

# The Altar Call: Is It Harmful or Helpful?

*Fred G. Zaspel*

---

## Introduction

It would be all but impossible to give an accurate description of the modern evangelical church without mention of the invitation system, or the "altar call," as it is called. The altar call is a custom in virtually all Evangelical, Fundamentalist, Wesleyan, Pentecostal, and Charismatic circles. Immediately following the sermon the congregation will sing a hymn during which the preacher calls men and women to walk to the front of the auditorium (the "altar") to make a public decision to "accept Christ." Salvation is offered to all who will but come to the front and take it. Those who come receive the personal attention of a counsellor and are instructed what to pray, and so on. They may be taken to a private "inquiry room," or they may kneel together at the front of the auditorium and speak together softly while the congregation is singing.

I say this is the custom. Indeed, it is all but universal in the evangelical world, and it is considered to be an essential part of evangelism. In fact, those who do not observe the custom are generally held to be "liberal" or at least "unconcerned" about evangelism. The invitation system is an essential feature of the modern evangelical church.

But in the thirteen years that I have been at Word of Life, there has never been such an altar call. I certainly do not want to leave the impression that those who observe the practice are not our friends, indeed, our brothers in Christ. But our refusal to adopt the prevailing custom makes us stand out as different, and as a result we are sometimes asked to explain "why." Given that the custom is such a prevailing one today, the question is a fair one. Why do we not observe the altar call at Word of Life Baptist Church?

## Where Did It Come From?

What is often shocking to many who use the modern invitation system is that the altar call is just that modern. The practice, although widespread, is a very new phenomenon in the Christian church. For nearly nineteen centuries no one had ever heard of the practice. Such well known evangelists as George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, and even John Wesley had never even heard of such a custom. And Charles Spurgeon, that passionate winner of souls par excellence, although well acquainted with the practice, firmly refused to adopt it and even criticized it severely.

Ironically, "the old fashioned altar call" was unheard of until the nineteenth century. It first came into being by the influence of Charles Finney, the pioneer of modern

evangelistic methods. In Finney's crusades (c. 1830) seats at the front were reserved for those who, after the sermon, would respond to the challenge to come to the Lord's side. Those who were thus "anxious" for their souls were invited to walk forward to the "anxious seat" where counsel and prayer would be given them.

The following quote from Finney's Lectures on Revival explains his view well.

*"Preach to him, and at the moment he thinks he is willing to do anything . . . bring him to the test; call on him to do one thing, to make one step that shall identify him with the people of God. . . . If you say to him, "there is the anxious seat, come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord's side," and if he is not willing to do a small thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything for Christ."*

The practice was designed to force decisions, to get results. So it did, and with slight variations the new method spread with increasing popularity through Finney and, later, Dwight L. Moody, and finally into virtually all of nineteenth and twentieth century evangelicalism. Peter Cartwright, Sam Jones, R. A. Torrey, Billy Sunday, Bob Jones, Gipsy Smith, Mordacai Ham, John R. Rice, Billy Graham all employed the method with impressive success. The invitation system had come to stay.

In all fairness, it is important to observe that the practice was not born in the apostolic church. It is not found in the ministry of Jesus, His apostles or even the church of the post-apostolic period. We do see Jesus and the apostles "inviting" men and women to Christ and to be saved, but never by means of this particular method. "Invitations" they give, to be sure! But not altar calls. The altar call is "old fashioned" in only a very relative sense. It is old fashioned to us at this end of the twentieth century, but it first arose more than eighteen centuries after Christ.

Now this may not prove that the altar call is wrong, but it surely demonstrates that the non-practice of the altar call is not wrong. If neither Jesus nor His apostles employed the method, and if they never commanded such to be done by the church, then it obviously cannot be wrong to decide against the more modern method. It is not a question of Biblical necessity but of modern custom and convenience. A church which refuses the practice can never be criticized for that refusal; indeed, such a church is at that point more in line with the apostolic church than are those churches which have adopted it.

So then, the altar call is not a matter of Biblical command or precedent. Our Lord does not require it of anyone at any time.

What remains is the question of the propriety of the altar call and the invitation system in general.

