

Are Altar Calls Biblical?

It might seem a bit strange to ask if altar calls are Biblical. After all, altar calls have become a staple of the modern American church. Who could possibly object to ending a sermon with an invitation to come forward and be saved? Isn't that just the natural thing to do?

Altar calls have become a tradition – in fact, they've nearly become a sacrament in some denominations. This makes it easy to simply accept them and assume that they must be a good idea. But what does the Bible have to say about this matter?

I think it's time that we took a step back and took a Biblical look at what we're doing. We should always be willing to compare every aspect of our lives – and our churches – to what's revealed in the Word of God. There should be nothing that's “too important” to examine from a Biblical perspective. If altar calls are a wonderful thing 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 had one, and they're 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 determined to find an example of this practice that they claim Melchizedek's meeting with Abraham was an altar call:

Genesis 14:18-20: “And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed

him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: 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 some people still claim this is Biblical proof that altar calls are Scriptural. If this is the only Biblical support you have then your case is not very good. I'll repeat this one more time: there are no altar calls anywhere in the Bible. It's not a Biblical practice and there's no Scriptural support for the idea.

Now, that doesn't mean no one in the Bible preached the gospel, because they definitely did. Many people preached repentance and urged sinners to turn from their sins:

Matthew 3:1-2: "In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, 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's 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 day that would be unthinkable, wouldn't it? If a modern church had a group of thousands of people they would conclude by playing some sort of emotional hymn. The pastor would ask everyone to close their eyes and urge people to pray a certain prayer. The pastor would tell them that if they prayed that prayer they would be saved. Or, instead of praying that prayer in their seats while no one is looking, they might instead invite people to come to the front of the church and pray the prayer there, saying that if they come and pray then they would be saved. This practice is so common that it's easy to miss the fact that no one in the Bible ever did anything like that.

The truth is altar calls are a modern phenomenon. They are entirely absent from the Bible and the early church didn't practice it. The altar call was popularized by Charles Finney¹, who lived from 1792 to 1875². There were a few isolated cases where altar calls were used before then in some special circumstances, but Finney is 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 didn't believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ (the idea that when we're saved God gives us the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that's why we're justified in His sight). He also rejected the idea of biblical regeneration – that people are made new creatures in Christ after they are saved³.

Finney believed that in order to save people, all you had to

1 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Altar_call

2 Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Grandison_Finney

3 Source:

https://www.wayoflife.org/reports/the_influence_of_chrales_finney.php

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.)

That was the mindset which created the altar call, and this was the theology behind it. Many people today have accepted Finney's ideas on what it takes to get people to be saved – and that's 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. Many churches are doing a very poor 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 in God (James 2:19), and demons would much rather go to Heaven than be cast into Hell! Demons, though, *are not saved*.

You see, being saved isn't 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 instead⁴. 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 stop your wicked 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:

4 We are *not* saved by our works. Good works are a *result* of salvation, not a cause! However, if good works are absent from our life then our salvation is a fraud, because genuine salvation will always result in good works. This can be seen from James 2:14-20 and 1 John 2:3-5. Genuine Christians will walk in the ways of God. Those who don't do that aren't saved.

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 praying “Lord, I believe that you died for sinners and I want to go to Heaven. However, 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 to do, and we’ll get along fine.” *That is not salvation.*

During altar calls people are told that if they come forward and pray a prayer they will be saved – but that’s not a true statement. *It’s not the prayer that saves you.* The prayer of salvation isn’t some sort of magical spell that saves people by the mere act of repeating certain words. Does the sinner who is praying that prayer actually understand the gospel? Is he repenting of his sins? Does he actually believe in the person and work of Christ? Is he abandoning his rebellion against God and submitting himself to His authority? The answers to these questions are *extremely important*. The only thing that can save people is *faith in Christ*. If that’s absent then the prayer won’t do any good. We are saved by *faith*, remember?

Ephesians 2:8-9: “For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 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’ve repented.” *But that’s precisely how some people treat the sinner’s prayer.*

The great danger of altar calls is that they're extremely shallow. They don't get into any of these critically important issues. Instead they teach people that if they just say certain magical words they can escape Hell. So what do people do? They go to the front of the church, they say that prayer, and they go away believing they were saved. Do you see how dangerous that is?

In fact, some churches make all of this worse by pronouncing that person to be saved right there on the spot! How could the pastor possibly know in that moment if the person was actually saved? Nowhere does the Bible say “If you go to the front of the church, pray a prayer, and feel good afterward, you're saved” – but that's how *many* people verify their salvation. The Biblical way of making sure that you're saved is to examine your life for the fruits of the Holy Spirit. 1 John has a whole list of tests that examine your life for evidence that you've changed and become a new person. Have you confessed your sins (1 John 1:8-9)? Are you walking in God's ways and keeping His commandments (1 John 2:3-6)? Do you love other Christians (1 John 2:9-10, 1 John 4:20-21)? Do you believe that Jesus is the Messiah (1 John 2:22-23)?

