
To Call or Not to Call?

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The subject of evangelistic methods and in particular Altar Calls is once again to the forefront of evangelical debate. The purpose of this article is not to chronicle that debate. Suffice it to say that any understanding of the background to the contemporary discussion needs to take into account the theology and practice of Charles Grandison Finney and his counterpart, Asahel Nettleton.¹ In relation to the contemporary history we need to bear in mind the influence of the national missions of recent years for which Dr Billy Graham and Luis Palau have been the main preachers. Staunch criticism of the evangelistic methods of these and other similar campaigns has come from more Reformed circles. The re-issuing of Iain Murray's 'THE INVITATION SYSTEM' and the publication of R T Kendall's 'STAND UP AND BE COUNTED', which defends a particular kind of Altar Call, indicate the back-cloth against which we must address this subject.

Another factor needs to be borne in mind. There are not a few of those who would wish to express criticism of the use of Altar Calls who were themselves converted under ministries which made regular use of them. This writer is one such. Some readers may suspect that this explains but does not excuse his rather conciliatory line. Others will accuse him of ingratitude for daring to criticise at all. Many in our churches find criticism of the use of Altar Calls almost impossible to cope with because at the time of their conversion they 'went forward'. When they hear intemperate criticisms of Altar Calls there can be a feeling that their own conversion is being called into question. It is as well to recognise that our spiritual history shapes what we are; and that our criticisms may have an effect on others that we never intended, but that is quite understandable given their background. In other words the subject must not be tackled simply polemically but also pastorally, lest we cause a brother to stumble.

The subject also deserves to be addressed discerningly. Later we shall describe a variety of evangelistic approaches in terms of what preachers of differing hues ask of people at the end of their sermons. Our purpose in doing so is simply to alert us to the fact that there is a whole spectrum of approaches. Unless we have a view of the Regulative Principle which rules them all out of court without further discussion, we cannot lump them all together. We may conclude by rejecting them all, but if we do so we will have had to employ a variety of theological arguments in the process. *Evangelistic practices must be assessed theologically.*

Preaching for decisions

Yet before we come to the matter of Altar Calls we would wish to make this assertion. There is a difference between preaching for decisions and 'decisionism'. We would want to argue that the word 'decision' is a good and helpful word with regard to the matter of response to the gospel. The reaction against it which is

evident in certain Reformed writers is quite understandable given its abuse. Yet if the Word of God can rightly be described as an ultimatum, an invitation, a command, it demands response. It demands decision, and there are a number of aspects to the kind of decision for which we must preach.

First there is the question of truth. Is the gospel true? Is Christ who he claims to be and whom we preach him to be? Did he die and rise again for the salvation of sinners? The Bereans are implicitly commended by Luke for their earnest approach to this question, 'Was Paul's message true?' (Acts 17:11). But then the question of obedience must be pressed. The question of truth is not academic. Will the sinner obey the truth? A decision must be made. This is the import of John 3:36. The language is clear and strong. The Christian is defined as one who has eternal life. The unbeliever remains under God's wrath and will never see life. The issue is resolved in terms of regeneration by the Spirit to new life, and reconciliation with God, but also in terms of decided attitudes towards the Son. It is this distinction between the actions of the believer and the unbeliever which is relevant here. The former believes, the latter disobeys or rejects.² The verse cries out for a decision. Will we believe the Son or will we reject and disobey him?

Gospel preaching is not lecturing. It is not the imparting of facts impartially — if that is ever possible. Preaching is to drive men and women to the point of decision. Yet this crisis, for such it is, is produced not by emotion, nor by psychological pressure, but by force of the truth proclaimed and by the enlightening of the Spirit.

Secondly, we ought not to be over cautious about calling for immediate decisions. We do not find the preachers of the NT encouraging people to go away and think about what they have heard. The call to leave all and follow Christ is a call to immediate action (Mt 4:18-22). This is explicitly the case in the dealings of Jesus with those who made excuses with regard to his call (Lk 9:59-62). It is true that these incidents relate to a particular kind of service in a particular context, but the Gospel-writers surely intend them to be paradigmatic of the general call to discipleship. It is a positive response to that call which constitutes conversion. A new Christian is a new disciple or nothing. The language of Paul in Athens illustrates this NT emphasis upon the call to an immediate decision to obey God. Even without the 'now' (which doubtless contrasts with the past times in which God overlooked man's ignorance) the last half of Acts 17:30, 'God commands all people everywhere to repent', demands an immediate response.

