

## Are Altar Calls Biblical?

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While the necessity of inviting sinners to Jesus is something to be defended, that invitation must be safeguarded. In the evangelism of today, inviting sinners to Christ, which is a matter related to preaching, has been confused with giving altar calls, which is something related to methodology. When today's preachers speak of "giving the invitation," they invariably mean giving an altar call in which people are bidden to walk to the front of the church or auditorium as an indication that they are "accepting Christ."

The great objective to this methodology is that it identifies a physical act with saving faith. No matter how carefully the preacher tries to explain that "coming to the front won't save you," the person being addressed can hardly be blamed for equating the two. All through the sermon he has been told of the importance of coming to Christ, and then at the end of the sermon he is exhorted, "Come to Jesus Christ right now; let this be the moment of decision; come as you are; He will receive you," and at the same time he is directed to come down to the front of the auditorium. I say he can hardly be blamed for believing in his own mind that coming down to the front was indeed that very "coming to Jesus" of which the preacher had been so earnestly speaking.

There are many people whose lives give sad evidence that they are unregenerate, yet feel sure that they have been saved simply because they "came to Jesus" by responding to an altar call. But coming to Christ is a purely spiritual matter. It has nothing to do with the movement of the hands or feet. Coming to Christ involves a response of the mind, heart and will of the sinner (produced of course by the operation of the Spirit), but it is a dangerous thing to link this so closely to any form of altar call.

Many Christians are not aware of the fact that the altar call system, deemed by many today to be so essential to evangelism, was not known in Christian churches until the 19th century. It was Charles Finney who introduced and popularized the system (though occasionally similar methods had been used by some Methodists before Finney), and though it is perhaps consistent with Finney's theological views, it is hardly consistent with a Reformed and Biblical doctrinal position. Men were invited to Christ, and by God's grace, came to Christ for 1,800 years before altar calls came to be used in churches. As sinners are invited to Christ through preaching, as Christ is declared and His gracious Gospel promises unfolded, and sinners are invited to "look and live," the Spirit of God will ensure that His Word shall not return unto Him void.

In preaching the gospel and inviting sinners to come to Christ we must be sure to address the whole man. The weakness of much of today's evangelical preaching lies in the fact that often only an emotional response is sought. An assault on the emotions is made; moving illustrations, and heart-rending anecdotes or personal experiences are used. Soft music and even, at times, special lighting effects are used to produce an emotional response. The outlet for that response is often the altar call discussed above which is identified with coming to Christ. However, when the person is removed from that atmosphere, and returns to the cold world of reality, his "decision" often proves to be spurious.

The inviting of sinners to Christ must be linked with an appeal to the whole person. There is no question that his emotions will be involved. How can one be unemotional when considering the cross and issues relating to the eternal welfare of the soul? The heart must be weaned from sin and the sinner must be brought to see Jesus as more desirable than all else. Only the Holy Spirit can do this of course, but the preacher will want to preach in such a way that the Spirit will use his message in achieving these objectives. The way to the heart must be through the mind. Truth must be

presented to the mind if the response of the heart is to be a valid one. The great facts of the gospel must be presented. The sinner must understand the issues involved. The great truths of ruin, redemption and regeneration must be set before him: repentance and faith must be explained. The mind must be reached if the heart is to be rightly moved.

Of course, the mind being enlightened and the heart moved, the will must be exercised. The gospel is not merely a subject for examination, analysis or discussion, but for obedient response. Reformed preachers must not over-react to the false teaching of the day regarding "free will" by failing to recognize the true importance of the will in the conversion experience. As Moses deliberately chose to align himself with the afflicted people of God, and to reject the pleasures of Egypt, so men and women today must choose to walk in the ways of the Lord and reject the world. Reformed preachers ought to feel no hesitation in preaching, "choose ye this day who ye shall serve." Such preachers will want their hearers to understand that the right choice of the will is to be attributed to the grace of the Spirit of God, not to themselves, but they ought still to press on the conscience of their hearers the necessity of the will responding obediently to the gospel.

This leads also to the importance of inviting men to the Biblical Jesus. Again, the abuses of modern evangelism make it necessary to consider this need. The Christ which some have heard about is a revolutionary hero who can yet lead mankind into a social-economic utopia. He is a kind of first century Che Guevara, ready to lead the young rebels against the modern day establishment. The Christ that others have heard about is a psychiatrist-like figure who can take care of all their hang-ups, deliver them from all of their frustrations and cares and give them a life free from any difficulties and worries. He is one who, in a mysterious way, makes marriages full of grace and romance, businessmen eminently successful, and athletes game-winning heroes. Others have heard of a Jesus who can assure them a place in heaven, while allowing them to pursue a life of carnality down here. This Jesus lets you have the best of both worlds; He is a Saviour without being a Lord: He delivers without making demands.

In inviting sinners to Jesus we must make sure that we are inviting them to a Biblical Jesus. I know of no better way to guard against a misleading view of Jesus than to think of Him in terms of His threefold office of prophet, priest and king, and to preach Him to men in this manner. This is not to say of course, that it is not legitimate to single out one aspect of the person or work of Christ in preaching, but it is to say that men must be given to understand who it is they must receive in order to become the sons of God. We are to invite men to Him as prophet: that is, one who will teach them the will of God, and one whose instruction they must believe and receive. We invite them to one who is priest: that is, one who offers up the atoning sacrifice for their sins. We invite them to one who is King: that is, one who will exercise rule over them, and to whom they owe allegiance.

If Christ is preached in His offices, and sinners recognize that it is to Him that they are invited and must come, then much confusion and danger will be avoided. The current debate going on as to whether Christ must be received as Lord as well as Saviour if a man is to be saved, must surely be settled if it be recognized that Christ must be preached in all of His offices. To say that Christ does not need to be received as Lord is to say that one may receive Him as prophet and priest but not as king. Such an idea is preposterous. You cannot divide up Christ. He is what He is; prophet, priest and king. To receive Him at all is to receive Him as He is, in His three-fold office.

So in inviting sinners to Christ there are safeguards to be maintained. We must not confuse the invitation to come to Jesus with the altar call: we must address the whole man and we must invite him to a Biblical Jesus.