

## The Altar Call

### Twelve Questions.

**"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."** Paul, Galatians 2:16, KJV

In America over the last two centuries, no event has become more associated with the evangelical-fundamentalist movement than the altar call. In evangelistic campaigns, revival crusades, and many church services, the altar call is synonymous with winning souls to Jesus Christ, or calling backslidden believers to repent and return to the Lord.

Typically, at the end of an evangelistic or church service, the invitation is extended for those in the audience to physically rise up out of their seat, step out into the aisle, and walk forward to a "metaphorical altar" located at the front of a church or stadium. As one altar call was stated:

Don't let distance keep you from Christ. Christ went to the Cross because he loved you. Certainly you can come these few steps. Come right now.[1]

At a metaphorical altar located at the front of the meeting place, people supposedly become saved. Other reasons for extending the altar call include that persons might rededicate their lives to Jesus after having backslidden into sin, seek certain spiritual gifts or blessings, or perhaps, dedicate their lives to vocational Christian ministry. Because of the publicity that altar calls receive via televised evangelistic crusades, and their use in many local churches, no public rite of passage to salvation, or rededication, is viewed as important as the altar call.

But the greater question surrounding this *rite of passage* is whether, or not, it accords with the nature of faith as the New Testament defines it. We need to examine "the altar call" in light of the Bible's description of faith, and what it means to be justified by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Does the altar call help someone to get saved? Or possibly, could this rite of Christian passage actually hinder the salvation of many?

However, before dealing with such questions and others, let it be stated that the matter before us is serious. With the altar call, whether to ask for it or not, issues regarding the purity and simplicity of the Gospel and the eternal destiny of human souls are involved. Issues raised by the altar call should not be conveniently ignored or cavalierly dismissed. There are devoted believers who date their conversion or spiritual turnaround from the time when they responded to an altar call at an evangelistic or revivalistic meeting. To such believers, the altar call has assumed a very special place in their lives. Their conversion and spiritual experience needs to be respected, but recognized for what it is; that it is their experience, and theirs alone. Therefore, the matter of the altar call is not to be considered lightly, but with godly solemnity. With this stated, we proceed to deal with the questions and issues which surround the public

invitation system that has arisen within the evangelical-fundamentalist movement. We proceed to deal with the first question, which are twelve in number, regarding the altar's role in the Bible.

### 1. The Altar Call: is it biblical concept?

The English word for "altar" derives from the Hebrew word *mizbeah*, which means "place of sacrifice." The root of the Hebrew word for altar is *zabach*, which means to "to slaughter for sacrifice." The altar was the place in the Tabernacle, and later in the Temple, where ancient Israelites brought their animals to be sacrificed to God, either as burnt, sin, guilt, or thank-peace offerings (Leviticus 6-7).

In our English Bible, the word altar occurs approximately 364 times in the Old Testament, and about 25 times in the New Testament. In the majority of these NT usages, the altar refers to the place of sacrifice located on the Temple mount in Jerusalem at the time of Jesus. In one instance, "altar" metaphorically refers to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross (Hebrews 13:10), while the book of Revelation describes a heavenly altar which "**was before the throne**" and "**before God**," the place out of which the horrendous judgments of the Apocalypse originated (Revelation 8:3; 9:13; 16:7).

Salient points that can be deduced from the word's occurrence in the Bible are these: *First*, the word "altar" is distinctly an Old Covenant term which has reference to the place where God required faithful Israelites to bring their sacrificial animals to be slaughtered. As such, the altar represents law, not grace. *Second*, the word finds scant mention in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul, to whom Jesus vouchsafed truths for the governance of church life, used the word "altar" twice in reference to Israel's sacrificial system which allowed the priests to eat of the sacrificial meat. According to Paul, this priestly right provided the precedent for churches to pay their pastors (1 Corinthians 9:13; 10:18). And *third*, other than referring to the completed sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the world's sins, the altar per se finds no mention in the New Testament's presentation of what it means to believe. While the New Testament calls upon New Covenant believers to make sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5; Hebrews 13:15-17; Romans 12:1-2), these sacrifices are not for salvation. Neither are they to be made upon any altar. Furthermore, the sacrifices are voluntary (grace), not mandatory (law).

