

# The Invitation System and the Altar Call

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I am going to ask you to come forward. Up there—down there—I want you to come. You come right now quickly. If you are with friends or relatives, they will wait for you. Don't let distance keep you from Christ. It's a long way, but Christ went all the way to the Cross because He loved you. Certainly you can come these few steps and give your life to Him . . .

The words above are Billy Graham's as quoted by Iain H. Murray in *The Invitation System* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967) 3-4.<sup>1</sup> Billy Graham was certainly famous for using such an invitation. But these words could just as well be those of thousands of other preachers who use basically the same formula week after week: the emotional music, and maybe asking everyone to sing *Just as I Am*. Then there is the invitation. A preacher may first ask people to bow their heads, close their eyes, and/or raise their hands. But always he will eventually tell them to come to Christ by coming up the aisle. Sometimes the preacher will also call those who want to rededicate their lives to Christ. It's certainly common enough. But is it biblical? Should we be doing this?

In a word, the answer to both questions is no. In this article, I'm going to give you several reasons why I believe we should not be using the invitation system or altar call.

## **Why the Invitation System/Altar Call Should Not Be Used**

1. There is not a single instance in the Bible of Christians using an altar call or invitation to come forward. If God intended this as a method of evangelizing, why didn't He say so or give us an example in His Word?

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<sup>1</sup> A PDF copy of Murray's book can be downloaded here:  
<http://rediscoveringthebible.com/InvitationSystem.pdf>

2. No one used the altar call until Charles G. Finney started using it in the nineteenth century. Significantly, Finney seems to have had an ulterior motive: "When people came forward during the altar calls of his revivals, he would often recruit them to join the abolition movement" (Peter Heltzel, *Jesus and Justice: Evangelicals, Race, and American Politics* [New Haven, CT: Yale University, 2009] 27)<sup>2</sup>; and, "On the altar lay sign-up sheets for the abolitionist movement" (David P. Gushee, ed., *A New Evangelical Manifesto: A Kingdom Vision for the Common Good* [St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2012] 112).<sup>3</sup> Having altars calls, then, is a tradition of men, and following tradition in place of Scripture is soundly condemned by Jesus Christ (see Matthew 15:3-9 and Mark 7:6-9).

3. The invitation system/altar call, because it is not Scriptural, is thus contrary to *sola scriptura*,<sup>4</sup> which says that we are to get our beliefs and teachings from the Bible alone.

4. The altar call causes confusion by seemingly making one place more important than another. The front of the room that people erroneously call the "sanctuary" is no more important than the back of the room, or the restrooms, or the parking lot!

5. The altar call causes confusion by equating coming down the aisle with coming to Christ. It is as if Jesus is somehow at the end of the aisle. But at the end of the aisle is the preacher, a man like any other. Trusting in Jesus Christ as our Savior is a gift the Holy Spirit works in our minds. It is not something that can only take place in a certain part of the room.

6. The altar call causes confusion by turning the pastor into the congregation's priest. All Christians make a holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5, 9), and one man is no more a priest than another. Yet, when the pastor issues his invitation to come forward, it is as if people must come to him for his prayer and blessing.

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<sup>2</sup> See

[http://books.google.com/books?id=o9xQC81GYjgC&pg=PA27&lpg=PA27&dq=finney+altar+call+abolition+movement&source=bl&ots=kPSy7CYU6U&sig=Xh\\_yC2-8ldypEv90v4VxYGzwQHQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=18b6Ub2NAoPhrAH98YDYAw&ved=0CDsQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=finney%20altar%20call%20abolit](http://books.google.com/books?id=o9xQC81GYjgC&pg=PA27&lpg=PA27&dq=finney+altar+call+abolition+movement&source=bl&ots=kPSy7CYU6U&sig=Xh_yC2-8ldypEv90v4VxYGzwQHQ&hl=en&sa=X&ei=18b6Ub2NAoPhrAH98YDYAw&ved=0CDsQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=finney%20altar%20call%20abolit)

<sup>3</sup> See

<http://books.google.com/books?id=5A83uw5rjpYC&pg=PA112&lpg=PA112&dq=finney+altar+call+abolition+movement&source=bl&ots=5bqXbmonKq&sig=7Vh912U8jFsSg6G7xuk4KFb0cvo&hl=en&sa=X&ei=18b6Ub2NAoPhrAH98YDYAw&ved=0CD4Q6AEwAw#v=onepage&q=finney%20altar%20call%20abol>

<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/endofreformation.htm>

7. The altar call adds a work to the grace of salvation. The Bible says, "For by grace you have been saved...not of works (Ephesians 2:8-9). Why, then, should anyone have to walk down an aisle and go to the front? To ask this of people is contrary to the Gospel. It says that a certain condition must be met and a work must be done to receive salvation.

