

PARKWAY COMMUNITY CHURCH

ALTAR CALLS

by Tom Leary

After attending Parkway Community Church for the first time, one may ask “Why was there no Altar Call? Why was there no ‘invitation’ after the preacher finished the sermon?” After all, most believers grew up in and/or came to salvation in a church that had an “altar call” every Sunday. The “invitation” is today a central part of a majority of Protestant church services across the nation. In fact, in the churches that employ such a technique,

...walking the aisle in response to the ‘altar call’ (is) so closely identified with conversion that coming to Christ and coming to the front (are) treated as one and the same thing. Behind the practice (lies) the fallacy that saving faith is of the same nature as a physical decision, and that if only sinners will answer the evangelist’s invitation then grace will secure their rebirth.¹

Anyone that has attended a Billy Graham Crusade has seen people being called to the front for salvation after Dr. Graham has concluded his message. Not only that, but experience has shown that when serving as a “counselor” at a Graham Crusade, the counselors are instructed to begin moving down toward the stage as soon as the invitation is given. The stated purpose: to encourage the unsaved to begin moving down in response to the call to come down, in response to the plea:

“Don’t let distance keep you from Christ. Your friends will wait for you. Christ went to the Cross because he loved you. Certainly you can come these few steps. Those of you up high in the stadium, begin moving right now. Come right now. We will wait for you”.

In the churches that employ the Invitation System, the congregation will continue to sing “Have Thine Own Way” or “Just As I Am”, waiting for the convicted sinner to release the “white knuckled” grip on the pew, to finally move to the front of the church to “take the pastor’s hand”. Unfortunately, this method has done considerable harm—harm to

¹ Murray, Iain H., Evangelicalism Divided: A Record of Crucial Change in the Years 1950 to 2000, (The Banner of Truth Trust, Carlisle, PA, 2000), p. 51-52

God's people, to the unsaved, and also to God's churches.

The use of the invitation system has caused many people to believe that they must "go forward" or "pray a prayer" in order to be saved. This method was not founded in the early church, and it has no basis in Scripture.

As a result, a number of serious questions are raised that will be answered here.

Indeed, the intent of this paper is not to offend, but to outline in clear terms just how the evangelical church today got to a place where the invitation system is used, and to explain why Parkway Community Church does not engage in the practice. Above all, we seek to be faithful to the Lord and to the Scripture.

In order to understand just how the altar call came to be, we must go back in church history, and take a close look at a man named Charles Finney.

THE ORIGIN OF THE ALTAR CALL

Though the foundation for the altar call is believed to have had its beginning in the 19th century with Charles Finney, it actually evolved from a method employed a century earlier.

In 1741, a minister named Eleazar Wheelock began to use a technique called the "Mourner's Seat". Wheelock would target certain sinners by having them sit in the front bench or pew, and during his sermon, "salvation was looming over their heads". After the sermon, these people were open to counsel and exhortation. They were vulnerable to whatever the preacher said. Eyewitnesses testified that false conversions were multiplied as a result of the employment of this methodology.²

CHARLES FINNEY

Charles Grandison Finney has come to be admired by countless believers, including some well known, well respected church leaders, but in fact, he was less than orthodox in his theology, and clearly not evangelical. After his conversion, Finney left his

² Staten, Steven Francis, "The Sinner's Prayer", p. 3

law practice to go on the road as an evangelist. Eventually, he taught at Oberlin Seminary, ultimately becoming the president of that seminary.

FINNEY'S THEOLOGY

Finney's belief system consisted of theological adultery. His theology revolved around human morality—man's ability to "be good".

...in Finney's theology, God is not sovereign; man is not a sinner by nature; the atonement is not a true payment for sin; justification by imputation is insulting to reason and morality; the new birth is simply the effect of successful techniques, and revival is a natural result of clever campaigns.³

For example, his idea of justification required constant and precise obedience to God—in a word, "works". He did not believe that Christ died for anyone in particular, and he believed that sinners had to meet certain criteria to experience salvation. In other words, he did not believe in the sufficiency of Christ's atoning death alone. Finney also argued that Christ could not have died for anyone's sins but his own.