It may surprise some to find out that in the New Testament there is no mention of or reference to "altar call" evangelism. In that Christ fulfilled the law, and was the final sacrifice demanded by God, no other sacrifice upon an altar, literal or metaphorical, is needed. From the perspective of Calvary, both the sacrifices and the altar of the Old Testament are obsolete. Signaling an end to the sacrificial system at the moment of Jesus' death, "[T]he veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom . . ." (Matthew 27:51). Furthermore, as predicted by Jesus, God judged the whole Jewish sacrificial system, altar and all, in A.D. 70 when invading Roman armies razed the Temple (Matthew 24:2). For the time being, and until the Jews regain control of the Temple Mount, that destruction of the temple ended the ancient Jewish sacrificial system.

Furthermore, the New Covenant faith instituted by Christ and His apostles ended the need for any altar. With the Lamb's completed sacrifice, God is well pleased and satisfied (John 4:34; 19:30). No other sacrifice on any altar, literal or metaphorical, is needed other than that which Christ made. Therefore, because of the diminished role of the altar under the New Covenant,

and in that there is no altar call mandated in the Bible, it must be asked, where did the rite come from? Who stated the tradition?

## 2. The Altar Call: what was its origin?

The American evangelist Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875) was the first evangelist-revivalist to employ the altar call, or public invitation. In the words of a Billy Graham biographer, Finney employed "new measures" in his evangelistic and revivalistic preaching. In one of the first known accounts of the now-familiar invitation system, he challenged people to stand or come to the front of the assembly to accept Christ. As William Martin wrote, "Finney believed conversion could be instantaneous and did not hesitate to use social pressure . . . to bring it about." [2] Beginning with Finney, the altar call caught on, and subsequent American evangelists, from Dwight L. Moody (1837-1899), to Billy Sunday (1862-1935), to R.A. Torrey (1856-1928), to Bob Jones (1883-1968), to John R. Rice (1895-1980), and to Billy Graham (1918-Present), did not hesitate to use it. In that Finney originated the invitational altar call system, and in that his methodology derived from his theology, it would be well for us to understand the theological framework into which the evangelist fit the altar call. Finney was both a theological *Pelagian* (He denied original sin and affirmed people's ability to become righteous by their own efforts.) and a methodological *pragmatist* (He would use any means to get people saved.).

In his Pelagianism, the evangelist believed a person's salvation could be auto-engendered. He believed salvation commenced in the domain of man's free will, not according to God's sovereign work upon the human soul. In his *Systematic Theology*, Finney wrote:

We deny that the human constitution is morally depraved, because it is impossible that sin should be a quality of the substance of soul or body. It is, and must be, a quality of choice or intention, and not of substance. [3]

Again the evangelist wrote:

[T]he sinner has all the faculties and natural attributes requisite to render perfect obedience to God. *All he needs is to be induced to use these powers and attributes as he ought.* [4]

This Finney believed in spite of Scripture's declaration, "**There is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God**" (Romans 3:11, KJV). Yet in spite of this scriptural declaration, one of the inducements the evangelist employed was the altar call. In his pragmatism, Finney believed that all human beings, if properly "induced", would respond to the Gospel message, would positively respond to God to be saved.

In contrast to Jesus' teaching on the new birth (John 3:3, 7, "**You must be born again** [i.e., *from above*]"), Finney believed a person could be born from below, "**born of the flesh**" (John 3:6). Finney advocated this in spite of the biblical doctrine of humanity's radical depravity (Genesis 6:5; Jeremiah 17:9; Mark 7:14-23; Romans 3:9-18). As opposed to Paul who wrote

that people are "**dead**" in their "**trespasses and sins**," Finney believed that somehow people were "alive" in their trespasses and sin, and as such, salvation could be self-engendered (See John 3:1-8; Ephesians 2:1.).

In summarizing the divergent ways of revival, William Martin observed, "Jonathan Edwards felt revivals had to be 'prayed down'; Charles Finney believed they could be 'worked up' and developed a clear-cut system for doing so." [5] Thus, Finney's *theology* gave rise to his *methodology*.

In his pragmatism, Finney would employ any method that generated the results he and the audience desired to see. About the evangelistic method in general, Finney stated that there is nothing supernatural about it. In his book *Revivals of Religion*, he wrote:

A revival is not a miracle, nor dependent on a miracle, in any sense. It is a purely philosophical result of the right use of the constituted means--as much so as any other effect produced by the application of means.[6]

Finney's pragmatic system included the altar call, and to that end, he believed that people's wills could be manipulated to get them to the altar.

