

**General Topics :: Altar Calls - article****Altar Calls - article - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2004/5/4 19:25**

I wrote the following article for my web site, and thought it might be good to share on this forum.

...choose for yourselves today whom you will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served which were beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.

(Joshua 24:15; NASB)

Lately I have been given a lot of thought as a young minister to what place altar calls will serve in my ministry. The past several months, I have had a bit of opportunity to observe a great deal of altar calls, even calling for one myself in a sermon I preached. I've also been able to gain insight about the matter at Bible college from my professors (who have all served in 20+ years of preaching), as well as fellow students who are also seasoned ministers. I've heard about altar calls given at funerals. I've seen altar calls in small churches. I've seen altar calls in a large church where over 100 individuals responded for the call to salvation and renewal. I have even responded to a few altar calls.

What is meant by an altar call? An altar call (for the few of those out there who are not really familiar with such a practice) is often a semi-formal call that a preacher typically gives from the pulpit after having given a sermon, asking for individuals he suspects might be under conviction over the sermon to come forward to the front of the congregation, so that they might be counseled with and prayed for. For sinners coming to the Lord, people usually are led to pray "the sinners prayer" where one asks the Lord to come into their lives. It is also a time where the saints, who might be struggling in their walk of faith, come forward to rededicate their lives to God, or simply get prayer for whatever issues they might be going through in their lives.

I was shocked to learn in my Christian history class that the altar call is a relatively recent phenomenon. In the 19th century, such famous preachers as Charles Finney asked those who wished to dedicate their life to Christ to stand up in their pews to indicate their decision. D.L. Moody also popularized the altar call, having an "inquiry room" where those interested in the Christian faith might be able to come and receive counsel after the service was over. Others such as Billy Sunday, Billy Graham, and countless others made the altar call a trademark of the evangelical Christian faith. In the 21st century, the altar call has become a sort of extra-biblical sacrament (an outward symbol of an inward grace), and is practiced more often than baptism, communion, and foot-washing.

That is not to say though that there is no biblical basis for having altar calls. Such verses as Joshua 24:15 cited above, where a preacher calls for a decision to be made right then and there, are not totally uncommon in the Scriptures. Such examples abound: Noah called for people to enter the ark; Moses told Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go; Joshua called the people to make a decision between God and idols; Elijah called the people to choose between Baal and God on Mt. Carmel; Joel called for a national assembly at the temple; Jesus called for those who would follow Him to leave everything they had right then and there.

Granted, most of these examples do not exactly fit the modern altar call, but they do provide some general principles that establish such a practice as acceptable. However, my main purpose in this article is not to call into question the actual practice of having an altar call, rather, my purpose is to call into question how some altar calls are practiced, and some faulty thinking that acts as its foundation, and why these ways of thinking are potentially dangerous.

Recently I attended an event on Good Friday called "This Is My Praise" at The First Foursquare Church of Concord, North Carolina. This event was a praise and worship concert based on Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir's latest CD. It was a beautifully done event, and the Spirit of the Lord was truly present throughout the service. At the end of the service, the pastor of the Church came up and spoke a few words about the Lord, and then had a style of altar call that is becoming more and more popular in recent years. At this event, I believe the Lord began to show me a few things going on.

Traditional altar calls ask individuals to publicly come forward to the front of the congregation to dedicate their lives to the Lord and lead individuals in prayer, or if the numbers responding are so great, people are prayed with in a more corporate manner than one-on-one. The new style that is often practiced these days though, is a bit different. Lately, the

trend in altar calls is to ask everybody in the congregation to close their eyes and bow their heads. Then, the preacher asks if there is anybody in the congregation who is struggling in their life, and would like to make a decision for Christ. If anybody wants to, the preacher then asks the congregation to let it be known by the showing of hands. At this event, the pastor then asked everybody in the congregation to pray a prayer, reciting after him, in unison. Sometimes instead of asking everybody to pray out loud in unison, the preacher goes ahead and just offers a prayer on behalf of everybody, asking those those who want to make a decision to utter the prayer in their heart.