Thirdly, we need to note that the preaching of Jesus and his disciples demanded a concrete response. We shall need to comment on the matter of water baptism a little later on. At this point, however, it is necessary to notice the variety of ways in which response to the gospel was 'concretised'. In the cases of Zacchaeus (Lk 19:8) and the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:33) there are examples of conversion being demonstrated in very concrete ways. Matthew 10 is most instructive at this point. In vv 11-15 it is the giving or withholding of a welcome into the home of one hearing the gospel which 'concretises' his response. Vv 32-42 take up the theme again. Here it is confession before men and identification with the people of God in practical ways which display outwardly the inner response.

Now we need to hold a balance here. Plainly the inward comes before the outward, but the outward is important. Evangelistic preaching and counselling need to take that into account. It is possible so to react against Altar Calls and the like that we fail our hearers by 'over-internalising' the gospel call, omitting to put before them the need to take practical, visible and open steps as part of their converting to Christ.

Avoiding 'decisionism'

Yet there is a major difference between this concern for immediate, 'concretised' decisions and 'decisionism'. 'Decisionism' is one of those rather ill-defined 'boo' words which gain currency in Evangelical circles from time to time. We need to be careful how we use such expressions. *Perhaps we can define 'decisionism' in terms of an error regarding the nature and purpose of faith.*

The crucial thing about saving faith is not the faith itself, but its object — Christ and him crucified. Dr J I Packer has written that 'one of the unhealthiest features of Protestant theology today is its preoccupation with faith: faith that is, viewed man-centredly as a state of existential commitment'.³ This view he contrasts with that of the Reformers. For them faith was 'not subject-centred but object-centred, not psychological but theological, not anthropocentric but Christocentric'. Packer goes on to quote from the late A M Stibbs who tells us:

'The faith of the individual must be seen as having no value in itself, but as discovering value wholly and solely through movement towards and committal to Christ. It must be seen simply as a means of finding all one's hope outside of oneself in the person and work of another; and not in any sense an originating cause or objective ground of justification. For true faith is active only in the man who is wholly preoccupied with Christ.'⁴

This point is well born out in Scripture, and in a number of ways. The range of use of *pistis* is evidence: our 'faith' rests upon the 'faith' (ie faithfulness) of God; and the gospel of God is the 'faith'. We debate which meaning is in view in relation to various texts, but that such a breadth of meaning exists is undeniable (eg 1 Cor 2:5; Rom 3:3; 1 Tim 1:2). But our point here is simply that this pattern of use suggests an object-centred conception of faith. The point is nailed home in Galatians 3. The chapter is full of 'faith' as the means of justification, but equally well it might be said that it is full of the object of that faith: Christ and him crucified (vv 1,10); receiving the promise in Christ through faith (v 14); until the seed should come...before faith came...now faith has come (vv 19,23,26); 'in faith in Christ' (vv 22,26).

'Decisionism' errs in relation to this biblical view of faith. Stibbs final words indicate the motive power towards faith. It must be the presentation of Christ. 'Decisionism' sits loose to that. The crucial thing is the 'decision'. So long as they give the appearance of being successful the means to promote that decision are, comparatively, a matter of indifference whether they be intellectual argument, emotional hype, peer-group pressure or whatever. Common to all 'decisionisms' is the conviction that it is man's act of faith, the decision to believe, which saves him. Moreover, when that act of faith is perceived to be inextricably bound up

with a physical act, then the action of the body becomes at least confusable with the action of the will. So the raising of a hand, walking out the front, etc, become something akin to Catholic sacraments. But more of that later.

The crucial difference between the 'decisionist' response and faith then is that the former places confidence in 'my faith in Christ', the latter in 'Christ for me'. In the former case, the decision is 'Yes, I will believe in Christ and so he will have to be for me'; in the latter case the decision is 'Yes, Christ is for me, and so I will have to be for him'. The former makes Christ the servant of 'my faith'; the latter makes me the servant of Christ. Therein lies all the difference in the world!

Contemporary evangelistic practices

With regard to evangelistic practices we need to ask two questions: do they necessarily portray faith in a 'decisionist' way; and, if not, do they tend to promote such a view of faith? First we need to describe a number of current practices. In the case of some they should not in any way be described as 'Altar Calls', but it is worth noting their use for evaluation. Some we would not wish to criticise in any way at all.

It is possible to categorise contemporary evangelistic practices in relation to the conclusion of the evangelist's address in terms of the variety and significance of acts which the hearer is invited to perform. It is relevant to do so in two ways here. In the first place we need to note that some call for acts on behalf of the hearer which are private and some for acts which are public. Secondly and more importantly it is helpful to categorise 'calls' in terms of the significance of the act called for.