### 3. The Altar Call: does it contradict justification by faith?

Salvation is by faith, and not by works. Genesis records that Abraham "**believed in the Lord, and He [the Lord] reckoned it to him as righteousness**" (Genesis 15:6). In explaining the great doctrine of justification by faith, the Bible quotes or alludes Abraham's prototypical faith on three subsequent occasions (Romans 4:3, 20-22; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23).

Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone. Salvation comes to the human heart by faith plus nothing; or as some might state it, via naked faith. Paul wrote that "**by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His [God's] sight**" (Romans 3:20). Again, the Apostle states "**that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law**" (Romans 3:28). As proof of this point, New Testament texts could be further multiplied.

Paul stated that, to both Jews and Greeks, he preached "**repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ**" (Acts 20:21). Salvation involves the following ingredients: godly sorrow for the sins we have committed against God (i.e., repentance), faith in Jesus Christ's substitutionary atonement for our sins, and belief that Jesus was raised from the dead. In the shortest evangelistic sermon ever preached, Paul told the Philippian jailer, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you shall be saved . . .**" (Acts 16:31). In no instance were people saved in the New Testament by heeding an altar call and walking down an aisle. Jesus and the apostles called upon people to repent and believe. Salvation is by faith plus nothing (Ephesians 2:8-9). Salvation is based upon what the Savior has done, not upon anything we might do.

The Reformers understood that salvation was by grace alone (*sola gratia*) through faith alone (*sola fide*). The clarion call of Jesus in the Gospel narratives was for people to believe in Him (John 14:1). The epistles exhort persons to trust the Gospel; that the Lord Jesus Christ "**died**

**for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures"** (1 Corinthians 15:3-4). If persons agree with this Gospel, they will be saved (Romans 10:9-10).

Lewis Sperry Chafer, the first president of Dallas Theological Seminary, and himself an evangelist, wrote about acts such as "standing or going forward in a meeting." Without equivocation he stated, "Great confusion has been wrought by the intrusion of such public acts into the condition for salvation; thereby making salvation seem to be by faith in Christ, plus a supposedly meritorious act." [7] Chafer then concludes, "To believe on the Lord Jesus Christ is the very opposite of doing anything: it is resting in the work and saving grace of Another." [8]

On this point the altar call--no matter how well-intentioned by those who employ it--seems to be a human contrivance. It suggests that one can be saved by a work (i.e., a work). Thus a work is either added to faith (i.e., synergism), or a work is substituted for faith (i.e., humanism). If in the mind and heart of the doer there is the slightest thought that walking an aisle is a cause or condition for salvation, then the act falls under the "**anathema**" (i.e., the curse or ban) of being "**another gospel**" (Galatians 1:9). Far from being an addition to faith, the altar call could prove, in the hearts of many persons, to be a replacement for a faith that is abiding and ongoing; and if that be the case, the consequences of such a substitution will be a spiritual disaster for eternity.

If by grace through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, God will save me Just as I Am, then it also stands to reason that, by His grace, He can save me just where I am. No physical movement to a metaphorical altar at the front a church, or stadium, is necessary. All that is needed is a response in faith to the regenerating wind of the sovereign Spirit blowing upon one's soul (John 3:8). The altar call is an unbiblical exercise unbecoming the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

#### **4. The Altar Call: does it attempt to make faith visible?**

Hebrews says, "**Now faith is . . . the conviction of things not seen**" (Hebrews 11:1). Of believers, the apostle Paul stated, "[W]e walk by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7; Compare 2 Corinthians 4:18; Hebrews 11:7, 27.). The altar call, it seems, is an attempt by man to make invisible faith visible, and in so doing, becomes a supplement to faith. On this point, the altar call seems to "dress up" faith, a walking that might be thought to be the clothing for believing. But Chafer notes that placing one's faith in Christ as Savior, "can be performed only in the secret of the heart itself . . . This is a dealing with Christ alone, and . . . reason demands that it should be guarded from every distracting and confusing condition." [9] Again Chafer comments:

The divine plan in saving men provides that the Gospel of the saving grace of Christ is to be clearly presented to them. As they hear, some will believe, and when they believe they will in that instant be saved by the mighty power of God (John 3:36). There is little demand for methods beyond this God-given program. [10]