## **Supporting Arguments**

As you might expect, advocates of the modern invitation system do offer some arguments in support of the practice. Some of these arguments are of a strictly Biblical nature, and others of a more theological nature. Following is a survey of these arguments with some evaluation of them.

### **Scriptural Invitations**

First, it is often noted that the Scriptures abound with invitations to salvation. Such offers as, "Come to me!" and "Come to me and drink!" and "Be reconciled to God!" are well known, and they deserve to be. These are marvelous offers of life to those who will trust Christ.

It should be noted further that these offers are freely and sincerely given. The apostles did not hesitate to hold out Christ as Savior to all who would listen to their message. "Repent therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out" (Act 3:19). They preached indiscriminately, "Be reconciled to God!" (2Corinthians 5:20) and "testified both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).

With all this every Christian should not only agree but also rejoice. Christ is the perfectly suited savior for all who will come. Moreover, we should all be careful to learn from this that we also are entrusted with the responsibility to proclaim the good news of God's saving grace to all. This is our part in the divine enterprise of salvation (Matthew 28:19). We can go to any man or woman anywhere and with all sincerity say to them, "Christ is just what you need, and He is all you need. If you will trust Him, you will be saved!" The gospel is to go out to all men everywhere. Jesus saves!

But all this really says nothing about the propriety of the altar call. The altar call is for a man to physically move from one point to another. The gospel call is for a man to flee to Christ. The gospel call is for a man to spiritually identify with Christ through faith, to reach out with the hand of faith and lay hold of Him Who is life. Accordingly, the duty of the evangelist is to command and even plead with men to run to Him for refuge. But this must never be confused with a command to move anywhere physically. Neither Jesus nor His apostles ever instructed anyone that in order to be saved they must "come to the front" or "come for prayer" or "go to the inquiry room" or go to any geographical location. They needn't go anywhere. They were exhorted to go to Christ and nowhere else. Moreover, they are exhorted and assured that going to Him they need go nowhere else.

Everyone acknowledges that Charles Spurgeon emulated well the New Testament practice of evangelism. It would be difficult to find anywhere in the history of the church a man who was more passionate concerning the salvation of the lost and whose preaching brought more into the Kingdom. Yet in his preaching to sinners he refused to direct anyone to an "altar" or to the front of any building. He directed them only to Christ. "Go

to your God at once, even where you are now!" he would insist. "Cast yourself on Christ, now, at once, ere you stir an inch!" Spurgeon's practice was according to the Biblical model exactly. He would allow nothing to confuse the direction of the sinner's attention: it must be to Christ, and to Christ alone they are instructed look and go. Nor would they be allowed to entertain any notion that they should go somewhere else first. No! "Ere you stir an inch! Cast yourself on Christ now!"

What a better and more Biblical invitation this is!

### **Scriptural Exhortations**

It is similarly argued that Scripture also exhorts men to be saved. "Compel them to come in!" and "I beseech you, be reconciled to God!" are two examples of these exhortations.

But again, it is difficult to see how this lends any support whatever to the modern practice of calling sinners to the front of a building. We have already seen that sinners are freely invited to Christ. Here the invitation is only more urgent. There is a command or an entreaty, a begging if you will. And we should learn from this also. It is our responsibility and privilege as evangelists to press on our loved ones and friends the awful urgency of this matter. They must trust Christ or they will perish! And so we may confidently tell them so. We may say so with the authority of Christ and "command" them to believe. We may urge them with all the passion of our hearts, "Run to Christ! You have no where else to go!" Our evangelistic methods are not cold or detached from our emotions. This is a matter of eternal consequence! Run! "I beg you, run! Run now! Go to Christ! There is no other savior!" We are to exhort men and women to faith in Christ.

But as before, this entreaty or command is to flee to Christ. And this says precisely nothing in support of a physical movement from a church pew to an inquiry room. The exhortation has to do with the attention of their souls away from themselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. This has nothing whatever to do with feet or church aisles or "old fashioned saw-dust trails." It has to do with faith.