He denied the doctrine of Original Sin—as did Pelagius⁴—that we are all born into this world having inherited Adam's guilt and sin. He denied that we as humans have a sinful nature. In fact, Finney argued persistently against the belief that the new birth is a divine gift, arguing that "regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference; or in changing from selfishness to love or benevolence," as moved by the moral influence of Christ's example (Finney's Systematic Theology, p. 224).

On justification by grace alone through faith alone, Finney wrote, "The doctrine of an imputed righteousness, or that Christ's obedience to the law was accounted as our obedience, is founded on a most false and nonsensical assumption." After all, Christ's righteousness "could do no more than justify himself. It can never be imputed to us...It was naturally impossible, then, for him to obey in our behalf." This "representing of the atonement as the ground of the sinner's justification has been a sad occasion of

³ Horton, Michael S., "The Legacy of Charles Finney", in *Modern Reformation*, 1995, p. 4

⁴ According to Pelagius, Adam was just a bad example, not the father of our sinful condition. He argued that we are sinners because we sin, rather than we sin because we are sinners.

stumbling to many" (Finney, pp. 320-322).

Not only did the revivalist abandon the material principle of the Reformation (justification), making him a renegade against evangelical Christianity; he repudiated doctrines, such as original sin and the substitutionary atonement, that have been embraced by Roman Catholics and Protestants alike. Therefore, Finney is not merely an Arminian, but a Pelagian. He is not only an enemy of evangelical Protestantism, but of historic Christianity of the broadest sort.⁵

By corrupting the doctrine of justification by faith; by denying the doctrines of original sin and total depravity; by minimizing the sovereignty of God while enthroning the power of the human will; and above all, by undermining the doctrine of substitutionary atonement, Finney filled the bloodstream of American evangelicalism with poisons that have kept the movement maimed even to this day.⁶

CRITICISM OF FINNEY'S THEOLOGY

In response to Finney's digression from historic Christianity, a theologian named John Williamson Nevin (1803-1886) published a book called The Anxious Bench, which was highly critical of Finney's revivalism theology. In brief, he wrote:

God carries on His saving work through the ordinary, divinely established means grace in the church and in the Christian family. Therefore, rather than inventing our own man-made 'New Measures', we should rather trust God to work in His own way through the ordinary means of grace that He Himself has placed within the church. Christ will generally act through these to unite people to Himself, and then to build them up in Himself.⁷

Though Nevin was highly critical of Finney and his "new methods", he acknowledged:

God in His sovereignty may sometimes choose to make use of a bad method to effect a real conversion - but that does not justify us in using bad methods.⁸

He spoke well. It is true that we are not justified in using methods that digress from trust

⁵ Horton, p. 5

⁶ Johnson, Phillip R., "A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing: How Charles Finney's Theology Ravaged the Evangelical Movement", 1998

⁷ Nevin, John W., The Anxious Bench, in "Charles Finney and His Critics", Nick Needham, Banner of Truth Trust, 2006

⁸ Nevin

in the sovereignty of God and the work of his Spirit. Salvation is not dependent upon the work of man and his methods, but upon the work of the Spirit of God. Paul made it very clear that our responsibility is to tell others. God is the one that causes the harvest.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ALTAR CALL

The Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield was characterized by—distinguished by—Reformation theology. Finney rebelled against such teaching and developed his own means of effecting salvation.

Reacting against the pervasive Calvinism of the Great Awakening, the successors of that great movement of God's Spirit turned from God to humans, from the preaching of objective content (namely, Christ and him crucified) to the emphasis on getting a person to "make a decision."⁹

In order to get people to “make a decision”, Charles Finney and those who followed him in his thinking used “techniques” or “new methods” to accomplish that end. Finney’s “new methods” included emotional tactics that resulted in fainting and crying, and other “excitements,” as Finney and his followers called them, as well as the “Anxious Seat”.

In approximately 1835, Finney revived the practice initiated by Wheelock, calling the Mourner’s Seat the “Anxious Seat”. Finney held that the Anxious Seat took the place of baptism in the days of the apostles “*as a public manifestation of their (new converts) determination to be Christians*”. The Anxious Seat was not rooted in Scripture and was not rooted in the early church.

The Anxious Seat evolved into what it is today—the walking of an aisle, the raising of a hand, or the praying of a prayer, which, it is believed, is the public manifestation of one’s belief in Christ. It is typically referred to as an “invitation” or “altar call”.