Here is how the above might play out:

Quote:
-----*Pastor speaking:* Everybody please close your eyes and bow your heads. Tonight, if you think this message you heard really hits home, and you can say, 'Pastor, I am that person you were talking about,' and you want to make a decision for Christ, I want you to do this. With nobody looking around- everybody's eyes shut and heads bowed; this is a personal time between you and the Lord- I want you to respond by raising your hand, because I want to pray with you. There is no pressure here, we don't want to embarrass you, I just want to pray with you. This is just between you and the Lord. Father, I thank you today, and give you praise. Lord, forgive me my sins. Lord I trust you as my Lord and Personal Savior, and that you died for me and were resurrected three days later. Wash me and make me clean. In Jesus name, Amen.

The above situation is not very unlike what you might see in many different churches. You might even think the above is pretty good, and perhaps you are even a pastor that practices something not too unlike what is written above. However, there are some flaws with this method that should be considered.

The main problem I have with this method is the rather private matter it makes conversion and faith. The underlying idea behind this method is to make it as simple and easy as possible for people to make a decision for Christ. So, to remove any pressure that a person might feel about making a public expression of faith, everybody in the congregation is asked to close their eyes and bow their heads. This makes it very difficult for people to cop-out of responding because they are afraid of what people might think of them. This is further enforced when the preacher asks everybody to pray out loud in unison (or silently), so that just in case somebody in the congregation might be trying to eavesdrop on the prayers of another, the would-be convert can further remain unidentified.

This is quite the contrast to what we see biblically. I think this point can be magnified when compared to the act of water baptism. In the early Church, baptism was more often than not, a very public event that everybody saw. It did not take place in a chapel/sanctuary (such had yet been invented), and seldom did it take place in private residences or isolated places. Baptism was an event that all who dedicated their lives to the Lord were to partake in (and still are to partake in.) Now, where often did people get baptized at? They were often baptized in rivers, lakes, and any other public waterholes. In the ancient world, and still today, cities tended to pop up along such places as rivers and lakes, as access to water is essential to life. Thus, baptism in the early Church was a very public event that not only those in the Church would have seen, but the unbelievers in town would have seen as well.

Thus, there was nothing "private" about becoming a Christian. When a convert in the early Church dedicated their lives to Christ and sought to be baptized, they knew that by being baptized that the entire world would be looking on. In areas where the Church was relatively established, the world would look upon those being baptized in water, and know that there is something totally different about this person. No longer are they what they used to be, but now they are something totally different. They no longer pledge allegiance to this world and its ways. The world would know that those going down in the water have changed.

This stands as such a stark contrast to what we are asking people to do today. In trying to remove all stumbling blocks from the path of would-be converts, and making it as simple as possible for them to make some sort of reaction to the gospel, we are actually doing them a great disservice; and most importantly, I believe we are misrepresenting what the gospel is actually calling us to do. The gospel calls us to utterly abandon everything that we are and everything that we have, and instead utterly follow Christ. People must see they are not simply accepting some plot and making a mental assent to a scheme. Nor are they just "making a decision for Christ." (This is not an election we are holding to vote Christ into office.) Rather, would-be converts should understand we are calling them to dedicate their lives to following Christ.

If the possible embarrassment of making a public decision for Christ is such a stumbling block for the would-be convert, then I say they are not willing to dedicate their lives to following Christ. If they are not willing to even give their pride, they are those who look back after putting their hand to the plow, and Christ says such are not worthy of Him (Luke 9:62). Such individuals obviously have not found Christ to be the pearl of great price, and are actually saying their pride is of great

er value to them than Christ. To them, Christ is not worth it. Such is also in clear contrast to what we see in the Scriptures in yet another way. On the day of Pentecost after Peter delivered his sermon, people in the crowd began crying out what must they do to be saved (Acts 2:37). Such did not let their pride get the best of them. They did not mind that thousands were hearing them.