In the salvation transaction, the invisible God desires to save believers by invisible faith. After salvation, the invisible faith of the believer gives rise to visible works. Good works become the

clothing of faith, proof that one's Christian faith is genuine. By God's grace the believer is to "**put off the old man**" and "**put on the new man**" (See Colossians 3:3-14.). A changed life serves continuing notice that one's salvation is genuine. A faith that possesses root will bear fruit. A one time response to an altar call does not qualify as the fruit of salvation for as James wrote, "**Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone**" (James 2:17, KJV)

### 5. The Altar Call: has it become an evangelical sacrament?

The primary definition of a sacrament is "a visible sign of an inward grace." Roman Catholicism administers seven sacraments which operate *ex opera operatio* (Latin, "from the work done"). In other words, by their observance, the sacraments confer salvation through the church to a person. These sacraments are: 1. baptism; 2. confirmation; 3. mass, or the Lord's Supper; 4. penance, or confession; 5. extreme unction, or last rites; 6. marriage; and 7. orders, the ordination of priests and the consecration of nuns. The church holds that with the exception of marriage and orders, the church member must observe five of the saving mechanisms. Out of this sacerdotal business, the question arises within the context of the evangelical-fundamentalist movement, has the altar call become such a salvation mechanism? If it has, then the altar call is, as the previous discussion indicates, a corrupting influence upon the doctrine of justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).

Within the psyche of man their ever exists a pragmatic tendency to reduce religion to rites. Like apostate Israel of old, Christians, it seems, seek after "**signs**," outward signals that God has done an inward work (i.e., regeneration; Compare John 4:48; 1 Corinthians 1:22.). In this light, the unseen walk of faith becomes difficult because all of us are voyeurs at heart--we want to observe things happening now.

And in the early church, the rite of circumcision was just such a pragmatic, but painful, requirement added by Judaizers for salvation. The Judaizers said, "**Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved**" (Acts 15:1). But after intense debate in the early church, Peter nullified any such requirement when he announced, "**But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus**" (Acts 15:11; Read Acts 15:1-11.).

Like the circumcision the Judaizers required, is the altar call an attempt to validate salvation by something tangible or visible? It may be so.

### 6. The Altar Call: does it usurp the Holy Spirit's authority?

Of the Spirit's ministry in the work of evangelism, of getting people into the kingdom of God, Jesus told Nicodemus:

**That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, "You must be born again." The wind blows where it wishes and you hear the sound of it, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going; so is everyone who is born of the Spirit** (John 3:6-8).

In His statement to Nicodemus, Jesus likened the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration (i.e.,

"**born of the Spirit**") to the sovereign blowing of the wind. What the Lord communicated appears to be this: People can no more determine their entrance into the kingdom of God than they can control the wind and the weather. Such is the authority of the Holy Spirit in conversion.

Charles Finney, on the other hand, denied the authoritative working of the sovereign Spirit in evangelism. He wrote:

From the dogma of a sinful nature or constitution . . . flowed the doctrine of inability to repent, and the necessity of a physical regeneration. These too have been a sad stumbling-block . . . They infer the salvation of all men, from the fact of God's benevolence and physical omnipotence![11]

Finney believed that salvation came to the human soul not by *the wind of the Spirit*, but by *the will of man*. But the altar call is not a mechanism which facilitates and determines when the saving wind of the Holy Spirit might blow upon the human heart.

### 7. The Altar Call: is it a vow?

Often the altar call is offered with phrases like, "Give your life to Jesus. Make your commitment to Jesus now." Inherent within the altar call is the idea that a person is making a promise or vow to Jesus.

About such phrasing, our Lord said:

Again, you have heard that the ancients were told, "You shall not make false vows, but shall fulfill your vows to the Lord." But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great King. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. But let your statement be, "Yes, yes" or "No, no"; and anything beyond these is of evil (Matthew 5:33-37).

What many Christians fail to realize is that we are not saved by any promises we might make to God, but rather by His promise to us in Christ. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "**But the Scripture has shut up all men under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe**" (Galatians 3:22; Compare 1 Kings 8:56.). No human vow to the Lord possesses the power to regenerate the human soul. We are not saved by any commitment we might make to Jesus, but by His commitment to us (Deuteronomy 31:6, 8; Hebrews 13:5). We are regenerated by God's promise of the Spirit to us through faith in Christ (Acts 2:33; Ephesians 1:13-14). Failure to understand this great salvation truth may explain why some people are driven to return to the altar again and again. Like New Years' resolutions, their recommitments fail. On the other hand, there is great assurance for believers who will simply focus and rest upon God's promises to them.

