

Are Altar Calls Biblical?

Now, I realize this might seem like a strange question to ask. After all, altar calls have become a staple of the modern American church, to the point where it's hard to imagine a church service that *doesn't* have an altar call. Who could possibly object to ending a sermon with an invitation to come and be saved? Isn't that just the natural thing to do?

Altar calls have become a tradition – in fact, they have very nearly become a sacrament in our churches. Because of this, we don't stop to think about what we're doing. We simply accept them and assume that altar calls must be a good idea. When we run across a group that *doesn't* do altar calls we immediately think that they must be some kind of weird, unchurched pagans. What is their problem?

I think it's high time that we took a step back and took a Biblical look at what we're actually doing. We should always be willing to compare every aspect of our lives – and our churches – to what is revealed in the Word of God. There should be nothing that is “too important” to examine from a Biblical perspective. After all, if altar calls are a wonderful thing to do then it should be a simple matter to show that from the Bible, right? But if the Bible *doesn't* support this practice, then that should tell us something.

The first point I'd like to make is that there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. Altar calls are completely unknown in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, no church is ever said to have one, and they are never mentioned in any of the letters to the churches. The disciples never used an altar call in any of their sermons. Even Jesus Himself never used altar calls.

There are some people who try very hard to find an altar call in the Bible, but it can't be done because *there aren't any*. Some people are so desperate to find an example of this practice that they claim that Melchizedek's meeting with Abraham was an altar call:

Genesis 14:18: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God.

19 And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth:

20 And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.”

Just take a look at that passage for yourself! Does Melchizedek ask his audience to come to the front and pray the sinner's prayer so they can be saved from their sins? Absolutely not. This isn't even *remotely* like an altar call. No one is urging sinners to repent of their sins and put their faith and trust in Christ – and yet people still claim that this is Biblical proof that altar calls are scriptural. If this is truly the only Biblical support you have then your case is really, really poor.

I'll repeat this one more time: there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. It is not a Biblical practice, and there is no Scriptural support for that idea. Now, that doesn't mean that no one in the Bible preached the gospel, because they most certainly did. Many people preached repentance and urged sinners to turn from their sins:

Matthew 3:1: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea,

2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

Matthew 4:17: "From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

Acts 2:38: "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost."

There are many more examples that I could give, but I think you get the point. There is no shortage of preaching in the Bible! What we *don't* find are altar calls. Even when Jesus preached and ministered to thousands of people for several days in a row, He never wrapped up by urging people to come to the front of the group to be saved. That simply never happened.

In our days that would be unthinkable, wouldn't it? After all, if a modern church had a group of thousands of people, what would they do? Why, they're going to conclude by playing some sort of emotional hymn. They will then ask everyone to close their eyes, and urge the people to pray a certain prayer. The pastor will tell them that if they prayed that prayer then they're saved. Or, instead of praying that prayer in their seats while no one is looking, they may instead invite people to come to the front of the church and pray the prayer there. If they come and pray then they will be saved. This practice is so common that it never occurs to us that no one in the Bible ever did anything remotely like this.

But the truth is the altar call is a modern phenomenon. It is entirely absent from the Bible, and the early church did not practice it. In fact, the altar call was popularized by Charles Finney, who lived from 1792 to 1875. There were a few isolated cases where altar calls were used before then in some special circumstances, but Finney is really the evangelist who popularized it. In other words, *altar calls were unknown to the church before the 19th century*. They are something new. I'd also like to point out that while Finney was a well-known evangelist, he was far from orthodox. Finney rejected the doctrine of original sin. He did not believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ (the idea that when we are saved God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that is why we are justified in His sight). He also rejected the idea of biblical regeneration – that people are made new creatures in Christ after they are saved.

Finney believed that in order to save people, all you had to do was put the right kind of emotional pressure on them and use the right kind of tricks, and you could drive them to the altar and get them to say that magical prayer. He also believed in the "prayer of faith", which to him meant that God was required to give you whatever you prayed for. If you prayed that 100 souls would be saved by your preaching, then God was required to save 100 souls no matter what. (Needless to say, there are very serious theological problems with that idea.)

