

# “Altar-Call Evangelism”

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## Altar-Call Evangelism: *Is it biblical?*

“What mean these dispatches from the battle-field? ‘Last night, fourteen souls were under conviction, fifteen were justified, and eight received full sanctification.’ I am weary of this public bragging, this counting of unhatched chickens, this exhibition of doubtful spoils. Lay aside such numberings of the people, such idle pretense of certifying in half a minute that which will need the testing of a lifetime.” This lamentation combined with sage counsel was given over a hundred years ago by **Charles Haddon Spurgeon** (1834-1892). It was communicated in a public lecture to his ministerial students and then published in his classic book, *The Soul Winner*. Spurgeon’s grief was over a style of evangelism that was all the rage in his day because of how quickly so-called results could be counted, secured and then reported publicly as a mighty “gospel” success. We know this kind of evangelism today as “altar-call” evangelism. During Spurgeon’s generation this type of evangelism was very novel, but in our day (a hundred plus years later) – it’s the norm.

“But not only is it an accepted practice for churches in the 21st century, it is revered as the only sure and sacred means of acquiring conversions to Christ. Or, as one church-goer put it to me several years ago: “Without the altar-call *no one* will be saved.” In fact, along this same line of thinking, there is even a local pastor I know, who recently said: “Without the altar-call no church will grow in the South Georgia.” For me personally, over the past fourteen years, I have greatly questioned the legitimacy and even integrity of altar-call evangelism. Though for many years as an itinerant evangelist I too had faithfully practiced this manner of “getting people saved.” However, in 1995, by a series of illuminating discoveries, I gradually abandoned altar-call evangelism for good.

“The first great challenge to me over this practice was simply a question of its **biblical warrant**. Did Christ or the Apostles or the early church as a whole employ this method of calling people to come forward at the end of a worship service, make a decision for Christ by repeating a prayer, and then be given immediate assurance of their salvation? The answer is an emphatic - NO! Nowhere in Scripture is there either a model or sanction for the altar-call. Rather, what we see is an aggressive, clear, faithful proclamation of the gospel with God blessing His Word with conversions (e.g., Acts 2:14-47; 3:11-26; 17:16-34). To say it another way, biblical evangelism believes in the *sufficiency* of the gospel (Rom.1:16; I Cor.1:18-2:5). This means the gospel is enough for sinners to hear in order to be saved. Furthermore, it is the gospel alone which God has ordained as the means He uses to bring sinners to Himself (Rom.10:14-17; I Cor.3:5-7). Thus the mandate of the Great Commission is to go into all the world and *preach the gospel* to all people (Mark 16:15; Lk.24:47; cf. Matt.28:19). Nothing more, nothing less. The altar-call however imposes the church to do something more than what God Himself has ordained. In fact, it implies by its very method that the preaching of the gospel falls short as a means of bringing sinners to Christ. In short, the altar-call is nothing more than a man-made addition to the gospel and therefore a denial of its sufficiency.

“But what if someone argues that Christ called people to publicly come to Him and believe in Him - would this imply that altar-call evangelism is simply following Christ’s example? There are two important points we need to remember in answer to this assumption: *first*, believing on Christ is the result of being born again with a new nature that hungers and thirsts for Christ unto salvation (see Jn.3:1-8; 6:35; Eph.2:5; Tit.3:5), not with a physical act of going forward and publicly praying a prayer. When Jesus called people to come to Him in the context of salvation, it was not with the idea that they would physical come toward Him. It meant to believe on Him (e.g., Jn.6:35-37) *Second*, no one can come to Christ (thereby savingly believe on Him) unless they are “drawn” or “granted” this grace by the Father (Jn.6:44,65). Henceforth, true conversions to Christ are the result of God’s sovereign power and good pleasure alone, not the methods induced by men (see Acts 2:47; 5:14; II Thess.2:13,14).

