IN DEFENSE OF THE ALTAR CALL

By Steve Deneff

In the ongoing battle for the souls of modern men, the difference between success and victory is in the "conversion experience". The initial call to discipleship is as tender or tenuous a moment as there is in the Christian's life. In one sense, everything from here on rises or falls on those few moments when his naked soul is first alone with God. This is zero hour.

So what ever happened to the altar call?

In every religion, the altar is a place where God and man come together. What happens after that is anybody's guess. And whole religions are built around the different theories. But in Christendom it usually means one of two things (or both): it is first a place where God is offered to man through the sacrament of Communion (thus the Communion table is the altar for the Roman Catholic and other liturgical churches), and it is a place where man is offered to God through a conversion experience, as in the case with most revivalist (or holiness) churches.

How it all began

No one is certain how the first altar call happened, but most historians lay it at the feet of early Methodists. One anecdote from 1798 tells of Pastor John Easter issuing a call for his audience to gather around a bench in the front of the chapel, and to pray for salvation.

"I have not a doubt that God will convert a soul today," said the pastor with typical Methodist persuasion. And sure enough, by the end of the service, several men and women came forward and fell on the their knees, and wept until the cries of the mourners (in the words of one observer) "became truly awful." After some time, a prayer was offered for those around the bench who were earnestly seeking salvation, and two or three were converted, (that's right; only two or three). The Methodists came to call this "the mourner's bench."

In the following decades, pastors and evangelists from many persuasions began invoking this new technique in order to press for the moment of salvation at the end of their sermons. It was the logical conclusion of protestant faith. If justification occurs in a moment, why not look for that moment (hence, John Cotton's "dateable conversion" of 1647)? And why look for the moment, when it

is more convenient (and Arminian) to call for it?

But this practice was not without its critics. Those from the Calvinist tradition believed that men were called only to wait on God for their salvation, and not to press the matter themselves, and certainly not with such high-profile. To Calvinists, the Methodists were not only crazy, they were dangerous. But even some not-so-Calvinistic preachers were appalled at what they called the "lack of discretion" among those participating in the altar call. In 1807, a Wesleyan conference in England labeled the practice "highly improper (and) likely to produce considerable mischief."

The lawyer-turned-preacher of the last century, Charles Finney, roped off the first few rows of seats in his meetings, and called these the "anxious seats". Sinners were urged to leave their anonymous seats in the back, and to move forward as the preacher railed against the evils of the day. As an encore, Finney then finished his sermons by preaching directly to those (and sometimes only those) in the first few rows.

The Methodist evangelist, Phoebe Palmer thought the invitation to pray at an altar provided a visible way to "offer oneself as a holy and acceptable sacrifice" to God. But even more so, it was a convenient way to bring the sermon to a head; to get everyone thinking one thing; to "press for the moment", as Wesley was fond of saying. It was Mrs. Palmer who first coined the phrase "altar call".

Since then, the altar service has become such a staple in the church's diet, that most Christians over sixty years old still tell you they were first converted there. The altar was the Mount Moriah or burning bush of the last generation. Nearly every milestone in their spiritual pilgrimage was commemorated by a trip to the altar.

But not anymore.

Many churches now install a drama team and an orchestra pit before ever considering an altar rail. And unlike those who objected to the "mourner's bench" a hundred years ago, the nervous preachers who do so today object for purely pragmatic reasons. Their audience doesn't like it.

The modern, less embarrassing "altar call" involves raising our head to make eye contact with the speaker, or meeting at the front after everyone has left the service, or folding down the corner of our visitors card, or reciting a generic prayer and telling an usher, or for the really brave at heart, praying with the pastor during the week. A hundred and fifty years ago, Finney noticed that some who opposed his idea of a "mourner's bench" would themselves finish a sermon by "requesting all those who were willing to submit to God . . . to signify it by leaning forward and putting their heads down upon the pew before them." To Finney, this was not only a less embarrassing version of the

"mourner's bench", it was less radical as well and usually begot the kind of conversions it deserved. It is still true today.

So whatever happened to the altar call?

In today's church, it still takes nearly eight conversions to add a single person to the morning worship attendance. And anywhere between one-third to one-half of our modern converts still test positive for such viral beliefs as "my first responsibility in life is to me" (42%), or "all people are basically good" (77%), or "the purpose of life is enjoyment and personal fulfillment" (77%). And many of our "Christian teenagers" still lie to their parents or teachers (66%), or cheat on an exam (36%).

Now insofar as the trajectory of one's Christian life is determined by those few moments when his Lord says "follow me", statistics like these are not flattering to our modern, face-saving techniques for making converts. That is, our quantity is up, but our quality is down. We almost never hear of the chain smoker who suddenly quits in a day, or the town drunk who becomes as religious one day, as he was antagonistic the day before. All of life is not this simple, we know. But does every conversion these days require time and a twelve-step program? Are there no demons still exorcised at the moment of conversion? Must converts live with all of their vices the day after they are saved? While preaching of miracles, do we deny the grandest of them all: that God can change both the inclinations and behavior of a man in one fell swoop? Or are therapists the new doctors of the American soul?