An altar call may include one or more of the following methodologies:

- *Music is played softly in the background while the preacher prays and talks to the congregation.*

⁹ Horton, p. 1

- *Those who feel the pangs of conscience and know they need to respond to God's work in their heart are asked to slip up their hands.*
- *All are reminded to keep their "heads bowed and eyes closed...no one looking around."*
- *Those who slipped up their hands are possibly then asked to "look up" at the preacher so that he can talk directly just to them. If you have raised your hand and/or looked up, you are then asked to leave your seat and make your way down the aisle where the preacher or another counselor can greet you and talk with you further...."I don't want to embarrass you; I just want to pray with you."*
- *Designated counselors may at this time also leave their seats and make their way down the aisle to kneel or stand at the front (to prime the pump?). If you've come down the aisle, you are asked to go to a room off to the side where counselors are there to continue praying and talking with you.*
- *At any point in this approach, an invitation hymn may be sung (such as Just As I Am, I Surrender All, Have Thine Own Way, etc.). During this hymn you are invited to come to the front to kneel and pray, to rededicate your life, to receive Christ, to talk with the pastor or another counselor, or to join the church. (The altar call has many uses.)*
- *If several verses of the hymn have been sung, the minister may ask for the instruments to continue playing quietly. This gives those kneeling at the altar some time to finish, or those still resisting the Holy Spirit an opportunity to respond "before it's too late."¹⁰*
- *Perhaps one final verse of the hymn is sung.*
- *If someone has "given their life to Christ" or has joined the church, they may be presented to the congregation at the close of the altar call.¹¹*

All of these methods came to be used as the normative public profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. But they evolved over time. In the 1860's, instead of calling for a public decision by those who listened to his preaching—which tended to be a response under pressure—Dwight Moody (1837-1899) asked people to join him in a room called the "Inquiry Room". The discussion in the Inquiry Room eventually resulted in the "inquirer" being led in a prayer. Eventually, this technique led to "the Sinner's Prayer", which is still in use today.

¹⁰ The clear implication being that one could only experience salvation right then and there, in the church, and to walk out before "going forward" would result in no opportunity to be saved, for to walk away without Christ could result in one's death without him should he die

¹¹ Lorenzini, Massimo, "The Modern Invitation System Examined—The Reality of False Conversions", 2009, p. 3-4

After Moody died, R. A. Torrey took over Moody's ministry. He began to evangelize on the street, and would encourage people to "make a decision for Christ, right now". At the same time, Billy Sunday left his professional baseball team after his conversion, and

"in his crusades he popularized the Finney-Moody method and included a bit of a circus touch. After fire and brimstone sermons, heavy moralistic messages with political overtones, and humorous if not outlandish behavior, salvation was offered. Often it was associated with a prayer, and at other times a person was told they were saved because they simply walked down his tabernacle's "sawdust trail" to the front where he was standing. In time people were told they were saved because they publicly shook Sunday's hand, acknowledging that they would follow Christ."¹²

Finally, Billy Graham came to be recognized as the leading evangelist of his time. In the 1950's, Graham began his crusades—large venue events involving local churches and utilizing local church members. Believers were encouraged to bring a friend to the "meeting", and after he finished preaching, Graham would extend the "invitation", asking people to "get up out of their seats to come down and receive Christ". Counselors were to immediately move down to the front so others would not feel "funny" about doing so.¹³ The altar call had come into it's own.

THE DEFENSE OF THE INVITATION SYSTEM

There are a number of reasons given today to continue the use of the altar call or "invitation". People look to Scripture, practicality, and psychology to support their position that altar calls should be used in the church.

Certainly, there is the argument that "Jesus called his disciples publicly, therefore we should do the same".

Then, there is the pragmatic approach—having people go forward to profess Christ will give the preacher the opportunity to introduce the individual to the church body as a new convert. In this way, it will allow others to take the new convert under their wings as it were, to disciple them or to just "make them feel welcome". "Going forward" will also allow others who already believe to demonstrate their desire to join the church.

¹² Staten, p. 5

¹³ From the author's own experience

Still others will argue that when people go forward at the end of the preacher's sermon, it is a practical demonstration of the power of God's Word, and of the effectiveness of the preacher. To these people, what is important is "numbers, numbers, numbers". They argue that numbers definitively define the level of "success" the local church is experiencing, and will argue that numbers allow for proper planning for the next church year and for the budget.