The only way a person can tell if they're actually saved is evaluate their lives against the objective criteria that the Bible gives us. *The proof of our salvation is found in the life that we lead.* As Jesus said in Matthew 7:17, a good tree bears good fruit and an evil tree bears evil 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's no change in that person's life – if they continue living a sinful, wicked, and selfish life – then they aren't a

Christian. The prayer 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 an altar call!* Pastors have absolutely no business pronouncing anyone saved on the spot.

If the prayer “didn't work” then 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 what churches are doing. It's true that if you put a lot of emotional pressure on people and use the right manipulative tactics you may 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's entirely different 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 on the cross. That also doesn't mean they're sorry for their sins or are willing to turn from them. That *especially* doesn't mean the person is laying down their life and pledging to be living sacrifices to Christ (Romans 12:1)!

It's that last point which is especially relevant in our modern age. There are many people in churches who believe that Christ died for sinners, but who have no intention of obeying Him. 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 do whatever they please, and God will just have to accept their behavior. 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 too much.

These people aren't saved. The apostle John makes this point very clear:

I John 2:3-5: “And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him.”

Some pastors call these people “carnal Christians” and say that they just aren't 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 then you aren't saved at all.

But altar calls gloss over all these critical issues. They don't give people a deep understanding of the gospel; instead they teach “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're saved right there on the spot, instead of applying the Biblical tests that separate true conversions from false ones.

This is one of the reasons why so many churches are filled with shallow “believers” who don't understand the gospel and haven't actually repented of anything, but who are nonetheless convinced that they're saved because they once went to the front and prayed a prayer.

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 3:7-8: “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? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for

repentance:”

When ten thousand people go to the altar in a great evangelistic crusade, are their lives 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.

I've seen cases where people went to the front of the church to get saved – but instead of doing it just once they did it over and over again, in one service after another. The reason they did this was because they didn't understand the gospel and they couldn't tell if they were actually saved or not. What they did know was that being saved was a warm and happy feeling, and since they didn't have that feeling anymore they must not be saved. So they went to the front of the church again, and then announced that this time they were *really* saved.

None of that is Biblical, but that's the sort of mindset that altar calls encourage. Altar calls exchange 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? This practice has taught generations of people that coming to the front of the church and praying a prayer is the same thing as getting saved. I'm very concerned that this actually inoculates people from the gospel. Once a person has gone to the front of the church and prayed that prayer, they believe they were saved *because that's what pastors tell them*. Even if they're leading an incredibly wicked life that's utterly devoid of faith or godliness, it's difficult to tell that person they need to repent and believe. Since they believe they're already saved they won't listen to what you have to say. They've been taught a false standard of faith, and that blocks the Biblical standard from reaching them.

Now, if a person is feeling conviction and wants to talk to the pastor about it then I think that's 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* greater. Should churches 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 aren't Biblical then what should people be doing? It's an easy question to answer. We should preach the gospel:

I Corinthians 1:18-24: “For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and will bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent. 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? 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. For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks foolishness; But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.”

Notice that Paul didn't say “If you want to get people saved, play a soft hymn and urge them to go to the front of the church and pray the following prayer. If people don't want to come then plant a few individuals 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: go to the front, pray a prayer, and you're done." Even though some churches use altar calls as if they were a sacrament from God, you won't find them in the Bible. Instead Paul was simple and to the point: *preach the cross*. Preach the full gospel of God because *that's* the mechanism 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 6:51-53: "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. The Jews therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us his flesh to eat? 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 6:64-66: "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. And he said, Therefore said I unto you, that no man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father.: 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 that people just needed to pray a simple prayer to avoid Hell, and would have avoided discussing any doctrines that might offend people. Once people had prayed the prayer and (hopefully) joined the church, preachers would preach messages that the new converts would accept. After all, if you preach hard truths there's a good chance 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 until it's acceptable to everyone. So that's what they do.

But that's not what Christ did. He knew that many of those who were following Him didn't actually believe at all, so He deliberately preached something hard in order to drive away those who didn't believe. Jesus only wanted *genuine* converts, not phonies. He used hard doctrine to separate the wheat from the chaff. The modern church would never dream of doing that today – and that says a lot about them.

Altar calls are a great tool to use if you want maximize the number of people in your pews. However, if you're looking to create genuine Christians who will stand the test of time then they're 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 believe will be offended and leave. Offending people may seem like a bad thing to do but it's *far* better than giving people assurance that they've been saved when they haven't. It's *much* easier for someone who knows that they're lost to come to Jesus than someone who's

convinced they were saved at the altar when they weren't.