To these questions, we raise our defense of the altar call. We know its limitations. But there are quick and certain advantages to calling people forward for counseling and prayer around an altar - especially in today's self-improvement society.

For starters, the altar call front-loads the gospel. "Repentance needs to be as serious as the sin was severe," wrote Charles Spurgeon, and the altar call imposes its seriousness on the penitent seeker by making him a little uncomfortable. But he might as well get used to it, for he will never be Christ's disciple who does not deny himself in order to follow Christ. Besides, once the would-be convert learns to "hate his mother and father" (Luke 14:26), then "take up his cross" (Matthew 16:24), and finally serve the body of Christ (most of whom stayed in their seats the day he went forward), his walk to the altar will seem far less lonely and far less intimidating than it now seems to those who have had it too easy all of these years. On the other hand, it should not surprise us to see a generation of Christians (like the present generation) less committed and more selfish when their point of entry into the Christian faith was less demanding. They are not rebels. They are simply confused, and with good reason. They wonder how the same church, who nervously retreated from a public invitation a few months ago, could suddenly get so stubborn over the hard-sayings of Jesus. If those eager to please them, modified the altar call because it was too offensive to the modern age, why do they not do the same

for other, more offensive things in the Christian faith like tithing, fasting, or washing feet. Given enough time, they think, we will modify the hard-sayings too. The last few years has proven them right.

But the altar call also builds accountability right into the conversion experience. That is, when seekers are led to believe they can decide for Christ right in the privacy of their pews, they are tempted to believe they can deal with other problems in much the same manner. Everything is just between them and God. There is no church, no body of believers, no cloud of witnesses to know of their sins or hear their vows. Instead, their vices are as private as their thoughts, and even more deadly. Like Nicodemus, these "closet Christians" may come to Christ in the night, when no one is looking, but their conversions (if they are genuine) are ratified only when they stand for Christ publicly (John 7:50) and then with others in the church (19:39). A young carpenter in my church professed his Christian faith years before he admitted it at work, but once he finally did admit it, he noted that his public confession suddenly compelled him to live up to his faith because "now people are watching." Yet modern congregations still insist on a certain immunity that is both dangerous and undeserved when they badger their preachers for generic invitations about recommitment; or when they insist they will take care of matters themselves right in their seats. Has it ever occurred to them that whatever it is that keeps a seeker from coming to the altar, might later keep him from sharing his faith with others less friendly than those in the sanctuary? We may be sensitive to his need for a little dignity, but if we ever pander to it, we are aiding and abetting that moment in time when Christ shall deny him, too (see Matthew 10:33).

Third, the altar call allows the body of Christ to give the infant new birth. It is true that the "Spirit gives birth to (our) spirit," (John 3:6), but the church has always been the surrogate parent who raises those truly born again. In fact, we are more like midwives who help deliver what Someone Else has conceived. So when the old-fashioned altar is busy, it introduces not only the child (convert) to its parent (the church), but the parent to its child as well, and so keeps evangelism central to the church. Otherwise, when we only hear of conversions and do not witness them, we are like religious clerks who only ratify private little adoptions that have taken place during the week.

One fringe benefit of altar calls is that they cause testimonies, and through testimonies, the people of God know He is present in their midst. Testimonies are never about gradual bends in the river, they are about the sudden turns and defining moments in one's life, after which nothing will be the same. So it is no coincidence that public testimonies first began among people who practiced the altar call. Early camp meeting preachers of the last century knew that their sermons were heard and heeded because they heard about it in a later testimony. Holiness historian, Charles Johnson says that in early camp meetings, as many as 350 people would testify in a single hour with short phrases like "All within me says 'bless the Lord'", or "He satisfies my soul." In

some instances, these came as a sort of roll call in which the pulpit announced a particular state ("Kentucky"), and someone present from that state would shout in reply, "God is working there." The point here is that the preacher did not have to wonder how he was doing. He could tell it from the testimonies, because good testimonies were one step beyond the altar, which served as a sort of bridge between the sermon-preached (the preacher) and the sermon-heeded" (the hearer). Even so, any preacher today who desires a more responsive audience, ought to consider using that thin line of oak between the pulpit and the pew to act as an important bridge between the gospel offered and the gospel received. And what is more, the people themselves are somewhat revived when they hear of another's encounter with God. For God communicates His grace; He inspires His people through the ongoing stories of His miraculous work in other's lives.

