



NO, NO I WON'T GO!

Is it time to drop the altar call?

I get to speak in a lot of churches on weekends. Pastors tell me things have changed when it comes to the traditional altar call. People just won't come to the altar like they used to... at least at the end of the service. Once the music starts and the invitation is given, they start to freeze... They think thoughts like these:

1. This is none of your business.

Why do you want me to go up in front of all these people who don't really even know me? My religion is a personal relationship between myself and God. Going to the altar makes it too public.

2. Going up there would be humiliating.

It's downright embarrassing to walk up there and kneel down as if I am some sort of awful sinner or something like that. I'm no worse than the rest of the people in here, maybe even little a bit better.

4. Who are you to judge me?

What right do you have to tell me I should come up there? You have your views and I have mine. The world would be a better place if we just accepted each other's different views and didn't judge.

5. I already went.

I really need help with this whole mess I am going through but I already went up during the open altar time earlier in the service. I got help already.

6. I don't trust you.

I have no idea what you preachers do in secret. Maybe you are just like Jim Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart. I'm not so sure I want to bow down before a preacher. You look sincere, but who knows what you're really covering up?

7. Since when can people change in an instant?

The whole idea of going to the altar doesn't fit my therapeutic model of how people change. People change gradually over years or at least months. A Twelve Steps group or a counselor can help. But I don't buy this quick fix of simply going up front for a prayer and presto you're changed in an instant. If you want to help me, forget this altar call and start a support group.

These and other thoughts pass through the minds of an increasing number of people when we give altar calls today.

Yet, I often still give them. Why? Because people still come. It's amazing. In spite of the cultural bias against it, people still move out when an altar call is given. I am sometimes told, 'these people here don't go to the altar.' But when I open it up they stream forward. Sure some come to just to 'get help.' But many seem to be really seeking God's face. Since they keep coming, I keep inviting them.

But there is a deeper reason I still give altar calls. These reasons are more theological. I believe God created human beings with "free will," -- that is, the freedom to make personal decisions. In the Garden, Adam & Eve used their free will to decide to disobey God. Enter depravity. That is, then human will from then onward has been depraved, or bent toward sin. Our depraved will, though still free, is biased toward disobedience. As Augustine observed, we may be free to chose right, but we seem freer to chose wrong. So, with such a darkened nature, how could we ever find God? Enter God's grace -- the grace which precedes conversion, enlightening and drawing our heart toward Him. When we decide to come to God we experience saving grace. God's plan of salvation includes a provision for my personal decision. -- to believe, confess, repent, and receive -- all acts which spring from our will. The human will is critical for conversion. Though the decision does not save us, the decision is critical in our salvation. The will is also critical in our sanctification. God does not make us holy automatically and without our cooperation and submission. The sanctification of God's people involves commitment, surrender, consecration and seeking, again, all acts of the will. (The theological part is almost over, be patient.)

So, why do I keep giving altar calls? Because I keep calling for a decision in my preaching. And the altar call is one good way to 'put the question' for decision. The decision they make will be critical to the conversion of sinners and the sanctification of believers. So I keep preaching for a verdict and calling for decision. And the altar call still works (almost) everywhere I go.

Now, I know some of you are going to remind me that John Wesley never gave a public invitation for people to receive Christ and the church got along pretty well for many years with Baptism as the act of public confession. I also recognize that the American camp meeting style altar call is a relatively recent innovation, given 2000 years of Christian history. So I am not saying the public

altar call is a sacred cow. I am however suggesting that it may have more life in it than we think. I'm all for burying all smelly corpses lying around. But not while they're still breathing.

Sure, you can preach for a verdict and call for decision without giving an altar call. There are an increasing number of other 'decision devices' which are working today. Some speakers invite seekers to meet in a counseling room and have good results. Others call on people to raise their hand or sign a card. Recently more preachers invite those with spiritual needs to simply glance up and catch the speaker's eye. These methods are not wrong. In fact, as a guest speaker, I sometimes invite people to lift a hand to indicate to the pastor that they want an appointment to talk about spiritual things. I make sure the pastor makes a list. But I also still use a standard altar call. And, believe it or not, (given all the bias against it mentioned above) people often stream forward. So I still give altar calls. Before I toss out an old method I want to make sure I have its underlying principle or doctrine in place under the new method. I think the underlying principle here is about preaching for a verdict and calling for a decision, avoiding constant sermons which are pretty to listen to, but never lead to a crisis decision of 'what will you do with the man called Jesus.'

What do you think? Are your people still responding to verdict-altar calls? What changes do you see taking place?

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