Some evangelists avoid suggesting any act which is public. They may suggest no outward act at all. Perhaps more in the context of evangelistic literature, the private act of reading a printed prayer, and then signing it to say you have prayed it, is recommended. Or it may be suggested that the hearers perform an act which is known only to the preacher. For instance some invite their audience to bow their heads for prayer at the end of the sermon. The prayer will perhaps be one of commitment to Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. Having explained the content of what he is going to pray, the preacher asks those who intend to pray that prayer to lift their heads and catch his eye. Some evangelists provide opportunity for those who have heard the message to indicate privately their desire to hear more or to begin to meet with Christians by, say, handing in a card which they have filled in appropriately.

Others call for an act which is public. In some cases the act is that of going out to the front of the meeting. In other cases people are invited to stand up in the seats.

Perhaps a 'semi-public' call is that which invites the hearer, as an aspect of his response, to approach the preacher for literature or to talk more about what they have heard. Depending on the physical geography of the building and where the preacher is standing that may or may not be a request to do something which is open to general public observation.

The more crucial matter is what any act is said to signify. In some calls the act

signifies becoming a Christian. So one evangelist uses words like this, "If you want to say 'Yes' to Jesus Christ, come forward." Another may put it like this, "If you want to come to Jesus, come to the front." It is true that the call could mean that coming forward indicates simply a desire to come to Christ, but the intention is to convey that in moving physically in a certain way the hearer is actually saying 'Yes' to Jesus Christ.

Others invite those who have already become Christians to make that public by going forward. This is what Dr R T Kendall describes as 'public pledge'. It is a public affirmation of faith.

In other cases the act called for is to indicate a desire to become a Christian. Those who would like to become Christians are invited to go forward in order to be counselled in that direction.

Then again there is the suggestion that those who wish to know more about the Christian faith they have just heard expounded should express that desire in some way in order that that wish might be fulfilled.

Lastly, going forward may be urged quite explicitly in relation to any one of a whole variety of desires at one and the same time. Philip Back's report on Mission England (1984), makes plain that Dr Billy Graham's appeal is of a multiple nature.⁵ 'The counsellor forms included provision for recording the type of response an individual was making, in four broad categories:

Accepting Jesus Christ as personal Saviour...

To receive assurance of salvation...

To rededicate their lives to Christ...

For other reasons, which included providing moral support to a friend, going forward for prayer or other help, requests for further information and literature, and so on.'

Where the evangelist sees 'signs and wonders' as a necessary part of evangelism then those wanting healing or deliverance will be invited to go out along with those wishing to come to faith, etc.

Plainly, this brief description is not exhaustive, but perhaps it will suffice to alert us to the need to distinguish between things that differ.

Theologising calls

In response to all of this, we need some theological structure to enable the evaluation of these practices. Plainly not all of them fall into the trap of outright 'decisionism'. Altar Calls *per se* are not 'decisionist'. To invite enquirers to gather at the front of the hall either to speak personally with the preacher or to be addressed further by him, or to practice what Dr Kendall calls 'public pledge' is not decisionist.

Dr Kendall has suggested, and most helpfully, that the Altar Call, which for him is best described in terms of the response as 'public pledge', may be considered in the light of two Biblical and theological categories. The basic theological category into which he places the act of coming forward is that of confession. 'My conception of the public pledge is essentially this, confessing what is already

true.⁶ 'It is simply an invitation to come out of hiding, to 'go public' with your faith in Jesus.'⁷ But there is another category which impinges here. 'Public pledge' is linked with the confessional aspect of baptism and thus 'temporarily takes the place of baptism'.⁸ We are told that 'Charles Finney emphasised the anxious seat in America because baptism had lost its stigma.'⁸

Altar Calls and pastoral/situational considerations

Altar Calls can then be weighed in the light of the biblical categories of sacrament and confession, but first it is well to note some pastoral and situational considerations. It may be that situational factors make the use of particular practices advisable. The use of enquirers' meetings may become an organisational necessity where the numbers concerned for counsel are large or where there is a particular urgency for matters to be dealt with. But on the other hand, no matter what the audience it needs to be recalled that works-salvation is the natural man's heresy, whether those works be good deeds or good decisions. Evangelistic methods need to be calculated to counteract that. There are also situational factors which may weigh against certain practices. For example, where a population has been fed a 'decisionist gospel' it may be almost impossible to use any Altar Call method without being misunderstood. Or in a situation in which the people are prone to mass expressions of emotion the effect of an Altar Call may be unhelpful.