### **Scriptural Requirements for Public Professions**

In support of the modern invitation system it is often further argued that Scripture plainly requires public profession of faith. This, it is said, is what the invitation system fulfills. Matthew 10:32-33 is the primary verse in view here. Jesus says,

***"Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven."***

These are important words from our Lord, and they speak well to a glaring weakness in the "Christian" church today. Far too many believe that they can enter the wide and comfortable gate, make a

"profession," live as they like, forget Christ, and still make their way to heaven. Not so, Jesus warns. There are demands. Faith must be evident. True saving faith shows itself by loyalty to Christ. He cannot be denied. To deny Him is to remain in sin and take the broad road of convenience to destruction.

Saving faith is a pledge of allegiance to Christ. This pledge is visibly and publicly demonstrated first in water baptism and then in all of life. Whatever else a Christian is, he is one who belongs to Christ; and if his faith is true, this will be evident. "If we deny Him, he will deny us" (2Timothy 2:12).

But as before, this says nothing about the altar call. A man or woman "walking forward" down the aisle of a church building is obviously not what our Lord had in mind. A man's willingness (or unwillingness) to come to the front of a church building says nothing about his willingness to come to Christ. Walking in front of a crowd has nothing at all to do with the conversion process, and we have no right to create such a false category of "public declaration of faith" and thus pronounce the Biblical requirement fulfilled. We have every right indeed, we have divine right to require baptism as this outward and public profession of faith. And we have every right to expect that faith to continue to be evident in life. But the altar call is another matter entirely. It is an artificial, man-made requirement which, by virtue of its human origin, is a matter of no consequence whatever.

### **"But then how will people be saved?"**

After the supporting arguments fail the next question which arises, often in honest and sincere frustration, is, "How then will anyone be saved?" If we cannot invite them to step forward to the "altar," how will they ever make a profession of faith at all?

We should be patient with this frustration. When people are taught that "this" is the way people are saved, it will be confusing at first to think any differently. But only a little thinking will clarify the matter easily. How will they be saved? They will be saved just like every Christian was saved for eighteen-plus centuries before the invitation system was ever heard of. They will be saved just as so many since have been saved. They will look to Christ. They will turn to Him in faith and believe. It may be as they are with a friend who shows them the gospel. It may be while listening to a man preach the gospel. It may be while they are home alone reading the gospel. It may be in any of a great number of circumstances. But all that is required of him is that he look to Christ, trust Him, and he will be saved. We need not and dare not complicate the matter with any other considerations.

John Wesley was a champion of a brand of theology which in our day promotes the invitation system. Such was unheard of in his day, of course, but it would be a fair guess to say that if Wesley were with us today, he would employ the newer methods. His later followers did and still do. At any rate, it is instructive to see how Wesley himself handled

the question. He had no such modern convenience to provide any immediate tally of converts. He records in his Journal how he thought about the matter.

*Preached at (such and such a place). Many seemed deeply affected. But God alone knows how deeply.*

Whatever we may think of Wesley's theology generally, at this point his thinking was exactly Biblical. His concern was for God to do the work of regeneration. We do the preaching. In fact, we do the pleading. But then we are done. God alone knows the heart, and He is well able to take His Word and affect men deeply with it even long hours or days or perhaps years after the sermon is over. If they will be saved, it will be by looking to Christ whether or not there is an aisle in front of them when they do.

In other words, we all know that God is not restricted to this modern method. He can save any man anywhere at any time. Under-standing this, we all realize at least one reason why the altar call was not instituted by our Lord or His apostles: it is unnecessary.

**"What about those who have been saved as a result of an altar call?"**

First, we must clarify the question. No one is ever saved "as a result" of an altar call. We are saved only as a result of the gospel. The question, as too often asked, betrays an awful misunderstanding of this most important point. But with that clarification made, we may pass over this question very quickly. If and when God truly saves a man during the time of public invitation, then we all say "Amen!"

But this does not argue in support of the practice. It only argues that at least at times it has witnessed conversions.

**"What if a man leaves a service without making a decision?"**

This question is faced equally by people on both sides of the discussion. What happens to a man who leaves a service without making a decision? Sadly, they go away as they came in: lost. "He that believes not is condemned already" (John 3:18).