Finally, others will contend that a public response will forever "seal the deal". That is, they believe that if someone goes forward in a church service, and visibly declares their faith in Christ, there will be less of a chance of them reneging on their decision.

However, these arguments carry with them inherent dangers.

THE DANGERS OF THE INVITATION SYSTEM

Let us deal with the last argument first—"sealing the deal". The fact of the matter is, that when the gospel is preached, there will be true conversions and false conversions. One only needs to look at Mark 4:3-8, the parable of the sower, to see that this is true. Jesus described for us the fact that only a certain number will truly be saved. The utilization of the invitation system only serves to add to the confusion regarding those who have been saved by falsely inflating that number by identifying the number of people who "made a decision". This "decisionism" as it is referred to, identifies the practice of calling people to "make a decision for Christ", a decision, that in and of itself is supposed to guarantee their salvation. The problem is that a "decision" does not provide such a guarantee.

Consider the following examples:

- Charles E. Hackett, the division of home missions national director for the Assemblies of God in the U.S. said, "A soul at the altar does not generate much excitement in some circles because we realize approximately ninety-five out of every hundred will not become integrated into the church. In fact, most of them will not return for a second visit."
- In his book *Today's Evangelism*, Ernest C. Reisinger said of one outreach event, "It lasted eight days, and there were sixty-eight supposed conversions." A month later, not one of the "converts" could be found.
- In 1991, organizers of a Salt Lake City concert encouraged follow-up. They said,

“Less than 5 percent of those who respond to an altar call during a public crusade...are living a Christian life one year later.” In other words, *more than 95 percent* proved to be false converts.

- A pastor in Boulder, Colorado, sent a team to Russia in 1991 and obtained 2,500 decisions. The next year, the team found only thirty continuing in their faith. That’s a retention rate of 1.2 percent.
- In November 1970, a number of churches combined for a convention in Fort Worth, Texas, and secured 30,000 decisions. Six months later, the follow-up committee could only find thirty continuing in their faith.
- A mass crusade reported 18,000 decisions—yet, according to Church Growth magazine, 94 percent failed to become incorporated into a local church.
- In Sacramento, California, a combined crusade yielded more than 2,000 commitments. One church followed up on fifty-two of those decisions and couldn’t find one true convert.
- A leading U.S. denomination reported that during 1995 they secured 384,057 decisions but retained only 22,983 in fellowship. They couldn’t account for 361,074 supposed conversions. That’s a 94 percent fall-away rate.
- In the March/April 1993 issue of *American Horizon*, the national director of home missions of a major U.S. denomination disclosed that in 1991, 11,500 churches had obtained 294,784 decisions for Christ. Unfortunately, they could find only 14,337 in fellowship. That means that despite the usual intense follow-up, they couldn’t account for approximately 280,000 of their “converts.”¹⁴

“Back Door Evangelism” is what this is called. A “convert” will “walk the aisle”, “make a decision”, or “give his life to Christ”, and continue right out the back door, never to return.

All of us have known people who claimed to have committed their lives to Christ, but do not produce any fruit—what Jesus said would clearly identify the true believer. We have witnessed people who have “walked and aisle”, “raised a hand”, “looked up at the preacher”, recited the sinner’s prayer, or signed a card—yet never darkened the door of the church again.

Those who would argue that Jesus called his disciples publicly, so it follows we should ask sinners to walk the aisle publicly tend ignore the fact that when he called his disciples, Jesus did not call them to salvation, but to follow him and to learn from him.

¹⁴ Lorenzini, p. 2

Further, the invitation system typically involves major psychological pressure on those in the pews. This is accomplished by the incessant pleas of the preacher, as the choir continues to sing “Just As I Am”, by the indirect pressure brought to bear by a friend or relative who invited them to church, or the warning to come forward “before it is too late”. The reason? To elicit a profession of faith that will routinely result in leading the person to repeat the “sinner’s prayer.” “Routinely” because the believer doing the counseling does not think that the person who came forward would do so in a cavalier fashion. Therefore, that individual must be led in the sinner’s prayer. Additionally, people who “go forward” are given instant assurance of salvation, are introduced to the congregation as born-again believers, and are welcomed into the fellowship of the church—boom! Just like that! “One more” has therefore been reached “for the cause of Christ”.