We can see something of this in the story of Simon Magus (Acts 8:9-24). Simon's response to Philip's preaching was plainly spurious, but why? Surely it is evident that he had a mechanical view of religious merit and power. He was totally taken up with the natural man's heresy, that by doing certain things, believing, being baptised, paying for a rite, he could obtain divine power. Those who take Donald Macleod's view that Luke is indicating in v 12 that the response of the generality of the people was deficient,⁹ will recognise yet another situational factor which caused difficulty. There was doubtless great religious excitement abroad; witness their allegiance to and naming of Simon. In all probability this excitement was a Samaritan counterpart to Jewish apocalyptic expectation.¹⁰ Having already come into a popular religious mass-movement it would have been very easy for them to switch allegiance from Simon to Philip, accepting Philip's message and baptism for the same kind of reasons as they had responded to Simon.

Whether such an exegesis is correct or not, it is in no way to criticise Philip. It makes the point however that even with preaching which eschews the use of 'altar-calls' things can go wrong. Both the natural tendency of man and particular situational facts can militate against real faith. It is common experience that some professions prove to have lacked depth. The parable of the sower teaches us to expect that. However, it is right to deduce this. The preacher is wise who seeks to counter both pandemic and endemic anti-gospel effects.

Any call to an action which is supposed to signify coming to Christ (raising a hand, walking out the front, signing a card) fails completely at this point. Indeed it would seem to promote 'decisionism' suggesting that the act accomplishes and merits something of spiritual gain. An invitation to an after meeting or to individual counselling for serious enquirers may on occasions be valuable, even vital. But

it will be crucial that what happens then does not put pressure on the enquirer. Moreover if the response to that invitation is inevitably public, then great harm can be done by the unwarranted assumptions of over-enthused and excited Christians about the nature of the enquirer's response.

An invitation to make public one's conversion by some physical action does not seem on face value to be open to the charge of leading to 'decisionism'. Even here, however, there are risks. Where members of the congregation have been exposed to preaching which is blatantly 'decisionist' they may mistake the nature of the appeal being made. In the same way that people fail to read the small print in contracts, they will miss our careful explanations of what 'going out to the front' *does not* mean.

For these reasons it is necessary to reject totally the kind of Altar Call which makes a physical act synonymous with receiving Christ, and one would need to find fairly solid grounds for pursuing Dr Kendall's practice of 'public pledge'.

Altar Calls as quasi-sacraments

It is an intriguing fact that Finney saw the anxious seat as fulfilling the place which the Bible gives to baptism. It would be interesting to know more of his theology of the sacraments not least in the light of some current evangelistic practices. There are without doubt quasi-sacramental elements in some kinds of Altar Calls. Moreover, where a physical response is seen to be synonymous with coming to Christ, the underlying thinking seems to be very close to that of sacramentalist theologies. The *ex opera operato* effectiveness of the sacraments seems to have been transferred to the Altar Call, so that an individual can know that they are born again not because of baptism but because of this other objective, outward act performed in response to preaching.

Altar Calls and confession

Dr Kendall's point in relating 'public pledge' to baptism is quite different however. There is no sacramentalism there, because he specifically restricts 'public pledge' to those who have already come to faith. As we have seen, Dr Kendall places 'public pledge' more firmly in the category of confession.

But does 'public pledge' actually fit that category? Indeed what is confession? Confession, like faith, needs to be understood Christocentrically. Romans 10:9 ff is the passage in the Epistles which sets out the requirement of confession most forcibly. Matthew 10:32 and Luke 12:8 provide our Lord's equally potent demand that public acknowledgement of him must be made by his disciples. The Romans passage differs from the Gospels passages in terms of context. Romans 10:9ff points to the soteric benefits accruing to the one who believes and confesses. The Gospel passages are set in the context of persecution. Will the disciples submit to the fear of man or the fear of God?

Having noticed that difference, however, the similarities are very striking. Firstly, the subject of the confession is Christ. The believer is not being called to profess his faith: 'I believe'. He is being called to make a statement about Christ. *Confession is Christocentric*. Secondly, the teaching in both Romans and the

Gospels about confession contains a high Christology. R T France points out the 'egocentricity' of our Lord's demand.¹¹ It parallels a statement of Jehovah's in 1 Samuel 2:30 and is thus pregnant with Christological implications. Even to accept that Jesus had the right to make such a statement is to acknowledge his Lordship. Again in Romans the context of the confession is not to be seen in minimalist terms. To affirm that 'Jesus is Lord' in the context of Judaism — and that is the context of Romans 10 — would have been to have made remarkable statements about his person, his death, his resurrection, and his present reign.