“But there is a further reason why the altar-call is an unbiblical practice: *it creates a false assurance of salvation*. This is the most disturbing and dangerous aspect of the altar-call. Tens of thousands of people who have “walked the aisle” and “prayed the prayer” are given immediate assurance that they are saved. And the only evidence proffered for such assurance is the physical act of walking to the front of a church building and repeating a prayer. What’s worse, is that a local church will seal this false assurance through baptism and church membership - and the so-called new convert will be told “never to doubt your salvation again.”

“Now the problems with this are too numerous to disseminate for what my aim is in this article. Rather, I will offer three major propositions that should be considered carefully as a warning against this practice of giving immediate assurance, and employing the altar-call in general: **First, nowhere in Scripture is the assurance of salvation attributed to a physical act**. An atheist can “walk an aisle” and “pray the prayer” and still remain an atheist. The power of salvation and

the assurance that would accompany it, is not in the sinner coming to the front of a church building and praying a prayer but God alone who saves.

**“Secondly, the assurance of salvation in Scripture is related to both an objective and subjective spiritual reality.** The objective spiritual reality of assurance is Christ and His saving work (see Rom.3:21-4:5). Saving faith is not in what we have done but in Christ alone and what He accomplished to save us. The subjective spiritual reality of assurance is in the fruit of a holy life (see Gal.5:22-23; Heb.12:14). In fact, the entire book of First John is devoted to this biblical aspect of assurance. If you’re saved your life will bear out that transformation in desires and conduct that are both righteous and holy. The altar-call produces no such fruit of this kind - only antinomians and legalists.

**“Finally, the assurance of salvation is given by the Holy Spirit’s witness not a preacher who leads you in a prayer.** Romans 8:14-16 affirms this truth. Therefore, it is sheer arrogance (though unintentional, I’m sure) for a preacher to confer salvation-assurance on a sinner because they have repeated a prayer. This is nothing more than the Protestant version of Roman Catholic sacramentalism. Only the Holy Spirit can give us the assurance of salvation as He gives us a new heart, reveals to us the truth of Christ in the gospel, and empowers us to live a holy life. The altar-call cannot grant this kind of assurance.

“But sadly and tragically, many sinners are led into thinking they are saved because of their response to the altar-call, rather than being truly regenerated by the Holy Spirit and thus drawn to Christ (Jn.3:5; 6:44; Tit.3:5). Is it any wonder then that the greatest problem facing the local evangelical church in America is unregenerate church membership? The altar-call can increase a church-roll but it will never produce a new creation in Jesus Christ (II Cor.5:17-18a).

### **The History behind the Altar-Call**

“How and why did the altar-call ever become a part of mainstream evangelism? The actual history behind the altar-call began in the late 1700s with the first generation of American Methodists in America. Being concerned not to admit anyone prematurely into church membership, the Methodists began to “count” the number of their converts. The system they came up with for securing this knowledge of true conversions was what they called “the invitation to the altar.” The Methodists referred to the “altar” as the end of the building in front of the communion table, which was derived from their roots in the Church of England. Their initial practice of this method was simply bringing individuals to identify themselves publicly to be prayed for and given instruction as new converts to Christ. No one, at first, claimed the altar-call as a means of salvation. However, very soon, and inevitably, “coming to the altar” came to be confused with actual conversion to Christ. Methodist preachers would be heard calling people to “come to the altar and be saved.”

“It wasn’t until the 1820s though, that this innovative practice of American Methodism would become the mainstream of American Evangelicalism. And the introduction of the altar-call to the rest of Protestant America would not come from a Methodist - but a lawyer from New England who was ordained in the Presbyterian church. His name was **Charles G. Finney** (1792-1875). Finney has been hailed as “America’s Greatest Revivalist” and “the premier evangelist of the nineteenth-century.” It is beyond dispute that his methods and theology changed the whole course for how evangelicals in America would approach the meaning of revival and the techniques of large-scale evangelism. But what should be in dispute is if following the methods and theology of Charles Finney is conforming to the wisdom and truth of Scripture concerning conversion and evangelism.

