

Calling Sinners to Christ: A Biblical Response to the "Altar Call"

Workshop 16—Murungi Igweta

What is "altar call"? An appeal for an immediate public commitment to a sermon just preached, and is also called "the invitation". This may involve hand raising, standing up, kneeling down, going to a counseling area or signing a commitment card. Mostly it is walking down the aisle to the front where the preacher is, "coming forward to accept Christ as your Saviour" and repeating the "sinner's prayer" and being assured that salvation has been effected and it must not be doubted.

I. The Bible Does Not Teach the 'Altar Call'

Diligently search the scriptures you will not find any *command* or *example* in any verse of the Bible approving this method. Neither the Lord Jesus nor His apostles used or commanded this method, even if there were occasions when they could have used it, e.g. the Lord Jesus with Nicodemus (John 3:10-21); with the Samaritan Woman (John 4:1-42); with the rich young ruler (Mark 10:17-31); The Pentecost (Acts 2:36-37); Paul with the Philippian Jailor (Acts 16:30-31)

So where did altar call come from? Altar call is an invention of a Presbyterian evangelist named Charles G. Finney (1792-1875) who was Pelagian in theology. He called it coming to the anxious seat or to the inquiry room and began using it in his evangelistic services in about 1820. It was refined by D.L. Moody and popularized by Billy Graham. Other Word of Faith preachers have taken it and it has become the order of the day. Preached his last sermon on June 1980 and died at Ealing on 1 March 1981.

II. Altar Call Contradicts the Biblical Doctrines of God's Grace

A. *It contradicts the Bible doctrine of the depravity or the inability of man.*

A man who is spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1) cannot do himself any spiritual good. He can't even will to repent of sin and trust in Christ. He is dead, blind, and a slave! No man is able to come to Christ except the Father draw him (John 6:44).

B. *It contradicts the biblical order of salvation.*

The Scriptural order is:

Election >> Regeneration >> Faith >> Conversion

C. *It contradicts the gospel way of salvation by coming to Christ.*

The gospel *is not*, do something physical and if you will, you will be saved! Rather the gospel is that God has done it all for you – believe in His Son, Jesus Christ and you will be saved! See Romans 9:16; John 3:8; 1:12–13. The Coming to Jesus as He required in Matthew 11:28 is not physical, it is spiritual, it is to believe or trust Him for salvation.

D. *Altar call is opposed to salvation by grace without works.*

Salvation is by grace through faith according to Ephesians 2:8–9. Faith itself is the gift of God. See also Colossians 2:12 and Philippians 1:29. Faith is the opposite of doing something for salvation, it is trusting someone else, that is Christ, to do what you can't do. Works is the necessary *evidence of salvation*, *not* the *prior condition* of it. The altar call satisfies man's natural desire to do something to save or help save himself.

E. *It contradicts the Bible doctrine of Sola Scriptura.*

The Word of God alone, has God's authority, and so is sufficient for all matters of faith and practice. It is without error, it is infallible and final. There is nothing God wants us to know or to do that is not found in His written word (2 Timothy 3:16–17). But altar call promotes religious experience that is not in the Bible.

III. Altar Call has done Great Damage to the Cause of Christ

A. It produces great numbers of obviously false professions of Christ:

- Very few are baptized after this 'conversion'
- People who respond are not satisfied and so they respond to other altar calls!

B. Altar call deceives too many who respond to it.

No corresponding moral transformation as a result of responding to this call. No visible fruit of the Spirit.

C. The altar call produces scepticism and bitterness in many who respond to it.

IV. Conclusion

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

- ***Failure to search the Scriptures*** like the Bereans.
- ***Pragmatism.*** The deception that whatever works or appears to work is good.
- ***Lack of faith and trust in God the Saviour.*** *Salvation belongs to the Lord (Jonah 2:9)*

What is the biblical method of inviting sinners to Christ?

- ***Christ's invitation*** is found in Matthew 11:28
- ***Point sinners to Christ.*** Tell them to repent of their sins, and cast themselves to the cross of Christ. Peter told those who asked them what they should do (to be saved), he said, *"Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the Holy Spirit."* (Acts 2:38). Beseech them to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and they would be saved (Acts 16:31). If we are to be true to God's word we must

direct sinners to Christ and not to the front (altar) or to the preacher.

Recommended Reading on the subject

- Achok, Elly *Hells Best Revealed Secret*
- Adams, James E. *Decisional Regeneration*
- Blachard John *Pop Goes The Gospel*
- Chantry, Walter *Today's Gospel, Authentic Or Synthetic?*
- Crossley, Gareth *Everyday Evangelism*
- Dabney, Robert L. *An Exposition Of I Corinthians 3:10-15*
- Reisinger, Ernest *Today's Evangelism, It's Message and Methods*
- Hulse, Errol *The Great Invitation*
- Murray, Iain *The Invitation System*
- Packer, J. I. *Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God*