And this observation highlights again the urgency of the matter. We must press them to close with Christ. We must warn them, urge them, plead with them. But our warning and our pleading is in reference to Christ and not an aisle in a church building. We don't want them to think that in order to be saved they must walk an aisle. No! We want them to know that if they look to Christ even while they are seated they will be saved. And so we must tell them that. We must make the message very plain that they must go to Christ, and to go to Him requires no physical movement whatever only a look of the soul. Faith. Trust. Commitment. A reaching out with the hand of the soul to lay hold of that One Who alone can save. Yes, that One Who will save all who come.

## **Some Dangers in the Invitation System**

So far in this discussion we have primarily given our attention to the weaknesses of the arguments that are used in support of the modern altar call. These observations have demonstrated at least that the altar call is unnecessary.

But there is more that must be said, negative though it may be. In all honesty to the Scriptures we must point out that there are dangers involved with this practice which undermine some very important aspects of our faith. We will survey these dangers now.

### **A Confusion of the Meaning of Faith**

First of all and perhaps most importantly is this matter which we have emphasized already. The emphasis on "coming forward to receive Christ" confuses the meaning of faith.

What does it mean to "come to Christ"? We all know that it is a matter of faith. Luther used terminology such as "closing with Christ," and this terminology is exactly Biblical. We are to "look" to Him, "run to Him for refuge," "receive Him" all these Biblical expressions speak of matters of the soul. They speak of faith. And they allow nothing else. "Come here to receive Christ" is an awful confusion of the object and nature of saving faith. Why should we confuse the issue and ask men to come "here" for Christ? Where do we find Biblical justification for such a thing? God is not concerned whether a man walks down an aisle in a church, and neither should we be concerned with it. The only concern is that they look away to Christ and to no one else. And this is precisely where we must direct their attention. "Come, Ye Sinners," we sing. But to where are they to come?

*"Venture on Him, venture wholly!  
Let no other trust intrude!  
None but Jesus, none but Jesus, none but Jesus  
Can do helpless sinners good!"*

We want none who hear us preach to go away thinking that if they had done something walk an aisle, go to an inquiry room, whatever then they could have been saved. No, we want nothing to confuse or distract from this: they should have and still must look to Christ, the only savior of sinners. This is too important a matter to erect needless obstacles or distractions. They must be directed not to a geographical location in a building. They must be directed to Christ.

### **A Confusion of Mediators**

The modern altar call further runs the risk of confusing the idea of mediatorship. Who is our only mediator? With whom does the sinner need to do business if he is to be saved? Must he talk to you? To me? No, he must do business with Christ, for He alone is the one

who can bring us to God. But instructing a man to "come and talk to a personal worker" may well confuse matters. It again distracts from the One of Whom he should be thinking. The sermon itself is the invitation, and it gives direction to Christ and to no one else.

This is our great argument with Roman Catholicism. We need no priest but Christ! There are no other mediators, living or dead. We must go to God only by way of His Son or we will never reach him. This concern, it seems, was uppermost in Spurgeon's criticism of the practice.

*" Let me say, very softly and whisperingly, that there are little things among ourselves which must be carefully looked after, or we shall have a leaven of ritualism and priesthood working in our measures of meal. In our revival services, it might be as well to vary our procedure. Sometimes shut up that enquiry-room. I have my fears about that institution if it be used to permanence, and as an inevitable part of the services. It may be a very wise thing to invite persons who are under concern of soul to come apart from the rest of the congregation, and have conversation with godly people; but if you should ever see a notion is fashioning itself that there is something to be got in the private room which is not to be had at once in the assembly, or that God is more at the penitent form than elsewhere, aim a blow at that notion at once. We must not come back by a rapid march to the old ways of altars and confessionals, and have a Romish trumpery restored in a coarser form. If we make men think that conversation with ourselves or with our helpers is essential to their faith in Christ, we are taking the direct line for priestcraft. In the Gospel, the sinner and the Saviour are to come together, with none between. Speak upon this point very clearly, "You, sinner, sitting where you are, believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, shall have eternal life. Do not stop till you pass into an enquiry-room. Do not think it essential to confer with me. Do not suppose that I have the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, or that these godly men and women associated with me can tell you any other Gospel than this. He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life."*

Spurgeon's words proved prophetic; what he feared has come to pass. Spurgeon himself never adopted the modern method. He only warned against it. For those who desired further help Spurgeon often made himself available on Monday morning; if they were in earnest

they could return for further instruction. But his message on Monday was the same as on Sunday: "Look to Christ. You must go to Him." We must be very careful never to confuse this matter.