### 8. The Altar Call: can personalities manipulate it?

About the state of authority in the evangelical sub-culture, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones insightfully

wrote:

We have become fascinated by the idea of bigness, and we are quite convinced that if we can only 'stage' (yes, that is the word!) something [sic] really big before the world, we will shake it, and produce a mighty religious awakening. That seems to be the modern conception of authority.[12]

Against the backdrop of Lloyd-Jones' observation, the question must be asked: For appearance's sake, can the altar call be staged?

Chuck Templeton (1915-2001), who was once best friends with Billy Graham and helped the evangelist found *Youth for Christ* before he, Templeton, quit the Christian faith, informed Graham's biographers that "he became increasingly aware of how easy it was to manipulate people from the pulpit." About those who walked forward in evangelistic meetings, Templeton "complained to Billy that their motivation was not all spiritual, that a lot of their success could be attributed simply to 'animal magnetism'." [13] Templeton understood the altar call is not necessarily a spiritual event, but that its results can be attributed to the flesh.

In the public invitation system, there exists a temptation to make the invisible work of God visible, to achieve the tangible results that many wish to see; and, to validate their ministries, some evangelists and preachers will employ pragmatic means to make things happen. Finney did. Templeton complained to Graham that they did. And those who choreographed and televised Graham's crusades worked at it. About the sight of the hundreds of people coming forward at the end of a Billy Graham crusade meeting, one of the evangelist's biographers describes, ". . . they came, they came. Serious of mien but devoid of tears or other overt signs of emotion, more than a thousand souls" came forward. William Martin then goes on to explain:

The response pleased the audience in the television truck: 'Pan around and pull, [Camera] Three. Let them walk through. We want movement. Stand by, One. . . . Give me the shot with the aisles. A little further right. That's nice. Would you look at that! They're still coming'. [14]

While working at a conference center one summer as a teenager, I was temporarily assigned to the tabernacle. One conference week was run by an international ministry for the purpose of training evangelists, especially in the matter of conducting the public invitation and altar call. The invitation/altar call was to be offered in two stages. The Raise-the-Hand Stage: While every head was bowed and every eye was closed, the evangelists were to invite members of the audience to raise their hands if they wanted to accept Jesus. The Come-to-the-Altar Stage: After the hands had been raised, then those who had raised them were called to get out of their seat and walk forward to the front of the auditorium or church. In retrospect, the two stage process sort of reminded me of the "bait and switch" tactic used in advertising and sales. People are baited to just raise their hand in their seats. Then the invitation is switched as the people were then asked to get up out of their seats and move to the front of the auditorium.



To lessen human inhibition, to make it easier for members of the audience to participate, and to get audience members into the first stage, the evangelists needed people to raise their hands. In this regard, I heard the seminar leader explain to the evangelists that during the first stage they were never to say, while the audience's heads were bowed and eyes closed, that they saw hands being raised when in fact no hands were being raised. In so many words, they were told that it would be unethical to "prime the evangelistic pump" in such a manner.

Nevertheless, at one particular "evangelistic" meeting held during the week of that training conference, I sat in the very rear of the tabernacle. In the first stage, the evangelist told the audience to bow their heads and close their eyes as he invited people to accept Jesus into their heart. Rebellious and curious teenager that I was at that time in my life, I neither bowed my head or closed my eyes. Rather, I watched. I watched while the evangelist repeatedly said, "I see that hand . . . Yes, thank you, I see that hand . . . Thank you, I see your hand . . . Over on my left, I see that hand," and so on, and so on. As I watched and surveyed the audience from my rear vantage point, guess what? While the evangelist said he saw hands being raised, I saw no hands being raised! To this teenager, the whole process appeared to be gimmickry, not a movement of God's Spirit.

When Billy Graham crusades came to town, hundreds, if not thousands, of counselors were trained. At the beckoning call of the invitation, and to the singing of *Just as I Am* by the crusade choir and audience, these trained counselors would rise up in masse and proceed down the aisles to the front of the stadium. In doing so, the counselors gave the impression that they were responding to the invitation thereby lessening the inhibition of others to do so. After all, if all these people are going forward, why shouldn't I? In essence, the moving of the multitude of counselors to the altar functioned to prime the evangelistic pump.

Yet response cards revealed that "few inquirers were confirmed pagans. Most already had some connection to a church or had come to the crusade as a guest of a churchmember [sic]."[15] In the crusade that opened up *Texas Stadium* in August of 1973, some Dallas Seminary students who had served as counselors at the crusade told me that those whom they had counseled were clueless as to why they had even walked to the front of the stage located at about the west 30 yard-line.