8. The invitation system replaces our Father in heaven with the pastor. He stands up front and continually tries to draw people by telling them to "Come!" But Jesus says, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him" (John 6:44). He says nothing of pastors pleading and cajoling people by human effort to come.

9. The altar call gives the false impression that the preacher is, as Iain H. Murray puts it in the book cited above (p. 10) a "spiritual obstetrician," needed to supervise someone's spiritual new birth. The Bible supports no such idea.

10. The invitation system confuses what or who we are to come to. Again, in John 6:44, Jesus says, "No one can come to *me*" (emphasis added). He says nothing about coming to the front of a room or to a bench or to an altar. We don't come to Christ by walking to Him. We come to Him inwardly, spiritually.

11. The invitation system implies that man has an ability he does not. Even if someone argues that the pastor is only calling people to Christ, it is still wrong. Sinful men are totally depraved and completely unable to come to Christ by their own efforts,<sup>5</sup> so the pleadings of the preacher mean nothing.

12. The invitation system misrepresents God's will. The preacher gives the impression that God definitely wants everyone who is not saved to come down the aisle. The preacher's command to come is equated with a command from God. But Scripture never says anything of God wanting people to come down an aisle. And, beyond that, it may be that not all who hear the preacher's invitation are elect and called of God.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Download the *Total Depravity* booklet on this page:  
[http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg\\_010.htm](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg_010.htm)

<sup>6</sup> More information is available in the *Limited Atonement* booklet available here:  
[http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg\\_010.htm](http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/wohg_010.htm)

13. The invitation system usurps baptism. There are preachers who claim to believe in sovereign grace, but who still issue invitations. One reason they give for doing so is that it is merely a way of professing one's faith. But that is the place of baptism. When Peter preached his evangelistic sermon on Pentecost, he never called anyone to come forward. But when those who believed called out to him to know what they should do, he said, "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins" (Acts 2:38). He did not say to come forward.

But Scripture didn't stop people like Charles Finney. Comparing the practice of the apostles to his use of the anxious seat, he wrote,

The Gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ were called on to be baptized. It held the precise place that the anxious seat does now, as a public manifestation of their determination to be Christians.

Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*<sup>7</sup> [New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1868] 217

In other words, Finney invents a practice in which he calls people forward to what he calls an anxious seat. Then he says that baptism—the baptism that Jesus commissioned his disciples to use and which we read in Scripture they did use—*held* (past tense) the "precise place" that the anxious seat does now. So Finney invented a practice that he claims replaced the biblical practice of baptism. I can only say that Charles G. Finney apparently did not suffer from low self esteem. In fact, his arrogance is astounding!

14. Altar calls lead to false conversions. Pastors who use them give the false impression that you have to come forward and pray a sinner's prayer to be saved. Besides that, the invitation itself is an emotional manipulation designed to get people to make a decision the Holy Spirit may not be leading them to make. Many people who are not trusting in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior will fall victim to this manipulation and as a result follow the prescribed physical procedure (come forward). Some of these people will soon fall away, and those who, because of some carnal motivation continue to attend, can cause havoc in the assembly.

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<sup>7</sup> See <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/finney/revivals.html>

15. The invitation system can lead to a false estimation of the success or failure of a preacher or church. How many people came forward is seen as a measuring stick. This distorted idea is harmful to the preacher, the assembly, and the people who judge them by it.

16. The invitation system/altar call causes confusion by giving the impression that the purpose of the assembly of the saints is to evangelize. The regular meetings of the *ekklēsia* (usually wrongly translated "church") are not supposed to be evangelistic meetings. It would take another article to detail this, but if you will do a Bible study to compare the private house assemblies of the saints with the public preaching and discussions in the temple, the marketplaces, the synagogues of the Jews, the school of Tyrannus, and so forth, you will see a vast difference in purpose. It was in these public places that the apostles and evangelists would preach. Preach is translated from either *kērussō*, which means "herald," or *euaggelizō*, which means to announce good news. The Bible explains, "...it was God's good pleasure through the foolishness of the preaching to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21b). Preaching brings the Good News to God's elect, who then respond with belief. It is not for the already saved saints. The evangelistic meetings were also where the apostles and evangelists would dispute (*dialegomai*—dialogue, reason, discourse) with their hearers. Although members of the assembly could, if they desired, attend these public evangelistic meetings, the meetings were really for the unsaved. And some of these unsaved were coming to salvation. This is the way—publicly announcing the Gospel and fielding questions; not inviting people to come forward in an altar call—that the Lord used to add "to the assembly day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47).