### **A Mistrust of the Power of the Holy Spirit and the Preached Word**

God has made it plain to us that He saves by means of the Word that is preached. This is the tool in His hand in the saving of sinners. Paul expounds this at some length in 1Corinthians 1. "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (v.17). "For the message of the cross . . . is the power of God" (v.18). "It pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe" (v.21). This message which we preach is "the power of God" in saving sinners (vv.23-24); it is the instrument He uses in bringing men and women to Himself.

Accordingly, the apostle Paul said that he was very careful to allow these considerations to shape his ministry. "I came declaring the message of God about Jesus Christ," he said, "confidently relying on the Holy Spirit powerfully to take that message and make it effective, so that men and women would turn in faith to God and God alone" (vv.1-5).

In other words, Paul was confident that God would save by means of preaching. Preaching is the event in which God works, and we all who are saved know this to be true! Well we know how God has often taken the message and mysteriously but so obviously worked within us to call us back to Himself. The Puritans sometimes referred to preaching as "the chief means of grace." So it is. It is the usual way God works to save. More often publicly but also privately, God works through preaching.

Our problem today is that we really don't believe that. It is after the message that we come to "the most important part of the service." At pastor's seminars instructions are given how to use the invitation time to "sneak up" on people and "get them to come forward" and "make a decision." All of this betrays a woeful mistrust of God's appointed means of grace. Not so with the apostle Paul. He was very careful not to allow anyone to believe merely because he said so; he labored in such a way that their faith would be directed only heavenward (1Corinthians 2:3-5).

God has said that He would save via preaching. He in fact has saved through preaching, and He does save through preaching. We needn't doubt that He can and will. And we needn't invent new means to help Him do what He does so well all by Himself. We are obliged to trust Him to work via the means He has promised to bless.

### **A Misunderstanding of the Role of the Preacher**

The modern invitation system further reveals a misunderstanding of the role of the preacher. The preacher's duty is not to "get decisions." His duty is to proclaim the good news and exhort men and women to go to Christ. This is the means which God uses to save. We preach, and God Himself uses the word preached to "get the decision." (What a

woefully inadequate term that is! Saving faith is so much more than a "decision." It is running for rescue!) These roles must never be confused.

Charles Spurgeon often warned against the invitation system, even in his public preaching to the lost. It was not uncommon to hear him warn,

*"God has not appointed salvation by enquiry-rooms. . . . For the most part, a wounded conscience, like a wounded stag, delights to be alone that it may bleed in secret."*

The role of the preacher is to exhort men and women to faith in Christ. That is all. And that is enough. God is well able to do everything else.

### **A Confusion of Profession of Faith with Saving Faith**

Saving faith is not a decision that is made, and it is not a mouthing of a certain formula. Even if the formula is recited in prayer, this is not saving faith. Manipulating a person to say go through certain motions and say certain words does him no good whatever. This is not saving faith.

This is dangerous indeed. Can a man really be saved by saying "yes" to a series of questions? Have we done them any favor by allowing them to think so? This is a misunderstanding of saving faith. It is a confusion of professed faith with true saving faith.

This mistake has resulted in the unprecedented number of false converts which this century of evangelism has produced. Decisions and numbers there are, but the "converts" are notoriously unconverted. This is a direct result of confusing decisions with true faith, and it is a blight on the church. As Lewis Sperry Chafer said,

Careful students of evangelism have noticed that where the necessity of public action as a part of conversion has been most emphasized there has been a corresponding increase in the God-dishonoring record of so-called "backsliding"; and this is natural.

It is also inevitable. And it is shameful. And it is harmful, for we have convinced unconverted people that they are safe.

We must not mistake mere professions of faith with true, saving faith. Whether in formal preaching or in private witnessing or in special counseling, our instruction must not be directed to "decisions" but to Christ. We must show our hearers that Christ is the Savior, and we must exhort them to trust Him. This saving look to Christ may well be an event which you witness. But it just as well may be something that occurs later on when the person is alone with God. No matter. We give them the gospel, and we urge them to trust Christ. But there our work ends and God's work begins.

