to their decision or as an act of accepting Him.

Jesus did NOT call people to make a “one time” decision about Him, but to follow Him all their lives. He taught that one mark of true faith is a life that continually confesses Him.

2. Many today equate “coming to faith” with “coming down the aisle.”

Those who employ it know this is a problem, and thus go to great pains to make clear that “going down the aisle” does not save anyone.

Examination of the invitation used by Billy Graham shows just how confusing the system is:

I'm going to ask you to come forward. Up there—down there—I want you to come. You come right now—quickly. If you are here with friends or relatives, they will wait for you. 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.

Yet, Graham says that the coming forward is a “testimony of an inward experience that you have had with Christ.” So when is the person converted? Why are they coming?

So it is unclear just *what* is being required of those who come forward.

If the walk forward is an outward declaration of an inner-saving decision already made by the hearer in the seat, is this just an “act of witness”? Why then are people told to “come forward to *receive* Christ”? How is *receiving Christ* related to coming forward? Is there any relation? Most important, are these exhortations truly biblical expressions?

At the altar, the confusion continues: *You have come tonight to Jesus Christ, you have come to receive Him into your heart.* But which is it? Have they already come to Jesus, or are they coming now to receive Him?

The most popular description of the invitation as an *act of commitment to Christ* leaves these questions quite unresolved.

To a greater or lesser extent the sermon has already shown the need of a change in those who do not know Christ. The invitation is represented as providing the

opportunity for such a change to take place. The hearer is told that his need is to “let Christ come into his heart.”

All these man-made directives (i.e., *receive Christ, commit your life to Christ, come to Christ, let Christ into your heart*, etc.) end up being shallow substitutes for biblical directives.

Comments on the *sinner’s prayer*:

The sinner’s prayer came to be attached to the altar call...but this too is not found in Scripture.

A typical sinner’s prayer includes:

- a. An acknowledgement of sin...but this is not the same thing as repentance.
- b. An expression of belief in the act of Christ’s death...which is not necessarily the same as trust in His person and work.
- c. “Inviting Christ into your life”...(John 1:12 and Rev. 3:30 are used out of context in support).

The question is begged: Is this the same as God’s command to repent and believe?

Many consider the *prayer* to be a pivotal and necessary instrument for becoming a true Christian.

REMEMBER: It is not the accuracy, or even the efficacy of a prayer, that saves. It is Christ alone who saves. Yet many who desire to evangelize the lost live in fear that they didn’t properly “close the deal” or help an individual say “the right thing.” And the one desiring to embrace Christ lives in fear of not being truly saved because they didn’t say the words the right way.

In reality, if it’s in His will to do so, God quickens an individual (regeneration) and gives them the ability to repent and believe (saving faith) totally independent of that person’s ability to “get the words right” (or for that matter, to say any words out loud or privately at all).

3. There is a danger of giving assurance to those who are unconverted.

After someone has prayed the sinner’s prayer, it’s typical to give him or her immediate assurance that they are now part of God’s family.

Such a system leads some to believe that their decision “settles things with God” for all eternity. It actually encourages people to make a response that “settles things” and, through subsequent counseling, to never doubt that decision.

This is dangerous because it deceives many into resting their faith on a “profession” rather than on Christ, who alone is “able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him” (Heb. 7:25). Scripture makes a sober statement about those who think they are saved when they are not: “The Lord will say to many, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me’” (Matt. 7:22-23).

The invitation system leads many to trust their eternal destination to confidence in a “confession” even though they may openly live in rebellion to Him throughout their lives. In other words, their assurance is coming from an act on their part, rather than a genuine trust in the promises of God along with recognizing the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification in their life. They can point to a date when they walked down an aisle, but they would be hard-pressed to point out proof of regeneration.

As stated, the biblical perspective is that the Holy Spirit is the one who gives assurance, not the evangelist or any other person. We are to help people understand the *basis* of assurance, but leave the actual assuring to the Spirit.

It is man’s tendency to take the place of the Spirit in assuring the one praying the sinner’s prayer. The result is that many who are not truly regenerate are deceived into thinking they are.

(See p. 2191 of *The MacArthur Study Bible* where the proofs of authentic Christianity are outlined.)