This was the mindset that created the altar call, and this was the theology behind it. People today have accepted Finney's ideas on what it takes to get people to be saved – and that is unfortunate, because what the Bible teaches about salvation is radically different. The modern approach to salvation is extremely shallow and produces a great many false converts. We are not doing a very good job of explaining to people what salvation actually requires.

For example, take this account:

I recall a conversation in America in which a pastor's wife narrated to me her experience as a counselor. In counseling someone who came forward [to the altar] she discovered that this enquirer had no concept of repentance or faith. She

endeavored therefore to explain the gospel in a simple manner. The leader of the meeting in the meantime began to be impatient and after about ten minutes could stand it no longer. Sweeping the woman counselor aside, he took over as follows:

"You don't want to go to hell, do you?"

"No!"

"You want to go to heaven, don't you?"

"Yes, I do!"

"You believe that Christ died for sinners, don't you?"

"Yes, I do!"

"Then let's give thanks that he died for you and has given you salvation."

Then the leader prayed as follows: "Lord, I thank you for giving this soul eternal life. Thank you, Lord, Amen."

Then, turning to the person in question, he said, "Now you have eternal life and you can praise the Lord! Go and tell your friends that you have been saved!"

(*The Great Invitation*, Hulse, p109)

Was that person actually saved? I very seriously doubt it. He had no idea what faith was, and he had no concept of repentance. On top of that, the prayer itself was prayed by *the leader*, not by the individual. The person never repented of his sins or gave his life to Jesus. I'd like to point out that even *demons* believe that Christ died for sinners, and demons would much rather go to Heaven than be cast into Hell! Demons, though, *are not saved*.

You see, being saved is not just a matter of believing that Christ died for sinners. You also have to *repent*. You have to go to Christ and ask Jesus to forgive your sins. You have to submit yourself to Christ, turning from your own sinful ways and obeying God instead. Salvation is far more than just a mental assertion of "Yes, Jesus died for sins". In order to be saved you must *surrender*. You must halt your rebellion against God and give Him complete control over your life, your will, your thoughts, your possessions, and your actions.

You also need to understand who Christ is and what He did. For example:

Romans 10:9: "That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

Notice that belief in the resurrection is part of the requirements for salvation! Also notice how Paul talks about confessing the Lord Jesus. I cannot emphasize this enough: you *must* make Jesus your Lord. You cannot be saved by saying "Yes, Lord, I believe that you died for sinners and I want to go to Heaven, but I'm not going to obey you and I don't want you to tell me what to do. Just mind your own business and do whatever I tell you, and we'll get along fine." That is *not* salvation.

During altar calls we tell people that if they come forward and pray a prayer, they will be saved – but that is not a true statement. *It is not the prayer that saves you*. The prayer of salvation is not some sort of magical spell that saves people by the mere act of repeating the words. Does the sinner actually understand the gospel? Are they repenting of their sins? Do they actually believe in the person and work of Christ? Are they abandoning their rebellion against God and submitting themselves to His authority? The answer to these questions are *extremely important*. The only thing that can save people is *faith in Christ*. If that is absent then the prayer will not do any good whatsoever. We are saved by *faith*, remember?

Ephesians 2:8: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God:
9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.”

Notice that this passage *doesn't* say “You are saved by saying a certain sequence of words, regardless of what you actually believe and regardless of whether you have repented!” *But that is precisely how people often treat the sinner's prayer.*

The great danger of altar calls is that they are extremely shallow. They don't get into any of these issues; for one thing, they don't have the time. Instead they teach people that if they just say certain magical words they can escape Hell. So what do people do? They come to the front of the church, they say that prayer, and they go away believing that they are saved. Doesn't that seem like a dangerous thing to be doing?

In fact, the church makes this whole thing worse by pronouncing that person saved right then and there. That, too, is an awful thing to do. How can you possibly know in that split second if that person was actually saved? Nowhere does the Bible say “If you go to the front of the church, pray, and feel good afterward, you are saved” - but that is how *countless* people verify their salvation. The Biblical way of making sure that you are saved is to examine your life for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. I John has a whole list of tests that examine your life for evidence that you have changed and become a new person. Do you love other Christians? Do you obey God? Have you confessed your sins? Are you growing in holiness? Have you abandoned your old wicked ways? Are you staying in the faith?