As with faith, confession has Christ in view rather than self. It is for this reason that it is so vital. It expresses faith in terms of its object. It makes faith audible. It provides a means of response to the gospel which confirms that the gospel has been heard and understood. Stibbs wrote that 'true faith is active only in the man who is wholly preoccupied with Christ'. To express that faith it is natural not to speak so much of 'my faith', 'how happy I am', as of Christ.

Secondly, confession of this kind was evidence of true faith because of the context in which it was made. Where to confess Christ is to risk opposition from man it makes an unselfconscious statement about oneself. To affirm 'Jesus is Lord' in that context is to affirm his personal Lordship and implicitly a dependence upon his strength in the face of the consequences.

Confession then is not a statement about 'what has happened in my heart' nor 'a going public with my faith in Christ'. That which is confessed is an affirmation about Christ.¹² The content of that affirmation is both intelligible and unmistakable. This is not so with 'public pledge'.

Dr Kendall's public pledge has the primary purpose of confession, but remarkably he proposes a second purpose.

I now refer to what I would call the instrumental purpose of the public pledge: it allows people to seek the Lord in a public manner, although they may not be sure they are saved. The call to confess Christ publically allows many people to go forward who aren't sure why they are doing it but somehow feel it is the right thing for them to do. Sometimes a person who has walked to the front does not know why he is there. It is not unusual if, when I ask a person who has just moved out to the front, 'Why have you come?' that he answers, 'I don't know'.¹³

Dr Kendall is not alone in this experience. Evangelists who practise any form of Altar Call can give examples of the same phenomenon. Whether or not they ask people to come out for a variety of reasons they find that those who come do so for all sorts of reasons, some conscious, some subconscious. But that collapses the confessional value of 'public pledge'! How does the public know whether any particular person walking to the front is confessing Christ? What is being confessed? In the case of some, at least, it sounds like a confession of disorientation, bewilderment and confusion. *'Public pledge' does not have the coherent content of confession.*

Neither does it satisfy the Gospel passages in terms of context. Dr Kendall tells us that 'Finney emphasised the anxious seat in America because baptism had lost its

stigma. He therefore felt there was a need to bring back a stigma so that a certain amount of courage was required. I suggest that we are much like that in Britain.’⁸ I suggest not. It is true that to go out to the front on one’s own may be embarrassing to some. But in a church full of Christian family and friends, to respond to the gospel in an open way will not bring a stigma. Some of our young people may even feel a stigma when in church because they are the last of their peer-group to remain unconverted. Where masses of people are moving forward some feel a psychological difficulty about staying seated. The stigma of conversion is not so often felt in the church or the mission-stadium, as in the world, at work, in the non-Christian home, etc. That is where confession ‘allows people to prove to themselves that they are not ashamed of Jesus Christ’.¹³

The making of physical actions significant of coming to faith can find no firm biblical or theological warrant. At the very least, it risks obscuring the nature of real faith. Though Dr Kendall’s exposition of ‘public pledge’ seeks to find biblical and theological support, we cannot find it convincing. Yet we must preach for decisions, urge people to close with Christ immediately, and to express that conversion in concrete terms. And surely it is not to be sneered at if preachers organise ways to help the serious enquirer to come to faith, and the convert in his first steps in the faith.

Altar Calls? No, thanks! Preaching for decisions? Yes, please!

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References

1. See John Carrick, FOUNDATIONS, No 19 Autumn 1987
2. There is some debate as to how *'apeithon* should be translated here. Regularly it means ‘disobeys’, but it is possible to translate it as ‘disbelieves’ or ‘rejects’. In the context there is little effective difference between these.
3. HERE WE STAND, Hodder, p 95
4. Justification by Faith, EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY, July 1952, p 166
5. MISSION ENGLAND: WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?, Marc Europe, p 33
6. STAND UP AND BE COUNTED, Hodder, p 75
7. *ibid*, p 76
8. *ibid*, p 67
9. THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT, CFP, p 14f
10. cf J D G Dunn, BAPTISM IN THE HOLY SPIRIT, SCM, p 63f
11. MATTHEW, TNTC, IVP, ad loc
12. That is true also of baptism. It is not primarily a means of professing one’s faith. Baptism, by visibly preaching Christ and him crucified, is a means of grace.
13. *ibid*, p 24