On another occasion while a student at *Dallas Theological Seminary* in the early 1970s, my wife and I attended the morning service of one large Southern Baptist church. The service was televised, and at the end of it, the pastor gave an altar call to those who wanted to accept Jesus. Members of the audience immediately got up out of their seats and moved to the metaphorical "altar" at the front of the church. The television broadcast was concluded as the cameras panned the sight of 10-15 people walking down the aisle to accept Jesus. After the cameras had quit rolling and the singing had stopped (the program was now officially off the air), the pastor stepped down from his pulpit to interview those who now stood at the front of the church, having given the impression to the TV audience that they had come forward to accept Jesus. But the subsequent interviews revealed that some persons had come forward to take out church membership while others were moving their membership from another church to that church, and so on. As I recollect, not one person, as the invitation had stated, testified to having moved forward to accept Christ. Yet the impression provided to the television audience, and first-

time visitors such as my wife and I, was that people were coming forward to accept Jesus. As those who produced telecasts of the Graham crusades knew, an altar call can make for good television, but only if people respond. If there is no physical response, the whole scenario misfires.

What I am saying is this: The whole business of inviting people to the altar is intended to achieve tangible and visible results, and in accord with the strategies like that previously described, results can be choreographed and manipulated for appearance's sake. Chuck Templeton knew he could employ tactics to lessen the audience's inhibitions and achieve results. Maybe that explains why, in part, Templeton felt the invitational system could be accounted for reason of "animal magnetism." The altar call can easily degenerate into a movement of man, not God. As Dr. Chafer wrote, "A leader with a commanding public personality may secure the public action of many when the issue is made one of religious merit through some public act." [16] In congregations that expect results, altar calls are something that evangelists and pastors had better get good at, or their credibility will become suspect by voyeuristic Christians who like the Jews of Jesus' day, want to see God moving in their midst (See John 4:48; "**Jesus therefore said to him, 'Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe'.**").

### 9. The Altar Call: what are the results?

Where there is no fruit there is no root. Jesus hit on this point when He preached:

**Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them. Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity (Matthew 7:20-23, KJV).**

What Jesus said about the phony prophets of Christianity can also be said of the false professors of Christianity. As James states, faith without works is dead (James 2:20, 26).

As Charles Finney was the first to utilize the altar call, how did this rite of passage into the Christian life play out in the lives of those who walked the aisle? In his book *Perfectionism*, B.B. Warfield quotes Joseph Ives Foot, a contemporary of Finney, who wrote in 1838:

During ten years, hundreds, and perhaps thousands, were annually reported to be converted on all hands; but now it is admitted, that his (Finney's) real converts are comparatively few. It is declared, even by himself, that 'the great body of them are a disgrace to religion' . . . [17]

In light of "free-will altar calls," we ask, what are the tangible results, or fruit, in the aftermath of people's lives? In his book *A Call for Spiritual Reformation*, D. A. Carson draws attention to a pattern. He asks: "To what extent do those who profess faith at world-class evangelistic

meetings actually persevere, over a period of five years from their initial profession of faith?" Carson then cites the following statistic: "When careful studies have been undertaken, the most commonly agreed range is 2 percent to 4 percent; that is, between 2 percent and 4 percent of those who make a profession of faith at such meetings are actually persevering in the faith five years later, as measured by such external criteria as attendance at church, regular Bible reading, or the like." [18] There seems to be a high recidivism rate among those who after responding to the invitation to walk an aisle, return to their sinful lifestyles. More often than not, they are like criminals who upon release after incarceration, return to a life of crime. Just as I Am lapses into just as I was. If in the afterlife of having walked an aisle nothing changes in a person's life, if there is no sensitivity to sin and cultivation of righteous living, then it can only be concluded that regeneration has not taken place--that a person was not truly born again.

One can only hope that, in their response to the altar call, those who have not persevered in the faith do not possess the false assumption that they are saved because "once-upon-a-time" they walked an aisle (2 Corinthians 13:5). As Whitney R. Cross notes in his historical account of the Finney-style revival ministry of the mid-1800s, the whole process can easily become "a relentless mechanism forcing the person to say he was converted and to imagine the corresponding inner transformation." [19] Like in the crucial moment of a baseball game, when a batter smacks a line drive into left field appearing to drive in the decisive and winning run, at the last split second, to the crowd's dismay, the ball curves foul. How many conversions are foul ball conversions? If Carson's statistics are valid, far too many, it seems.