Psychology—subtle manipulative behavior by those leading in the church service—has no place in the worship service. Such manipulation perverts the truth. Again, what happens on Sunday morning is the Holy Spirit accomplishes his work in the lives of believers, who then, having been equipped for the work of ministry, go out and unashamedly share the truth of the gospel with others.

Walking the aisle is, unfortunately, equated by some—directly or indirectly—to one having true saving faith.

Where is either the mandate or example of the engineered call to ‘come to the front’ stated as an act of obedience to God’s call to repentance? When walking down an aisle is tantamount to following Christ and professing Him before men, the biblical idea of godliness has vanished. The system that relies on the altar call encourages these perversions.¹⁵

At the same time, having people “walk the aisle” can be a distraction from what is really important.

- The primary purpose of gathering on Sunday morning is to honor and worship the Lord by believers and the edification of those believers, the equipping of them for the work of ministry (see 1 Corinthians 11-14)

¹⁵ Lorenzini, p. 13

- Many people and/or churches measure the “success” of a Sunday morning worship service not only by the number of people that attend, but also by the number of people that “walk the aisle”
- If people don’t “walk the aisle”, particularly week after week, then the church membership and leadership will begin to question the effectiveness of the one preaching.

The fact of the matter is that the number of people that “walk an aisle” is not an indication of the effectiveness of the preacher. In fact, it is not about the preacher or the effectiveness of the preaching. Worship is not about the people.

Worship is all about God, and giving him the glory, honor and praise due him (Revelation 4). Worship is not about “success” but about bringing glory to the Lord, and such a measure of “success” does not glorify the Lord, but will instead tend to bring glory to man.

Clearly, it is dangerous to provide “assurance” to people who walk the aisle that they are actually saved. In most instances, the preacher “receiving” the individual has never met the individual who responds to the altar call. The preacher therefore has no idea of the spiritual state of the individual. Based on that person’s “profession”, and the fact that he “prayed to receive Christ”, the preacher presents the person to the congregation as a new believer. *How does the preacher know for certain that the person experienced true salvation?* The fact is, he doesn’t. Too many people are given assurance by a preacher (or counselor in a back room) that they are saved, before there is any visible fruit. As a result, people rely upon a “profession of faith”, or a response to an invitation for their salvation rather than upon Christ alone.

Two centuries ago, evangelist George Whitefield said: *There are so many stony ground hearers, who receive the Word with joy, that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits. I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.*

Spurgeon warned: *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." It very often happens that the converts that are born in excitement die when the excitement is over.¹⁶

Unfortunately, a very large number of those who have been "saved" (after walking an aisle) never show any sign of having been regenerated.

In the Scripture, when people were saved, it did not involve works—the Bible simply says "...and he believed...". Paul argued vehemently against any form of works being part of the salvation experience. The public acknowledgement in the Bible of someone having been saved was the fact that the person went out and testified about what had happened to him.

Calling people to walk the aisle and make a public decision for Christ—because they think their theology implies that inviting people to respond to Christ—is unnecessary. Others have quit calling people to come down front because they think everyone within earshot is already saved.

Salvation has everything to do with the work of the Holy Spirit—the third person of the Trinity.

THE WORD OF GOD, THE BIBLE

The fact of the matter is that it is God alone who saves. God alone causes one to believe. It is God who causes one to be regenerated, and it is God that enables the individual to exercise the gift of faith. These are some of the foundational, non-negotiable truths of genuine Christianity.

For some, the use of an altar call uncovers a lack of trust in the sovereignty of God.

"If we don't provide an opportunity to respond to the gospel, someone might leave and never have another opportunity to be saved. They could die in an accident this week and their eternal judgment in hell would be our fault. Their blood would be on our hands."

This is a theological problem...a total misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God in salvation. Scripture makes it clear that salvation is of the Lord. And that whom the Lord

¹⁶ Lorenzini, p. 8

has foreknown and predestined, He does indeed call and justify. And whom He justifies He will indeed someday glorify. Romans 8:28-30 present this chain as completed from God's perspective.

Our lack of obedience to the Lord when we are not faithful in calling people to repentance IS sin on our part. But the eternal destiny of souls is totally in God's hands, not ours. It is His job to convert sinners; it is ours simply to be faithful.