Two centuries ago, evangelist George Whitefield said: *There are so many stony ground hearers, who receive the Word with joy, that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits. I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.*

Spurgeon warned: *Sometimes we are inclined to think that a very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of peace before they have known their misery; restoring the prodigal to the Father’s house, and never making him say, “Father, I have sinned.”*

It very often happens that the converts that are born in excitement die when the excitement is over.

It is vital that we share the “good news,” but it behooves us equally to be certain that we not give assurance to those who show no evidence of conversion.

4. A large number of people who are “converted” during altar calls fall away.

The sad fact is extremely high numbers of these “converts” never show any competent sign of being converted.

Leighton Ford argues: *The inner decision for Christ is like driving a nail through a board. The open declaration of it is like clinching the nail on the other side, so that it cannot easily be pulled out.*

In other words, the giving of an invitation *ought* to result in an even higher percentage of “converts” living out their profession. Yet the opposite seems to be true.

Statistics compiled on crusades using the invitation system show that only a small percentage of “professors” show any signs of conversion even a few weeks after the decision.

Ernest Reisinger notes: *This unbiblical system has produced the greatest record of statistics ever compiled by church or business.*

Reacting to “Finneyism,” R.L. Dabney commented: *We have come to coolly accept the fact that 45 out of 50, or even a higher ratio, will eventually apostatize.*

Such was not the common experience before the use of the invitation system. Those who were converted were so thoroughly changed that there was no need of a system to encourage decisions or record them before there was fruit. False conversions were the exception rather than the rule in the ministry of Finney’s contemporary, Asahel Nettleton.

Nettleton (d. 1844) was an effective evangelist who believed the invitation system prematurely reaped what would turn out to be false converts.

Spurgeon thought similarly.

Toward the end of his life, Charles Finney, after reflecting on the many who claimed conversion but had since fallen away, had mixed thoughts about the genuineness of his work. In fact, his development of a doctrine of perfectionism (“entire sanctification”) came out of his attempt to answer the questions as to why so many of his “converts” lived such godless lives. The use of an invitation system eventually leads to a two-tiered approach to the Christian life to explain the difference between those few who have been changed by their “decision” and the multitudes who have not. [See “Did You Know?” Christian History Vol. 8 (1988)]

This is not to say that no one can be saved during an altar call...but many pastors/evangelists have had to “eat their words” many times.

If you use an altar call, you can have both true conversions and false professions (yet both are presented to the church as being genuine). If you do not use an altar call, but leave it to God to use the teaching of the Word to save whom He chooses in His own time, you are more prone to look for real fruit of repentance before treating an individual as a genuine convert.

5. The altar call can be effective in getting people to respond even if a clear, biblical presentation of the gospel and accurate biblical preaching are absent.

The altar call method can be tacked on to just about any type of service, no matter whether the gospel was presented or not. If the music and lighting is right, if the speaker is persuasive, then people can be emotionally manipulated to respond during an altar call.

The extension of an appeal for public decision may result in a purely psychological response that provides a catharsis for the emotional pressure of the sermon or event. And persons who respond to such an appeal falsely assume that their action has made them right with God.

6. Scripture already explains how a convert is to make his profession public.

Many pastors are quick to publicly introduce the one who has prayed and who has just been told that he or she is a Christian...sometimes within minutes of the last verse of the invitation hymn. This may have been someone who wasn't even known to the pastor/evangelist until that moment.

But Scripture gives us God's way of publicly making a confession of belief in Christ. First of all, there is baptism. Through this ordinance a convert to Christ proclaims to the world his new life in Christ. Many churches also require a verbal testimony at the time of baptism, which allows the individual to give more detail of their understanding of the gospel and the events of their conversion.

Comment on *baptism*:

Many churches are quick to baptize their new "converts." This is based merely upon an individual's profession. But baptism is for true believers. God knows the heart; we, on the other hand, can only come to a reasonable conclusion about the validity of someone's profession by observing the fruit of their life (Matt. 7:16-23; 13:8). Many "professors" do not really love the brethren nor the atmosphere of godliness. Therefore they fall away because they were not really saved.

Second, the tenor of Scripture is that a holy life that is lived to the glory of God is a profound public testimony to the life-changing power of Christ.

Churches who do not use an altar call have no difficulty presenting new members to the congregation. A presentation at the conclusion of a worship service of new members who have completed membership interviews and/or membership classes is a common approach taken by churches who believe that only true believers should be counted as part of the fellowship. In other words, church membership is taken seriously.