The Bible teaches, "**For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death**" (2 Corinthians 7:10, KJV). If a person's repentance is based upon carnal excitement, or "animal magnetism" as Templeton defined it, then such repentance is of the world and works death, not life. In a repentance which works death, no life change is evidenced in the unconverted "convert." If people are saved through the altar call, as many testify to have been, then I think it may be safe to say that they were saved in spite of the altar call, not because of it.

The evidence of salvation (i.e., justification) is that of a changed life (2 Corinthians 5:17). As Dr. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote, "If the spectacular element in public soul-winning is eliminated there is less opportunity to count supposed results, and the test of conversion will be removed from the sphere of profession and made to rest on the reality of a changed life afterwards." [20] The Bible knows nothing about true believers who live in perpetual carnality. We may stumble and fall in our Christian walk. We may even be injured and require spiritual hospitalization for a time. The cameo (i.e., the little picture) can sometimes appear quite unbecoming of a believer; but overall, the panorama (i.e., the big picture) of a true believer's life will be a beautiful thing, provided that life is rooted in Christ. This brings us to a tenth question which surrounds the altar call.

#### **10. The Altar Call: does not the salvation of a few justify the walk of many?**

The end justifies the means, so the pragmatist reasons. Most of those who employ the altar call will admit that ninety-six to ninety-eight percent of persons walking an aisle experience no authentic work of God in their souls, that the spiritual results in people's lives are mixed, perhaps even being heavily weighted in the negative. Nevertheless, practitioners of the altar call

will argue that the possible spiritual awakening of a few justifies an apparent spiritual hardening of many. As summarized by one early advocate of the altar call when the method was first instituted, "If only some souls are saved by the use of new measures, we ought thankfully to own their power, and give them our countenance." [21] So the question arises, should evangelists and pastors employ a method that, though it might bring a spiritual blessing to a few, may also negatively impact the spiritual life of many?

Such faulty reasoning was summarized as follows: "From the little that I saw, I would say that if good is done by these irregular means, it is done at frightful expense. It is like slaying hundreds to save one." [22]

### 11. The Altar Call: doesn't it help people to find assurance of salvation?

On an ongoing basis, in being assured of salvation, it is important that believers keep focus upon Jesus and what He has done, not upon anything they have done or might do. The author of Hebrews states: "[L]et us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:1b-2). In gaining the assurance of salvation, it is important that believers keep their focus upon God's Word, not upon a walk that happened "once-upon-a-time."

To those who truly believe, God's Word offers great assurance. Consider the following verses: "For I am persuaded, that [nothing] . . . shall . . . separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Romans 8:38-39, KJV; Read verse 8:29-39.). "Wherefore he [Jesus] is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25, KJV). "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to make you stand in the presence of His glory blameless with great joy, to the only God our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen" (Jude 24-25). Assurance of salvation comes to us by God's Word, and not by our walk to a metaphorical altar.

### 12. The Altar Call: do any biblical texts support the evangelical rite?

Advocates of the altar call prevail upon the following proof text to establish the rite of the altar call. It gives people an opportunity to publicly confess Jesus Christ as Savior. Jesus said, "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 10:32-33). At first glance, Jesus' words might seem to endorse the altar call as such a confession. But the context of Jesus' words does not support such understanding.

The issue surrounds not what the Christian is to do--believers are to confess Christ--but rather, before whom they are called upon to do it. They are to confess Jesus "before men." Just who are these men? Are they believers, or unbelievers? Do they represent civil and/or religious authorities? Are the men hostile to, or embracing of, Christianity? Is the confession to take place inside the church, or outside the church? Questions surround the meaning of "men" in this

context. So how should Jesus' words ("**Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven**") be understood?

Jesus told the disciples that they would be called upon to confess Him before unfriendly courts, governors, and kings. Earlier in the chapter Jesus warned His disciples, "**But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the courts, and scourge you in their synagogues; and you shall even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles**" (Matthew 10:17-18). As one commentator observed, "Public acknowledgement of Jesus" in this context was likely to be "in a court defense . . ."[23]

Other verses in the context bear it out. Again Jesus warned of persecution to come: "**And brother will deliver up brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents, and cause them to be put to death. And you will be hated by all on account of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved. But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next. . .**" (Matthew 10:21-23a). The environment in which Jesus told the disciples they would be called upon to confess His name before men was going to be unfriendly. The context of this verse has nothing to do with confessing Christ by walking an aisle in the "friendly confines" of a church. Rather, it has to do with confessing Christ before hostile civil, magisterial, and judicial authorities.