### **A Creation of False Assurance**

Moreover, this modern practice has tended to promote false assurance. We must frankly acknowledge that the modern invitation system has become a kind of third sacrament in the church. We all know so many who "know" they are Christians, because they were baptized as infants or as adults for that matter. The same is true of countless people who have "walked the aisle." They were assured that if they would "come forward" and "make a decision" they could be saved. They came, and there some well-intentioned personal worker convinced them that because they came and answered "yes" to the various questions and then prayed "the sinner's prayer" that now they are saved and no one should ever make them doubt it! Then they left. And they went back to the same old life they had. They made no real public profession of Christ, but because they did as they were instructed they "know" they are safe. This is a needless problem which we have created.

Once more the example of Charles Spurgeon is instructive. In his preaching he would address the sinner, saying, "Go home alone, trusting in Jesus." Then he would enter dialogue with the sinner,

*"I would like to go into the enquiry-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 fictitious confidence. Very few of the supposed converts of enquiry-rooms turn out well. Go to your God at once, even where you are now. Cast yourself on Christ, now, at once, ere you stir an inch!"*

### **A Wrong Focus**

All must admit that the modern invitation system has resulted in a shift of focus. The focus has shifted from the spiritual to the physical, from the internal to the external. The meeting was "wonderful" because so many people "went forward." We know that "God was working" because so many people responded to the altar call. And in all this our attention is drawn away from God and His work in the human heart to a spot at the front of a building. All this when in reality God may not have been working at all; we really have no way of knowing yet. Or He may well have been at great work accomplishing wonderful things in the hearts and lives of many of His people when no one at all responded to the altar call. We just cannot know yet. Which simply points up the fact that this shift in focus is a misleading one.

### **A False View of Human Ability**

One more item of immense importance is the question of human ability. Can a man be saved by walking an aisle, correctly answering a series of questions, and then praying a prescribed prayer? Put more plainly, does it lie within our own power to "decide" for Christ? Can we be the cause of our own conversion? Can walking an aisle contribute anything to conversion?

This question is crucial, for it will determine the direction of our efforts and of our faith. This issue shaped the Protestant Reformation. The Roman Catholic Erasmus' treatise *On the Freedom of the Will* (1524) and Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* (1525) stated the differences between the two views of salvation: the Roman Catholic believes that man has ability to participate in his own conversion, and the Protestant believes that man has no such ability at all. For Luther, this was foundational. Is salvation free, or is it somehow achieved?

Luther went to the Scriptures to answer the question. Can we effect our own conversion? No, no, a thousand times no! "It is not of him that wills or of him that runs, but of God that shows mercy" (Romans 9:16). "Of His own will he begot us by the word of truth" (James 1:18). "No man knows the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son wills to reveal Him" (Matthew 11:27). "No man can come to me except the Father draw him" (John 6:44). "The carnal mind is enmity against God and is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be. So then, they that are in the flesh cannot please God" (Romans 8:7-8). Man "dead" in sins must be brought to life by God before He can do anything at all that is of spiritual good (Ephesians 2:1-5). These who believe unto salvation first were born of God (John 1:12-13). Salvation comes entirely from God's side; it is given freely at His own will (Romans 9:16; James 1:18). Salvation cannot in any way be caused by anything a man can do. We therefore reject any notion of decisional regeneration as strongly as we reject any notion of baptismal regeneration. Salvation is a work of God alone (Jonah 2:9). What men need is rescue, and that rescue only God can give.

All this brings us to the same conclusions we have already reached. 1) Our whole focus in evangelism must be heavenward. We must wait on God to do the saving, for only He can save. 2) The sinner's whole attention must be the same. He must never be allowed to look to himself his will, his efforts, or whatever. In our evangelism, no man needs to hear that he has the ability to do something to effect his own conversion. No. If he is to be saved there must be no feelings of self-reliance remaining. He must know that he is helpless but that there is a Savior from heaven Who has come and Who is mighty to save. He must be directed to Christ Who alone "reveals the Father" (Matthew 11:27). We must never, never, never do or say anything that will confuse this issue. We must direct the sinner to Christ and to Christ alone. With no feelings of self-help reserved he must run in desperation away from himself to Christ. And with all of his props removed and nowhere to direct his faith but God, he has been well evangelized.