So we are to trust God in all matters, including the evangelization of the lost.¹⁷

When the Word is preached and the Spirit is at work, the sinner is brought to conviction of sin and he cannot love his sin anymore. He must repent.¹⁸

Romans 8:30 says:

And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The salvation that is of God has a defined order—and none of it includes any of man's techniques or methods. God calls and God justifies. God's call will guarantee the response by the one he predestined. The only responsibility man has in this process is the faithful declaration of the Word of God—period.

Wayne Grudem put it this way regarding the call of God:

This powerful act of God is often referred to as "effective calling", to distinguish it from the general gospel invitation that goes to all people and which some people reject. This is not to say that human gospel proclamation is not involved. In fact, God's effective calling comes through the human preaching of the gospel, because Paul says, "to this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Of course, there are many who hear the general call of the gospel message and do not respond. But in some cases the gospel call is made so effective by the working of the Holy Spirit in people's hearts that they do respond; we can say that they have received "effective calling".

We may define effective calling as follows: "Effective calling is an act of God the Father, speaking through the human proclamation of the gospel, in which he summons people to

¹⁷ Lorenzini, p. 10-11

¹⁸ Elliff, Jim, "Closing with Christ" (*Viewpoint*, January—March 1999), p. 13

himself in such a way that they respond in saving faith."¹⁹

Further,

*Although it is true that effective calling awakens and brings forth a response from us, we must always insist that this response still has to be a voluntary, willing response in which the individual person puts his or her trust in Christ.*²⁰

That voluntary response must be just that—voluntary. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones had a lot to say on this subject, some of which is quoted below:

"...it is possible, by various means and methods and mechanisms, to influence the human mind. That is indisputable. We grant that this can be done by religious movements as well as by political and other movements".

"For instance, I remember hearing a story concerning a preacher who was endeavoring to convince his congregation of the danger of delaying decision and action. As an illustration, he pictured a number of people staying at the seaside, who had walked one afternoon on to a promontory of rock stretching from the beach. They had walked right out onto this rocky point and the sea lay all around them. They were enjoying the view and looking out to sea. They failed to realize that gradually the tide was coming in on both sides of them and that it was about to cut them off at the point where the promontory joined the mainland. There they were, so enjoying the sunshine and the fishing that they were unaware of their peril. Then, suddenly, someone noticed it and the urgent question arose as to whether their retreat was already cut off. Were they already surrounded? Would the sea soon cover the whole promontory, and were they all to be drowned? The preacher had taken much time in presenting the story, and had done it with such dramatic effect that he brought the congregation to a point when it seemed to be doubtful whether anybody in the party could escape at all. At that point he suddenly shouted: 'If you do not run at once, it will be too late!' It is said that literally the whole congregation rose to its feet and the Chapel was speedily emptied!

"What do we say about an occurrence such as that? I would unhesitatingly condemn that kind of preaching. None can deny, surely, that at that point the influence was almost purely psychological, that the congregation had ceased to be aware of the truth, and that their minds had been so gripped by this graphic picture that they were acting almost automatically. At that point it is the 'flesh' that is operating rather than the 'Spirit.'

¹⁹ Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994), p. 693

²⁰ Grudem, p. 693

"In the second place I think we must avoid anything that leads to a suspicion that in evangelistic activities we are 'conditioning' people in a psychological manner.... It is, of course, not the criticism which it is important to avoid, but the use of any method which God cannot approve. This again suggests that we must avoid any deliberate use of 'techniques' as aids to the gospel.... Naturally, if what you desire is to produce psychological results then, of necessity, you will have to employ the proper psychological techniques. But I am arguing that we are not to do so if we really believe in the work of the Holy Spirit. We are to present the truth, trusting to the Holy Spirit to apply it. I would urge, therefore, that on scriptural grounds we must not of set purpose decide to employ techniques. That is to go over onto the side of, and to the use of, psychology.

"Another important principle is that in presenting the Christian gospel we must never, in the first place, make a direct approach either to the emotions or to the will. The emotions and the will should always be influenced through the mind. Truth is intended to come to the mind. The normal course is for the emotions and the will to be affected by the truth after it has first entered and gripped the mind. It seems to me that this is a principle of Holy Scripture. The approach to the emotions and the will should be indirect. Still less should we ever bring any pressure to bear upon either the emotions or the will. We are to 'plead' with men but never to bring pressure. We are to 'beseech,' but we are never to browbeat. This, it seems to me, is a vital distinction which every preacher and missionary must always bear in mind.