## Conclusion

In their giving altar calls, many pastors provide the appearance of deeply caring for souls, the implication being that any pastor who does not offer altar calls cares neither for the salvation or spiritual welfare of people. This issue needs to be addressed.

On this point, we enter into the realm of motive, and as Paul stated, only God is qualified to judge any pastor's heart and motive. He wrote:

**For I am conscious of nothing against myself, yet I am not by this acquitted; but the one who examines me is the Lord. Therefore do not go on passing judgment before the time, but wait until the Lord comes who will both bring to light the things hidden in the darkness and disclose the motives of men's hearts; and then each man's praise will come to him from God's** (1 Corinthians 4:4-5).

Though sometimes during and at the end of a service, I frequently invite people to trust in Jesus Christ where they are, I do not ask them to do anything outwardly to signify their inner faith. That will come later through baptism and good works, both of which follow faith (See Acts 2:38; 8:12; etc.). I invite them to faith, not to move forward. I do not invite them to walk forward for what, in my view, is a very important reason: I do not want faith to become confused with something else. I do not want "do" (i.e., Come forward.) to be confused with "done" (i.e., Christ's sacrifice is complete and sufficient to save us from our sins.). The Gospel demands that persons possess a godly sorrow and conviction for sin, place their faith in Jesus Christ who died on the cross for their sins, and believe that He rose from the dead. As a pastor, I do not want any method to conflict with or confuse this message. I want nothing to come between the sinner and the Savior. Salvation is through faith and by grace (i.e., the unmerited favor of God), and for

that reason, I do not offer altar calls. Faith is personal. I refrain from doing altar calls not because I am indifferent to the state of people's souls, but rather, because I am concerned that there is no confusion about how a person is saved--that people cannot be saved by anything they might do, but rather, by faith in what Jesus has already done. God's salvation comes to the human heart by faith plus nothing!

As another pastor summarizes: "If we truly believe that salvation is by God's grace alone, not something that is accomplished by means of partnership between God and man, we will have no apprehension about preaching the gospel and inviting people to Christ in such a way that they are left with nothing to do but repent and believe, and nowhere to go but to Christ Himself by faith." [24]

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## ENDNOTES

- [1] Iain H. Murray, *Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950-2000* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000) 52, quoting Curtis Mitchell, *God in the Garden: The Official Story of the Billy Graham New York Crusade* (Kingswood, Surrey: World's Work, 1957) 148-149.
- [2] William Martin, *The Billy Graham Story: Prophet with Honor* (London, England: Hutchinson, 1992) 41.
- [3] Charles G. Finney, *Systematic Theology*, Lecture 24, J.H. Fairchild, Editor (Albany, OR: Books for the Ages, 1878) 304.
- [4] Emphasis added, Finney, *Systematic Theology*, Lecture 27, 349.
- [5] Martin, *Graham Story*, 42.
- [6] Charles G. Finney, *Revivals of Religion*, Lecture 1 (Virginia Beach, VA: CBN University Press, 1978) 4.
- [7] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *True Evangelism: Winning Souls by Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1919) 10.
- [8] Ibid. 13.
- [9] Ibid. 14-15.
- [10] Ibid. 24.
- [11] Finney, *Systematic Theology*, Lecture 24, 307.
- [12] D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Authority* (Chicago, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1958) 71.
- [13] Sherwood Eliot Wirt, *Billy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1997) 38.
- [14] Martin, *Graham Story*, 29.
- [15] Ibid. 30.
- [16] Chafer, *Evangelism*, 15.
- [17] Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, "Perfectionism," Volume 2, in *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Volume 8 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1932) 23.
- [18] D.A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1992) 14.
- [19] Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned Over District* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1950) 181-182.
- [20] Chafer, *Evangelism*, 19.
- [21] Iain H. Murray, *Revival & Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism*

1750-1858 (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994) 367.

[22] Ibid. 367-368.

[23] Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993) 288.

[24] Daryl Wingerd, *The Corrupt Root and Bitter Fruit of Altar Call Evangelism* (<http://www.ccwonline.org/altar.html>)