As ministers of the gospel, we must resist making the Christian faith a private thing. Granted, each individually will have to give an account to God one day for their lives, and yes, individually we must believe upon the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved. However, there is nothing private about being a Christian. Christians are a community of those who have believed and professed Jesus Christ to be Lord (Romans 10:9). This community is called to be the light of the world, a city set upon a hill that cannot be hidden. Being a Christian is a very visible thing. Let us not further drive the wedge that our Western civilization makes, of having private beliefs but secular lives. Faith in Christ is simply not personal, it is interpersonal. It relates not only to Christ, but also the rest of the Church, and also the rest of the world.

Ministers must resist the urge to simply getting people to respond, and coming up with clever ways in getting them to do so. Some have the temptation to make things easy for any number of reasons: So they can pridefully boast of their numbers; So they can report it to their denominational headquarters for reasons of politics and pay; etc. We must desire in our preaching to cause people to so encounter Christ that they fall under deep conviction of their sins and have a great desire to respond to Christ and be saved. To rush the conversion experience is to risk us having a Church full of still-borns instead of those who have been born again.

So, what have I decided to do in my personal ministry? Be it in the open air street evangelism that I do, or whatever teaching ministry I have within the Church, I do not plan on having too many altar calls. I like a method that A.W. Tozer is said to have done. Once, after preaching a rather convicting sermon, and aware of its obvious impact on his audience, as he dismissed the service, he closed saying something along the lines of this: I know it is traditional to have an altar call at this time, but, I am not going to do that; Rather, I charge you to go out of this building and live this message.

Remember this, Christ did not call us to go forth and make altar calls in all nations. He did not call us to go and convince people to make decisions for Christ. Rather, He called us to go forth and make disciples of all nations. He called us to go forth and call people to make Christ their life. Amen.

Re: Altar Calls - posted by Gideons (), on: 2004/5/4 19:48

Excellent article and your points are well taken. We don't have altar calls in the church I attend, primarily because of cultural differences (I go to a Korean church).

I've seen altar calls result in no true repentance but mere emotionalism. Surely there will be feelings when a sinner comes before the living God, but I believe it must be done carefully and prayerfully. Some pastors are more interested in getting members than getting true converts.

I believe if we truly seek the Lord and let the Spirit lead, He will let the preacher know how to proceed at the end of the service. I think that's the way it should be versus a standard way of doing things for every service, which seems to be true for most churches.

Dear Brother, just let the Spirit of Truth lead you and he'll guide you at the end of your message, whether it's in a church building or whether you're preaching on the streets.

Ed

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2004/5/4 19:52

Quote:

I believe if we truly seek the Lord and let the Spirit lead, He will let the preacher know how to proceed at the end of the service. I think that's the way it should be versus a standard way of doing things for every service, which seems to be true for most churches.

Indeed. And I will always remain sensitive to what the Spirit wants me to do when I'm done with a message. Perhaps with some it will be one of those "choose this day whom you will serve..." type endings... but perhaps it will not.

Quote:

We don't have altar calls in the church I attend, primarily because of cultural differences (I go to a Korean church).

That's pretty interesting.

Re: - posted by KingJimmy (), on: 2004/5/5 11:02

Quote:

Excellent article and your points are well taken. We don't have altar calls in the church I attend, primarily because of cultural differences (I go to a Korean church).

I started thinking about it more and got curious, what does your church do without the altar call (for many of us Western churches, it is hard to imagine church without the altar call)?

Re: - posted by Gideons (), on: 2004/5/5 12:08

Yes, I can understand your question. I don't know why this is the case but from what my brothers and sisters have told me, almost all Korean churches have no altar calls. Our pastor asks people periodically if they want to give their life to Jesus and then she meets with them individually and explains what the Christian life is all about.

Since I haven't been at these meetings, I'm not sure what transpires next to be honest. I know she explains how to become a Christian and what it means when we give our life to Him. If an individual makes this choice, then we have a baptismal service and she once again asks them if they are giving their life to Christ, as well as repenting from all known sin.

I'll have to ask some new believers. I'm still learning the cultural differences and was hesitant to ask because I didn't want to be considered offensive.