"I would affirm that much of the modern approach to evangelism, with its techniques and methods, is unnecessary if we really believe in the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and His application of God's message. I suggest that our 'techniques' and our 'mechanics' actually divert the attention of people from the truth of the message to some lower, particular, immediate and practical action which may have the opposite effect from what is intended. The point I am making is that it is surely our business to avoid anything which produces a merely psychological condition rather than a spiritual condition."²¹

THE DECLARATION OF THE WORD

As stated above, the responsibility borne by man in the process of salvation is the faithful declaration of the Word of God—period. It is not man's responsibility to call people to "make a decision for Christ". It is not man's responsibility to "give the people the opportunity to accept Christ". It is not man's responsibility to "give an invitation", nor is it man's responsibility to see how many people can be convinced to "walk the aisle". Man's responsibility is to faithfully and authentically declare the truth of the gospel.

²¹ Lloyd-Jones, D. M., *Conversions—Psychological and Spiritual*, Inter-Varsity Press, 1959

Paul, in Romans 10:14, wrote *How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?* Paul was declaring the importance and necessity of the faithful declaration of the gospel. It is the work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate the individual and to convict the sinner of his need for Jesus. When the Word is faithfully declared, and the unsaved hear that Word, it is then that the Spirit does his work. A perfect example of this is in Acts 2. Peter, on the day of Pentecost, got up and preached the gospel—he preached Jesus. The Spirit of God then brought conviction to a group of those who were listening. The Spirit then caused those in whom the Spirit did his saving work to ask “...*what shall we do?*”

³⁶ Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.” ³⁷ Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” ³⁸ And Peter said to them, “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 gift of the Holy Spirit. [Emphasis added]

To sum up:

- The Word was preached (Peter’s sermon),
- The sinners were convicted (“they were cut to the heart”) and
- Then they asked what they were to do (rather than someone making the “offer”), and
- Then Peter told them to repent.

Today, too many people get it backwards. They will:

1. Bring a friend to a church service *without* having shared the gospel with the friend (failing to tell others the reason they believe, defaulting to the pastor);
2. Bring a friend to a church service, and expect them to “get saved” while they are in the church building (not allowing for or expecting the Spirit to work in the individual’s life elsewhere);
3. Bring a friend to a church service, and expect their friend to respond to the preacher’s offer of salvation (rather than allowing for the work of the Spirit);
4. Expect the friend to hear the offer (invitation) and respond to the offer (without

allowing for the Word to bring conviction)

They will do all of this without recognizing the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit in salvation. By their actions, these people show that they hold that a person cannot be saved apart from responding to an offer of salvation (invitation). By their actions, these people demonstrate their belief that one must “walk an aisle” or “take the pastor’s hand” to be saved.

Unfortunately, this approach has also negatively impacted worship in the churches in America in that they have been turned into situations where the all-important question is “How many ‘decisions’ today?” Instead of maintaining a focus on the Lord Jesus Christ, exalting him and praising him, the end of the church service turns into a focus on how many people will walk down the aisle. Instead of pondering the message that was just preached from the Word of God, people are wondering when others will “walk forward”. This author knows—he was one of them! This author also talked to others—including pastors—in church leadership whose concerns were the same!

Worship services are to be worshipful, teaching times when the church is edified. The church—made up of edified believers—then goes out to do the work of evangelism.

Conclusion

We must be patient to allow the Holy Spirit to work conviction in the heart. That may happen in a few moments, a few hours, days, or even years. To be biblically evangelistic, we must be certain that what we do leads men to faith, not just to decisions.²²

FURTHER READING:

Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors, by Bennet Tyler & Andrew Bonar, Banner of Truth, reprint 1996

Ehrhard, Jim, “The Dangers of the Invitation System,” Christian Communicators Worldwide, 1999

Grudem, Wayne, Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994), Chapter 33, “The Gospel Call and Effective Calling”

Johnson, Phillip R., “A Wolf in Sheep’s Clothing: How Charles Finney’s Theology Ravaged the Evangelical Movement”, 1998

Murray, Iain, Revival and Revivalism, Banner of Truth (June 1994)

²² Ehrhard, Jim, “The Dangers of the Invitation System,” (Christian Communicators Worldwide, 1999) p. 22-23