The only way a person can tell if they are actually saved or not is to wait and see, and evaluate their lives against the objective criteria that the Bible lays out. The proof of their salvation is in the life that they lead. As Jesus said, a good tree bears good fruit and a bad tree bears bad fruit. Genuine conversions always result in a changed life, because we become a new creature in Christ:

2 Corinthians 5:17: “Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new.”

If there is no change in that person's life – if they continue living a sinful, wicked, selfish life – then they aren't a Christian. The prayer that they prayed was a waste of time, and responding to the altar call did nothing. Their conversion was phony. But you know something? *That's not something you can determine during the altar call.* Churches have absolutely no business pronouncing anyone saved on the spot.

If the prayer “didn't work”, the problem isn't with Christ. Jesus is clear that He will reject no one:

John 6:37: “All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out.”

The problem is with what we're doing. Sure, if you put a lot of emotional pressure on people and use the right manipulative tactics, you might be able to get people to come to the front of the church and pray a prayer that you tell them to pray. *But that is a very far cry from being saved.* That doesn't mean that person understood or believed the gospel. That doesn't mean they have any idea what Christ actually did for them. That also doesn't mean they are sorry for their sins or are willing to turn from them. That *especially* doesn't mean that person is laying down their life and pledging to be slaves of Christ.

It's that last point that is especially relevant in our modern age. Churches are filled with people

who believe that Christ died for sinners but who have no intention of obeying God. These people love their sins and don't have the slightest intention of turning from them. They believe they can continue to live a life of sin and doing whatever they please, and that God will just have to take whatever He can get. The idea that you have to repent of your sins and live a holy life is completely foreign to them. They would never agree to such a thing because they love their sins and their selves too much.

These people are not saved. The apostle John makes this point very clear:

1 John 2:3: "And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.

4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

5 But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him."

Sure, the modern church may call them "carnal Christians" and say that they're just not very spiritual, but the Bible calls them what they are: *lost people*. In order to be saved Jesus must be your Savior *and* your Lord. If you reject Him as Lord and insist that *you* will control your life, not God, then you are not saved at all.

But altar calls skirt over all these issues. They don't give people a deep understanding of the gospel; instead they say "Pray this prayer and you'll go to Heaven". They don't test the person to see if he actually understands what he's doing or believes in the gospel; instead they use high-pressure tactics to get people to say a set of magical words. On top of all that, altar calls assure the person that they are saved right then and there – instead of applying the Biblical tests that separate true conversions from false ones.

As a result, our churches are filled with incredibly shallow "believers" who may or may not understand the gospel and who may or may not have actually repented, but who are nonetheless convinced that they're saved, because they once went to the front and prayed a prayer and that's all it takes.

Here's something to think about: of all those people who come to the altar to "get saved", how many of them show any fruits of repentance?

Matthew 3:7: "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees come to his baptism, he said unto them, O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

8 Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance:"

When ten thousand people respond in one of the great evangelistic crusades, do we see the lives of those people transformed? How many of those people join churches, lead holy lives, and display the fruits of the Spirit? You know the answer as well as I do: most of those people are never seen again.

In fact, what I *have* seen are people who come to the altar to get saved over, and over, and over again. The reason they do this is because they don't understand the gospel and they have no idea how to tell if they're actually saved or not. All they know is that being saved is a warm feeling, and since they don't have that feeling anymore they must not be saved. So they go to the front of the church to try to get that feeling again, and then announce to the world that this time they've *really* been saved.

None of that is Biblical, but that's the sort of mindset we're encouraging. We've exchanged the Biblical understanding of the gospel with a shallow one that's designed to drive as many people as

possible to the front of the church.