“You see, for Finney, hijacking the altar-call from the Methodists needed no adjustments for his doctrinal position. Calling people to come forward and giving them immediate assurance of salvation for their public response, was a logical fit for what Finney believed to be a true conversion to Christ. In his theology, all that a sinner needed to be saved was a decision of the will, rather than a regeneration of his nature. In other words, Finney did not believe in the necessity of the new birth (Jn.1:13; 3:1-8) because he did not believe in the reality of the sinner’s depraved nature (Jer.17:9; Eph.2:1-3).

“Charles Finney was in fact a *Pelagian* at heart. His entire theology of salvation embodied the fifth-century heresy known as **Pelagianism** (412 A.D.). Therefore Finney denied the biblical doctrines of original sin, salvation by grace alone, justification by faith alone, and even, the penal substitution of Christ’s death. Needless to say, Finney was a bona fide heretic - who dazzled his generation with persuasive arguments that pitted reason over revelation, emotional tactics to manipulate the crowds, and quick conversions - which were documented over a period of several years and proven false by the apostasy of most people who “came to the altar” in his meetings.

“Sadly though, “Finneyism” is still alive and well in many churches today. Conversions to Christ are still counted as people answering the altar-call, rather than seeing the evidence of genuine spiritual fruit (Gal.5:22-23). And the determining factor for salvation is still attributed to man’s will rather than God’s sovereign grace (cf. Rom.8:30). Finney would be proud. But what should matter most for us is this: is God glorified by a method not sanctioned by His Word in which man is given the credit for salvation? We know the answer...but will we obey?

## The Theology Behind the Altar-Call

“There is a definite theology which drives the practice of the altar-call. Though many may argue today that theology and methodology are separate issues; yet, the truth is, we only practice what it is we believe. Thus how we “do ministry” is determined by our doctrinal convictions. And the method of altar-call evangelism is no different in this respect.

“So, for the early Methodists and the evangelist Charles G. Finney, it was essentially their theology of salvation which inspired them to use this novel method of calling people to come forward and be saved. For Finney, it was the heresy of **Pelagianism** (circa 412 A.D.) which moved him to comfortably embrace the altar-call. For the Methodists, it was their affirmation of the aberrant teaching of **Arminianism** (circa 1618). However, what is peculiar in both cases, is that it was their belief in *man’s will* being the determining factor in salvation which really formed the core doctrine behind the altar-call.

“Thus, whether you’re considering Arminianism or Pelagianism, what both of these doctrines share in common is that man’s will is sovereign in salvation. Albeit, Pelagianism denies the necessity for God’s grace in Christ to save (hence, it is heretical teaching), while Arminianism contends that without God’s grace man will not be saved - yet in the end, both the Pelagian and the Arminian reward the will of man with the credit for why he is saved; rather than the sovereign grace of God.

“This is the fundamental reason why so many people have attributed their salvation to “walking an aisle”, “praying a prayer”, or “making a decision for Christ.” The sole object and reason for their salvation is centered in the exercise of their will to choose. And should we be surprised that this would be where they give the credit for being saved? If you’ve grown up all your life in church hearing that, “If you take the first step God will do the rest” - then it is only inevitable that under this teaching you will believe that it was your decision which initiated salvation. In other words, God has provided salvation and made the offer, but without man making his move to saved, God is left helplessly wondering if anyone is going to be accept what He has done. Why? Because the theology behind the altar-call is a man-centered view of salvation. God’s will is impotent while man’s will is omnipotent. Is this *biblical*?

“No, the truth of Scripture is that man by nature is sinful to the core (Psa.51:5; Jer.17:9; Rom.3:9-18). He cannot save himself nor does he want to be saved (Mk.10:27; Jn.5:40; Rom.3:11; Eph.2:1-3). Left to his own decisions, bound up in his sinful nature, man will run at breakneck speed and bust hell wide open. For there is no natural affection for Christ in the lost sinner (Jn.3:19-20; Rom.8:5-8). Moreover, when he hears the gospel, his natural understanding reasons that it is foolish and stupid (I Cor.1:18a; 2:14). In this condition, we cannot look to the sinner to “take the first step” for salvation - for no such “step” will ever come!