Once saved, the saints assembled in private houses to receive revelation from brethren using the gifts of knowledge, prophecy, and tongues, and to be instructed by teachers who could rightly divide the Word of truth. They also ate the Lord's Supper (often referred to as breaking bread—see 1 Corinthians 10:16). But these meetings were for those who had already professed their faith and who were baptized. They were not evangelistic meetings.

Most Christians today are weekly attending what amounts to public evangelistic meetings (or, if the Lord's Supper is eaten, unbiblical hybrid meetings) and have never been to a private assembly of the saints. And even these evangelistic meetings often use the unbiblical invitation system. What's more, such meetings are not sound meat for

Christians, who, if they rely on them for their spiritual nourishment, will starve.

### **Revelation 22:17**

I attended for a couple of years a Baptist church that claimed to teach the doctrines of grace. Nevertheless, each week, the pastor issued an invitation—emotional music and singing and a command to come down the aisle. I could never understand how someone who believed that man can do no work for his salvation and that God determined our salvation in eternity, accomplished it on the Cross, and gave it to us through the gift of faith could conduct altar calls. His explanation was Revelation 22:17: "The Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' He who hears, let him say, 'Come!' He who is thirsty, let him come. He who desires, let him take the water of life freely." He essentially said that this was an invitation from God, and if God issues an invitation, then it is an example we can follow.

If you will read the verses immediately before this verse, you will see that Jesus has just said, "Behold, I come quickly" (verse 12). Verse 17 begins with the Spirit and the bride saying to *Christ*, "Come!" This is not an invitation to the sinner. Then we read that "he who hears"—likely referring to individual Christians who have ears to hear—is also to say to Jesus, "Come!" So far, all of these are entreaties for Jesus to come.

Next, we read of the sinner, referred to as, " He who is thirsty." He is to be allowed, or let, to come. Come to what? The front of the room? No. The Scripture explains this in the next sentence. "He who desires," another way of saying thirsts, "let him take the water of life freely." This is what he is to come to, the water of life. This is essentially saying what Jesus says in John 7:37-38: "Now on the last and greatest day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink! He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, from within him will flow rivers of living water'" (see also Isaiah 55:1; John 4:14; and Revelation 21:6). To thirst is to seek Jesus, to want God. Is this necessarily true of just anyone who can walk down an aisle? Scripture tells us no: "There is no one who seeks after God" (Romans 3:11b). Who then?

Jesus said, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up in the last day" (John 6:44). Only those drawn by the Father can come to Jesus. "Drawn" is from the Greek word *helkuō*, and it means "drag." No one comes to Jesus

unless the Father drags him. There's no walking up aisles here. I'd like to see a preacher dragging people up the aisle! The point is, it is not our will but God's. He makes us willing. And He doesn't drag us up an aisle, but to Christ.

### **Walking Down the Aisle in the Other Direction**

Every week, preachers all over the face of this planet mindlessly follow in the footsteps of Charles Finney and Billy Graham in practicing an invitation system that has no biblical basis and is a mockery of the means God uses to bring people to salvation. But, you say, My pastor is just doing this because he was taught to do it, and doesn't know what is presented in this article. Okay, everyone deserves a fair chance. Give this article to your pastor. Ask him to read it. If he then agrees to stop giving invitations, well and good. But if he doesn't, then I have a question for you. Will you continue to sit there listening to this Christ-dishonoring nonsense? Oh, I'm not judging you. I did it for two years in a church in which there was more wrong than just the invitation system. I was trying to keep the peace, attending for the fellowship, trying to be a light, and so forth. But how can there be peace when someone is violating Scripture? What fellowship can there really be with people who agree with such a system? (see Amos 3:3) What sort of light can one be when continuing to attend gives the impression that one condones the error? And so my family and I walked down the aisle, yes and out the door, never to return. For many years now, we have been gathering to worship the Lord in our home, as did the early saints (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2), and truly growing in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18).