

Where We Stand

The Altar Call

by Rev. Allen Brummel

Many of our young people attend schools where they are expected to respond to “altar calls” or to make “decisions for Christ.” They face intense pressure by teachers, ministers, and even fellow students to give an open, immediate reaction to the gospel in some visible way. Others have perhaps heard of youth rallies in which a “decision for Christ” was requested. The “altar call” takes many different forms. It can be an appeal to come forward to a certain place in the front of the auditorium or church. It can be an invitation to stand, raise the hand, sign a card, or do something similar. Basic to all kinds is a desire for some type of visible, man-determined response to a biblical message. Also, fundamental to the “altar call” is an understanding that faith is the work of man and that some kind of decision is necessary for salvation. Although it is often confessed that God’s grace and assistance are necessary, the activity required for salvation is still spoken of as an act of man.

A Biblical Method?

What ought to be our response to such a requirement? Is this biblical? Is our salvation dependent upon our making a “decision for Christ?”

The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice, therefore we must turn to the Bible and find out what the Bible says about such a requirement. If there were any book where we might find such a requirement being practiced, it would be in the book of Acts. The book of Acts reveals the zeal and urgency of the New Testament church in her mission labors. As the apostles preached the Word of God to Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth, they directed all their listeners to Jesus Christ and stressed the need to repent. Many turned to the Lord, and daily God added to the church such as should be saved. (Acts 2:47) In all of this do we find any direction or evidence of “altar calls” being used? Were men commanded to come forward, or to sign a pledge, or to fill out a card, or to hold up their hands? Was a “decision for Christ” required in order to be saved? We find nothing of the sort!

The invitation, “altar call,” or “decision for Christ” conflicts with the very heart of the apostles’ preaching. The apostles preached sin and grace. The response to the sermons of Peter and Paul was that men and women were pricked in their hearts and realized they could do nothing to save themselves. The response of faith was: “Men and brethren, what must we do?” (Acts 2:37) When they asked for a requirement, what did Peter require of them? He said, “Repent, and be baptized.” (Acts 2:38) Repentance was the required response to the preached word; a response worked by grace; a response which was possible only because of the fruit of the Holy Spirit’s work in their hearts.

We must be clear that there is a response to the good news of the gospel. That response is to see one’s sinfulness and to lay hold of Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior by a true and living faith. This response is not a prerequisite to salvation, but a necessary fruit of salvation. We must trust in Jesus, we must make a commitment to live for Him and must sacrifice our lives to Him. This response is not the response of our own free-will, but is worked in the elect sinner by the wonderful grace of the Holy Spirit. This response is personal and shows itself publicly in a desire to make public confession of faith, to be baptized (if not already as an infant), and to live a godly life.

A Basic Critique

First, the focus in the “altar call” is placed upon man, rather than upon God. There has always been, and continues to be, an attempt to reconcile God to man rather than man to God. Men want to compromise God and his teaching so as to bring Him into conformity with the will of man. Man wants to be in control of everything, including his salvation. So called converts, therefore, are weak because

they depend on their own will and their own ability to keep their salvation. They are constantly looking at themselves rather than at God. The whole focus of their attention is upon whether or not they are doing enough or are good enough. The result of this is that often the same individuals come forward week after week. These individuals ask Jesus into their hearts time and time again. There is no assurance in our feelings nor in our abilities. We need to trust alone in the ability of God who is able to keep us from falling. (Jude 24)

The focus of the Scriptures and of salvation is on Jesus Christ. Our salvation is found only in His righteousness and in His life. He, rather than our own ability, becomes the object of our trust and confidence. When our faith is rooted in Christ we can have confidence and assurance of our salvation. We are sinners, but our confidence is in Jesus Christ, our Lord, who went to the cross to cover our sins and to give us abundant pardon.

Second, the emphasis of the “altar call” is on the act of faith, rather than the object of faith. Many sermons and messages found in evangelical and Reformed churches and schools preach faith, not Christ. This makes an idol out of faith! According to Scripture, faith is the means, the instrument of justification and salvation. (Romans 5:1) Faith is a gift of God which must be rooted in the finished work of Jesus Christ and His righteousness. By faith we take Christ’s righteousness and believe that it has been made our own. Our fascination is not found in our decision or our going up front, not in our act of faith, but rather in the object of our faith, Jesus Christ. All boasting and blessedness is found in Christ, the object of faith and the one from whom all the blessings of salvation flow through a true, living faith. True faith looks to Christ.

Thirdly, the “altar call” presents the promise of the gospel as a general, free offer to all who will come forward and receive Jesus Christ. Is that a free offer? It is not at all free. You must come and get it—you must be good enough to come and receive it. There are strings attached!

The Scriptures make clear that the promise of the gospel is a free, particular promise of salvation to all those whom God calls. (Acts 2:39) The faith and grace given to lay hold of that promise are not general, but particular. The promise, though promiscuously preached, is a particular promise to those who know themselves to be spiritually poor in spirit, weary and heavy laden, and thirsty. (Matthew 5:3, 11:28, Isaiah 55:1, Rev. 22:17)

The biblical truth of Calvinism leaves no room for any kind of “altar call.” The “altar call” compromises the Biblical teachings concerning total depravity, the sovereignty of God’s grace, good works, and many others. Calvinism preaches the wonder of the promise—the free gift of God’s grace in Jesus Christ to those whom the Father has given Him. Calvinism commands men and women to repent and believe. Men and women are not left in confusion as to their responsibility before God, but are instructed to turn from their sins and to trust in Jesus Christ as their Savior.

No Place For Man In The Work Of Salvation?

Does our rejection of the ‘altar call’ mean that man has no place in his own salvation? It emphatically does! We do not merely minimize man’s part in salvation, we emphatically assert that man has no place in his salvation. “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen you, and ordained you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit, and that your fruit should remain: that whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in my name, he may give it you.” (John 15:16) “No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him; and I will raise him up at the last day.” (John 6:44)

No Need For A Response To The Gospel?

Does our rejection of the “altar call” and the need for a “decision for Christ” mean that it does not matter how Christians live and that we are not responsible before God? It does not! Men stand before God as responsible individuals. Those whom God has chosen and whose hearts He has opened will respond to the wonder of grace which God works in their hearts. The response will be a response of grace and the fruit of their salvation. When the sinner hears the preaching of God’s holiness,

righteousness, mercy, love, and grace, then the elect sinner is convicted by the Holy Spirit and brought to his knees in true repentance. The preaching of sovereign grace provides the answers which the struggling sinner needs to hear. By the grace of God our response must be to repent and believe that our sins are forgiven! The response to the preached word is repentance and life-long conversion. This repentance and conversion is grounded in God's abundant grace and mercy.

No Need To Pray?

There are some who might respond—What then is the sense of praying for the salvation of our neighbors if it is all determined by God anyway? Our response ought to be to put the question right back at them—What is the sense of praying if God is not in complete control of salvation? Those who believe the doctrine of God's eternal election and His sovereignty in salvation can and do pray for the salvation of their neighbors. If God is not in control of salvation, then God is sitting in heaven eagerly hoping that people will use their free will and accept Jesus as their Savior. Why pray to God for the salvation of individuals if God is powerless to help? This god is not the God of the Bible, but is an idol!

Thanks be to God that He has power! He has power to overrule hearts, to penetrate stubborn and rebellious minds, and to bring sinners to Christ. He does not plead with sinners to come forward, but commands all men everywhere to repent. (Acts 17:30) He has complete power over the salvation of men. He may not choose to answer our prayers the way we would like, but He is the only one who can ultimately change things, and He will not allow any of His own to perish. (II Peter 3:9) ♦

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