“How then is man to be saved? It can only be by the sovereign mercy and grace of God (Rom.8:30; 9:15-18; Eph.2:8-10). God must take the first step! God must work in the sinner a new life, recreating a new heart, a new nature (Ezk.36:26; Jn.3:3-8; Eph.2:5) which brings about new desires that cry out, “Lord, save me and make me right with you!” God must give the faith to believe on Christ and the repentance to flee from sin (Eph.2:8; II Tim.2:25). In short, salvation, from first to last, is of the Lord (Jonah 2:9; Eph.1:3-14; II Thess.2:13). This is the theology of the Bible: **God ALONE saves sinners by His grace and for His glory!**

## A Biblical Alternative to the Unbiblical Altar-Call

“What I have sought to establish in these past three posts is a very careful and critical evaluation of the altar-call. It has been my intention to hold up this “sacred cow” of modern evangelism, in the light of both Scripture and church history, to prove that it is purely a practice of man’s invention driven initially by pragmatic motives without the warrant of God’s Word. Moreover, its theological construct actually robs God of His glory in redemption, by positioning man’s will as the determinate factor for why anyone is saved. Hence, the altar-call does not “call” sinners to look only to Christ for their salvation; but rather, their focus is fixed on what they must do (e.g, walk an aisle, pray a prayer, sign a card) in order to secure themselves in God’s favor. The fruit however of such misguidance are largely false conversions instead of sinners truly casting themselves solely upon Christ and His saving work. Suffice it to say, the altar-call should be abandoned as an unbiblical method which undermines both the gospel and the redeeming work of Christ.

“Now with such a strong condemnation for the altar-call, what kind of evangelism should then be practiced? If we take the altar-call away, what are we left with? In the first place, **to remove the altar-call we will reestablish the sufficiency of the gospel.** This means that the gospel will again be seen as “the power of God unto salvation for everyone who believes” (Rom.1:16), and thus what God has ordained for bringing sinners unto a saving faith in Jesus Christ (Rom.10:14-17). Furthermore, the gospel-commands to “believe” and “repent” will take their rightful place as the only biblical responses necessary to salvation (Mark 1:15; Acts 20:21); as opposed to the unbiblical commands to “raise a hand”, “repeat the

sinner's prayer", "walk an aisle", or "sign a card." In short, the gospel has its own built-in invitation to all sinners that is sufficient for their salvation, without the confusion and benighted notion of "coming to the altar to be saved."

"In the second place, *to remove the altar-call we will reestablish the necessity of the Spirit's work of regeneration*. To call sinners to an altar for salvation takes away from the fundamental urgency to be "born again" (Jn.3:3-8). If a mere decision and a "coming forward" is all we need to be saved, then why must there be a new birth? But the truth is, we have "stony hearts" which God in His sovereign mercy must replace with "new hearts", so that we will be savingly converted to Christ (Ezk.36:26; Tit.3:5,6). With no altar-call the doctrine of the new birth can be proclaimed without obstruction, and the sinner will be impressed with the fact that a "change of heart" is the very core and essence of his salvation. As Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) once declared: "I speak advisedly when I say that the doctrine of 'believe and live' would be a very dangerous one if it were not accompanied by the doctrine of regeneration." Remember what Christ said to Nicodemus: "You *must* be born again" (Jn.3:7, emphasis mine). Without regeneration there is no faith or repentance (Jn.1:12-13).

"In the third and final place, *to remove the altar-call we will reestablish a context of integrity for both conversions and church membership*. This is probably the greatest need of the hour for the local church. The altar-call has bloated so many churches with members who have no fruit to prove the credibility of their conversion. But if the altar-call is taken away, then greater time, patience, and care can be given to sinners who "seem" to be under conviction for their sin and are asking questions about Christ. This means that conversions will not be rushed or forced for the sake of "numbers" or "results" - but instead, the gospel is faithfully preached, sinners are called to believe and repent, and God is trusted for the work which He alone can do, namely, save sinners! In time, we must be assured that if God has brought salvation, then the fruit of that conversion will eventually manifest itself (Matt.13:18-23); and the result will be a church membership with integrity. This, above all, must be recovered in our day.