7. For some, the use of an altar call uncovers a lack of trust in the sovereignty of God.

“If we don’t provide an opportunity to respond to the gospel, someone might leave and never have another opportunity to be saved. They could die in an accident this week and their eternal judgement in hell would be our fault. Their blood would be on our hands.”

This is a theological problem...a total misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God in salvation. Scripture makes it clear that salvation is of the Lord. And that whom the Lord has foreknown and predestined, He does indeed call and justify. And whom He justifies He will indeed someday glorify. Romans 8:28-30 present this *chain* as completed from God’s perspective.

Our lack of obedience to the Lord when we are not faithful in calling people to repentance IS sin on our part. But the eternal destiny of souls is totally in God’s hands, not ours. It is His job to convert sinners; it is ours simply to be faithful.

So we are to trust God in all matters, including the evangelization of the lost.

ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

Lloyd-Jones, in chapter 14 of *Preaching & Preachers*, articulates his opposition to the invitation system:

1. It is wrong to put direct pressure on the will. The will should always be approached primarily through the mind, the intellect, and then through the affections. The action of the will should be determined by those influences.
2. In the end it may produce a condition in which what has determined the response of the man who ‘comes forward’ is not so much the truth itself as, perhaps, the personality of the evangelist, or some vague general fear, or some other kind of influence.

3. The preaching of the Word and the call for decision should not be separated in our thinking.
4. This method surely carries in it the implication that sinners have an inherent power of decision and of self-conversion.
5. There is an implication here that the evangelist somehow is in a position to manipulate the Holy Spirit and His work. Some organizers today even predict the results.
6. This method tends to produce a superficial conviction of sin, if any at all. People often respond because they have the impression that by doing so they will receive certain benefits.
7. You are encouraging people to think that their act of going forward somehow saves them.
8. It raises the whole question of the doctrine of regeneration. This is the most serious thing of all. This work is the work of the Holy Spirit, and His work alone, no one else can do it. And as it is His work it is always a thorough work; and it is always a work that will show itself.
9. No sinner ever really decides for Christ.

QUOTES

- Jim Elliff, “Closing with Christ” (*Viewpoint*, January—March 1999, p. 13):

It is interesting to note that the Bible account focuses attention on the object of our faith, Jesus Christ, and His life and work, when presenting the gospel to those who do not believe. There is virtually no explanation of the nature of repentance and faith; merely its mention seems to be enough. Why is that so? It is because of this wonderful reality. When the Word is preached and the Spirit is at work, the sinner is brought to conviction of sin and he cannot love his sin anymore. He must repent. And when the Word presents Christ as the only hope and the Spirit is at work in the sinner, he sees no refuge for his soul but Christ. He must believe. Where else could he possibly go?

On the main, evangelism, after laying out the awfulness of man and his sin, and the consequence and offense against God, focuses its gaze on Christ and His work on behalf of sinners. And the people simply believe. There is no emphasis on anything else. They just believe—no laboring of mechanics or methods or perfectly worded prayers, or walks to the front. They believe it is all they can do.

You may not agree with my assessment, but it is my contention that our use of the altar call and the accouterment of a “sinner’s prayer” is a sign of our lack of trust in God. Do we really believe that God can save, that His gospel is powerful, that His Spirit is effectual in His work?

- Thomas Nettles, By His Grace and For His Glory (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986):

Those who have reservations about equating immediate post-sermonic calls for physical response (initiated by a planned appeal for such) with following the will of God desire strong biblical rationale before they can approve it. Baptism, incorporation into a believing group, regular worship and fellowship with other believers, and day-by-day pursuit of holiness and acts of Christian love—all these have the character of confessing Christ before men and are specifically commended, as well as notably exemplified, in Scripture. Where is either the mandate or example of the engineered call to ‘come to the front’ stated as an act of obedience to God’s call to repentance? When walking down an aisle is tantamount to following Christ and professing Him before men, the biblical idea of godliness has vanished. The system that relies on the altar call encourages these perversions.

- Various statements by John MacArthur from the message “Commitments of a Powerful Leader,” delivered at Grace Community Church in 1992 (tape GC 56-3):

[Paul, in 1 Corinthians 2] didn’t use techniques that excite and stir, and move people’s emotions to achieve results. He preached the Scriptures to the mind. Many preachers today know how to move people to respond without the Scriptures being the issue. They can manipulate them emotionally, and frankly, that kind of stuff really prostitutes the preacher’s stewardship, because it makes him no different than a secular persuader.