In short, salvation is not gained by walking anywhere or by correctly answering a series of good questions or by praying anyone's prescribed formula prayer. Salvation is given freely by God. We must never leave the sinner with the impression that he can in any way manipulate God into granting salvation. We must leave him with the impression that he is desperate and that he can only run to God for mercy.

### **Summary**

There is much more. But these are the most important considerations. There are serious dangers in the modern invitation system. It is not a Biblical practice but a relic of

nineteenth-century American evangelical tradition. It confuses the nature and object of saving faith. It confuses mere professions of faith with true, saving faith. It fosters false assurance. It distracts thinking away from the workings of God in the inner man. It mistrusts the God-appointed means of preaching and the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word. It mistakes the role of the preacher. And it rests on an unscriptural view of human ability.

## Conclusion

We will not get into questioning the motives of all who practice the altar call, and we will not question the genuineness of the faith of many Christians who trace their conversion experience to a church building. We will only say that the practice is of extra-Biblical origin and that it has many dangers. It offers no help at all but only harm. A return to the New Testament practice is surely best. "Till our latest breath," we will talk of the glories of Christ, His ability and willingness to save, His desirability, and His availability. We will urge all men and women who will listen to run to Him and to Him alone, for He is the great Savior of sinners.

*Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,  
Weak and wounded, sick, and sore;  
Jesus ready stands to save you,  
Full of pity, joined with power!  
He is able, He is able, He is able!  
He is willing; doubt no more!*

~~~~~

## Quote & Unquote

### More from Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1882)

"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.' How can he be healed who is not sick? or he be satisfied with the bread of life who is not hungry? The old-fashioned sense of sin is despised, and consequently a religion is run up before the foundations are dug out. Everything in this age is shallow. Deep-sea fishing is almost an extinct business so far as men's souls are concerned. The consequence is that men leap into religion, and then leap out again. Unhumbled they come to the church, unhumbled they remained in it, and unhumbled they go from it."

### From David Martin Lloyd-Jones (1971)

"Most would agree with my sixth point which is that 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. . . .

"Or take another illustration out of my own experience. In the church where I ministered in South Wales I used to stand at the main door of the church at the close of the service on Sunday night, and shake hands with people as they went out. The incident to which I am referring concerns a man who used to come to our service every Sunday night. He was a tradesman but also a heavy drinker. He got drunk regularly every Saturday night, but he was also regularly seated in the gallery of our church every Sunday night. On the particular night to which I am referring I happened to notice while preaching that this man was obviously being affected. I could see that he was weeping copiously, and I was anxious to know what was happening to him. At the end of the service I went and stood at the door. After a while I saw this man coming, and immediately I was in a real mental conflict. Should I, in view of what I had seen, say a word to him and ask him to make his decision that night, or should I not? Would I be interfering with the work of the Spirit if I did so? Hurriedly I decided that I would not ask him to stay behind, so I just greeted him as usual and he went out. His face revealed that he had been crying copiously, and he could scarcely look at me. The following evening I was walking to the prayer-meeting in the church, and, going over a railway bridge, I saw this same man coming to meet me. He came across the road to me and said, 'You know, doctor, if you had asked me to stay behind last night I would have done so.' 'Well,' I said, 'I am asking you now, come with me now.' 'Oh no,' he replied, 'but if you had asked me last night I would have done so.' 'My dear friend,' I said, 'if what happened to you last night does not last for twenty-four hours I am not interested in it. If you are not as ready to come with me now as you were last night you have not got the right, the true thing. Whatever affected you last night was only temporary and passing, you still do not see your real need of Christ.'

"This is the kind of thing that may happen even when an appeal is not made. But when an appeal is made it is greatly exaggerated and so you get spurious conversions."

Published by Word of Life Baptist Church, Pottsville, PA

copyright © 1998 All rights reserved

Copying and other reproductions are permitted for non-commercial use only.