It may seem completely harmless to urge people to come to the front of the church to be saved – but is it? What we've done is taught generations of people that coming to the front of the church and praying a prayer is the same thing as getting saved. That is a very far cry from what the Bible has to say about the matter. In fact, I am gravely concerned that by doing this we are actually inoculating people from the gospel. After all, once a person has gone to the front of the church and prayed, they believe that they are saved *because that is what pastors everywhere tell them*. Even if they are leading an incredibly wicked life that is utterly devoid of faith or godliness, it is impossible to tell that person “You need to repent and believe”. Since they believe that they are already saved, they won't listen to anything you have to say. They have been taught a false standard of faith, and that blocks the Biblical standard from ever reaching them.

Now, if a person is feeling conviction and wants to talk to the pastor about it, I think that is a good thing. A thorough conversation could do that person a world of good and lead them to Christ – but that's not what altar calls are. I fear that our approach to salvation has *not* been saving people at all, but instead has been immunizing them against the gospel and setting them on the road to Hell. Are there people who are genuinely saved through altar calls? Of course – but the number of people who respond and then are never seen again is far, *far* greater. Should we really be using a method that rarely works, that produces many false converts, and that has no Biblical support whatsoever?

You might wonder: if altar calls are not Biblical, then what should people be doing? It's an easy question to answer. We should preach the gospel:

I Corinthians 1:18: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God.

19 For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.

20 Where is the wise? where is the scribe? where is the disputer of this world? hath not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?

21 For after that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe.

22 For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom:

23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness;

24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

Notice that Paul did not say “If you want to get people saved, play a soft hymn and urge them to come to the front of the church to pray the following prayer. If people don't want to come then plant a few people in the audience and have them come to the front, to make it look like people are moving and put more pressure on the reluctant ones. Make it sound like people just have to say a certain phrase in order to avoid Hell. Don't emphasize the cost of following Christ, and make no mention of repentance or a changed life. Keep it simple: you come to the front, you pray the prayer, and you're done.” Even though churches follow those instructions as if they were a sacrament from God, you will not find them *anywhere* in the Bible. Instead Paul was simple and to the point: *preach the cross*. Preach the full gospel of God, because *that* is the mechanism that God will use to save people.

I find it fascinating that Christ routinely offended those who came to Him. For example, after attracting a very large crowd by miraculously feeding thousands of people with a very small meal,

Jesus said this:

John 6:51: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.

52 The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

53 Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you."

After Jesus preached this message, many of those who had been following Him left:

John 6:64: "But there are some of you that believe not. For Jesus knew from the beginning who they were that believed not, and who should betray him.

65 And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.

66: From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him."

If the modern church had been in that situation, they would have reacted completely differently. First of all, the church would have had an altar call to bring as many people to the front as possible. They would have emphasized praying a simple prayer to avoid Hell, and would have avoided discussing any doctrines that might offend people. Once they had prayed the prayer and joined the church, they would then preach messages that the new converts would accept. After all, if you preach the hard truths there's a good chance that people will leave, and who wants that? The modern church is all about numbers: the more people you can pack in the better – and the easiest way to do that is to water down the truth and make it acceptable to everyone. So that's what we do.

But that's not what Christ did. He knew that many of those who were following Him didn't really believe, and so He deliberately preached something hard so that those who didn't believe would leave. He only wanted *genuine* converts, not phonies. He used hard doctrine to separate the wheat from the chaff. We would never dream of doing that today – and that alone says a lot about us.

Altar calls are a great tool to use if you want maximize the number of people in your pews. However, if you are looking for genuine Christians who will stand the test of time then they are a terrible thing to use – *especially* when used in the careless way that so many modern churches use them. As we can see, Christ took a radically different approach.

Do you want to save people? Then preach the gospel. Make sure that people understand it – *all* of it. Preach the hard truths. Tell them that genuine conversions result in a changed life that bears the fruits of the Spirit. Those who believe will come to Christ and truly be saved – and those who don't will be offended and driven away. Offending people may seem like a bad thing to do, but it is *far* better than making them think that they're saved when they really aren't. After all, it is *much* easier for someone who knows that they're lost to come to Jesus, than someone who is convinced they were saved at the altar when they really weren't.