Preachers who are gifted communicators, and who are articulate, and who use the emotional techniques, and the sad stories, and the tear-jerking approaches, and who get the mood music playing behind the scene, and can create the kind of manipulative environment, can affect in people behavior changes and even alter their basic values—and never need to use the Word of God. But what is the ultimate result? Is it true regeneration? Of course not! The only legitimate tool is the Scripture. The only legitimate bridge to change is the mind.

I am not saying that people can’t be converted (during an altar call). But I am saying that people who aren’t being converted get swept up in it. The people who are converted, are converted because they comprehend the truth, and because the Spirit of God effects the transformation.

(Speaking of William McGuire's suggested five-step process of change: Attention, Comprehension, Yielding, Retention, Action) *I think it is the preacher's responsibility to get attention and comprehension. It is the Holy Spirit's responsibility to produce yielding, retention, and action—that's not my job. All the slick techniques, all the gospel marketing packages, all the pulpit histrionics of jumping and stomping and flailing around, and doing whatever they do to create the mood. All the sad stories, the mood music, the endless invitations, the hand raising, the walking to the front, all of that kind of pressure is not preaching the Word. It has nothing to do with comprehension. The decision of yielding, surrendering and then retaining and acting, is between the hearer and God, and not the hearer and the preacher.*

You can move people with things other than the Scriptures, but you are working on their feelings and not on their mind.

John Kennedy, a nineteenth-century British minister (quoted in The Invitation System, by Iain Murray, p. 30):

Faith (by those using the invitation system) is represented as something to be done, in order to gain salvation; and pains are taken to show that it is an easy thing.

I know well the tendency there is, at a certain stage of anxious inquiry, to ask, "What is faith, that I may do it?" It is a legalist's work to satisfy that craving; but this is what is done in the "inquiry room." Explanations of what faith is are but trifling with souls.

How different is the Scripture way! The great aim there is to "set forth" the object, not to explain the act, of faith. Let there be conviction, illumination and renewal, and faith becomes the instinctive response of the quickened soul to the presentation by God of His Christ; and without these, no explanation of faith can be helpful to any one. The labor to explain it is too often the legal spirit. It were wiser to take pains in removing ignorance and error regarding God, and sin and Christ. Help them know these, if you would not build them up with "untempered mortar" in a false peace. If you would be wise, as well as kind, work in that direction, rather than hurrying them to belief.

Jim Ehrhard, "The Dangers of the Invitation System," (Christian Communicators Worldwide, 1999. pp. 22-23):

We must be patient to allow the Holy Spirit to work conviction in the heart. That may happen in a few moments, a few hours, days, or even years.

To be biblically evangelistic, we must be certain that what we do leads men to faith, not just to decisions.

CONCLUSION

- Many have put forth supposed values of the invitation system. It is even widely suggested that one who fails to give public invitations is not concerned for the souls of men. Yet could it be that the very opposite is true: that the very extension of such an appeal might be the means for deluding many into a false state of assurance ultimately resulting in their damnation?
- The biblical method of focusing on the gospel itself, without props, and allowing God to save whom He wills, when He wills, *demand*s the hearing of the Word. And it demands trust that God will call His elect to Himself according to His own timetable.

When the Word is preached, there will be varying responses (Acts 17:32-34).

Just be faithful to preach the Word...and leave the results to God. He will save His elect according to His own timing.

This was the way used by Jesus, the Apostles, the Reformers, the Puritans, and most others until the 1830's. That way is simply to proclaim the truth, to call men to repent and believe, and to leave the results in the hands of the Spirit who alone can bring people to faith.

To be evangelistic, we must be convinced of the power that God's Word has in converting men without the help of our man-made systems.

The real question is: How powerful is the Word of God? Can it change men from sinners into saints without an extension of an altar call? Will it convict and convert (as God promises), or will we need to add something that helps men "settle it"?

You will never be able to do without the invitation system until you are thoroughly convinced of the power of God's Word.

"How will they believe without a preacher?" (Rom. 10:14). "In the exercise of His will He brought us forth by the word of truth" (James 1:18). "For you have been born again, not of seed which is perishable, but imperishable, that is, through the living and abiding word of God" (1 Pet. 1:23).

RESOURCES:

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