Finally, the altar call provides a focal point for confession. In the time line of history, the rise of the therapeutic in this country has occurred at exactly the same time, and in the same proportion to the decline of interest in the altar call. Families no longer meet at the altar to pray. They now schedule appointments with the family therapist. And all that is left for the blundering pastor to do is to recommend that the therapist at least be "Christian". But it is not the therapist himself who undermines our gospel of an instantaneous conversion. It is his science, or presuppositions. He assumes, and most of our culture with him, that problems today are not as simple as they once were. And so he has designed a whole new religion, with its own language, ordinands and eisogesis to propitiate (or at least explain away) the new deadly sins of low self-esteem, obsessive-compulsive disorders, and stress-related anxiety. But fortunately (?) we have not thrown our conversions out. We have only humanized them. Rather than judge that some conversions are lacking in fruit and are therefore not authentic, we have slowly decided that everyone who cries "Lord, Lord" is saved, and that some of these need the benefits of good therapy to help loosen sins they should have dropped at the altar. It is true that many problems today do not disappear quickly, even when we pray they would. But counseling, like every device, only educates the sinner and takes him to that moment wherein he must decide to walk, or not to walk in the truth he has just received. But we must never confuse a science with the Savior, nor the knowledge of truth with the decision to walk in it. They are two separate, and sometimes unrelated matters. So when our forefathers talked of "driving a stake at the altar", they were not speaking of simplistic solutions for sins they did not fully understand. They meant that most of life was spiritual, and that all knowledge was only as good as our willingness to let it in. In this sense, they prayed for conversions in their soul, which naturally worked its way out. Today, we pray for therapy to help our minds, which must later work its way in to our soul. Ours is a much slower (and less efficient) process. And frankly, if Christian counseling is the new altar call, let's all build altars and get them in by Sunday, because after forty years of CAPS (Christian Association of Psychological Studies), we have learned that half of those with problems, will resolve them - whether they seek counseling or not. And we have learned that

those who find good help, are just as likely to find it with a good friend or (are you ready for this?) pastor, as with any trained psychologist. To be sure, all of life's problems are not simple. But many of them are, and so require the attention and focus of an altar as a place to "drive a stake". For those problems more profound, we will find that God's grace, properly offered and properly understood, is more radical and profound than anything we mortals have dreamed up down here. For "where sin did abound . . ." (Romans 5:20).

Now what does all of this mean? What are the implications for ministers today, who are called to know their people and study God's Word, then stand in the pulpit every Sunday to bring the two of them together? There is one immediate consequence: Ministers today need to shift from sermons that inform, to sermons that declare; from data to revelation; from persuasion to proclamation. For the kingdom of God is not a democracy, and truth does never depend on how many will heed its appeal. If we can make this quantum shift in our minds, we can once again appeal to modern men from the gospel, once delivered for all the saints, and then move to meet those whose souls Christ has stirred, at the altar. In exchange, we will have fewer converts, but an easier time discipling them. It does not seem we will spend as much time prying their fingers off from the sins they should have already abandoned, or at least intend to.

Of course, "Spirit gives birth to spirit . . . (and) the wind blows wherever it pleases," (John 3:6,8). The truly penitent seeker no more needs an altar than he needs a four-step plan for God to work His miracle. In fact, many who come to the altar at the end of a service are actually converted somewhere in the aisle on their way down to the front. The decision to "step out" is only symbolic of a much deeper surrender inside their soul. The prayer around the altar only confirms the miracle now past, and is equal to the cleansed leper presenting himself to the priest. But either way, the altar has served as a focal point and has provided both the preacher and the service with a method to press for the moment.

Over all, the future of the old Methodist "mourner's bench" is quite secure. The altar will survive because it must. Modern psychology's twelve-stepism has had its day and, in many cases, left us with a God who is more sympathetic than powerful. Congregations are growing weary of a God who only understands, but does not deliver them from the power of their sin. Young preachers are getting anxious to answer the "so what?" at the end of every sermon, and are beginning to preach for a verdict again. John Wesley's "press for the moment" is sounding wiser every day to people from all denominations who have seen the last thirty years of converts ooze into their ranks with no clear delineation to their faith.

The answer for many will be to use the altar as the focal point for milestones, where the people of God symbolize their conversions the way they symbolized their baptisms, marriages and memberships - by standing or kneeling before

the altar and recognizing this as a defining moment in their lives. When they do, their testimonies will brighten the faith of others around them.

Years from now, when our own children sift through the remains of our day, deciding what to keep and what to throw away, they may stumble across the altar and - notwithstanding it's excesses and abuse - judge it as a place where men met God. Or they may see it as a crude and indefensible tool (similar to the rod in Aaron's hand) once used for extraordinary things. Whatever they decide, let us leave for them the memory of our soul, that knew it's enemy, met it's match, had it's day and found it's Savior . . . in the crisis of saving faith.

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