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“HEY, WHERE IS THAT SOLDIER?” OR, WHY I DON’T GIVE ALTAR CALLS

by Josh King

I am not sure of the validity of this practice, but apparently at one end of army shooting ranges there is always one lone soldier standing at attention. According to Brad House, one soldier wondered why this was. He asked the officer in charge why and his answer was, “that’s how we have always done it.” After some more profitable investigation he found out that the protocol was written when officers rode horses. The lone soldier would hold the horses’ bridles so that they would not get spooked by the gunshots. When the horses left, the soldier remained; and soon, nobody knew why.

Altar calls are like that soldier. Ours is absent and some people may be asking “Hey, where did that soldier go?” Here are the reasons why we have removed this soldier from his post.

First, this soldier hasn’t always stood there. The altar call is nowhere to be found in the pages of Scripture and you have to do some serious origami with the Bible to prove it is so. We simply are not commanded to give an altar call. It was an idea that a man came up with. Was it a good idea? I don’t think so. Although some Methodist preachers were already using altar calls, it was Charles Finney who popularized the altar call. I am always surprised when I hear evangelicals speak of their high esteem for Finney. Many seem to revere him simply because he was a big figure in the Second Great Awakening who promoted “revivals”, drew crowds, and under whose preaching many made “professions”. They are unaware that Finney denied justification by faith, total depravity, and said that all we needed to do to be saved was to make a decision. Because the core of man was not evil according to Finney, we just need to decide to be good and then we will be saved. The altar call to Finney was a tool to make conversion happen. Grace is something we can then pull down at will, we just need to find the right methods and use them according to Finney.

So was the altar call a bad idea? Most certainly it was as Finney used it, but can it be used in a good way? Rarely; I don’t think pastors who do altar calls are necessarily sinning, but I do think the practice unwise at best and I do think the practice has the potential to be gravely dangerous. The altar call can be a manipulative tool used to coerce someone using their feelings. Biblically we should seek to arouse the emotions, but always through the mind. We should lift the emotions with Biblical truth, not emotional or sentimental appeals. I agree with Edwards that,



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I should think myself in the way of my duty to raise the affections of my hearers as high as I possibly can, provided that they are affected with nothing but the truth, and with affections that are not disagreeable to the nature of what they are affected with.

I grew up going to church camp and seeing an emotionalism that led to many “walking the aisle.” Children were *assured* that if they “meant” that prayer they were truly saved. Truly many of these ministers preached the gospel and meant well, and many souls were genuinely saved, yet many never demonstrate any fruit and return to that event as proof positive that they are redeemed. Scripture never tells us to find peace and assurance in this way. John wrote a letter so that those who believe might know that we have eternal life (1 John) and nowhere does he or any other Biblical author tell you to try and remember an event.

Altar calls then can lead individuals to confuse the physical act of “coming forward”, with the spiritual act of “coming to Jesus”. They are not the same act. They may happen in the same moment, but they are not the same act. Coming to Jesus isn’t reliant on your coming forward. I came forward in a church service, but that was not identical with my coming to Jesus. Many think they have been saved while pastors pronounce “peace, peace,” when there is none. Because of altar calls many are in a worse state, deluding themselves that on the basis of their own works, not Christ’s, that heaven is theirs. Many will cry out on the last day, “Lord, Lord, did we not do... in your name (Matthew 6:21-23)?” How many of these will have walked an aisle?

Some think that the altar call is necessary as a public profession of faith. But what about those who don’t walk the aisle? Further, if they aren’t saved yet, what exactly are they professing? *Baptism* is the act whereby we publicly identify with Christ, not the altar call. God’s badges are superior to man’s. Just because there isn’t a soldier at the end of the range, doesn’t mean that we aren’t soldiers.

But the most substantial reason why I do not give altar calls is that “that soldier” isn’t necessary for us to hit our target. It is the gospel that is the power of God unto salvation (Romans 1:16). As the gospel is preached God convicts, draws, regenerates, and gives faith (Romans 11:14-17; 1 Peter 1:23-25). Salvation is of the Lord! When I preach the gospel, God saves sinners. God’s means (preaching) trump man’s methods (altar calls). This soldier ain’t necessary. Don’t mistake me, I believe in invitations. Oh I believe in invitations, but the invitation is, “look to Christ, believe on Christ, trust Christ.” There isn’t a holy place at the front of the church that makes salvation happen, but there is a holy God in heaven who does.



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I am indebted to Ryan Kelly whose list below served to clarify much of my thinking.

1. The altar call is simply and completely absent from the pages of the N.T.
2. The altar call is historically absent until the 19th century, and its use at that time (via Charles Finney) was directly based upon bad theology and a man-centered, manipulative methodology.
3. The altar call very easily confuses the physical act of “coming forward” with the spiritual act of “coming to Christ.” These two can happen simultaneously, but too often people believe that coming to Christ is going forward (and vice-versa).
4. The altar call can easily deceive people about the reality of their spiritual state and the biblical basis for assurance. The Bible never offers us assurance on the ground that we “went forward.”
5. The altar call partially replaces baptism as the means of public profession of faith.
6. The altar call can mislead us to think that salvation (or any official response to God’s Word) happens primarily on Sundays, only at the end of the service, and only “up front.”
7. The altar call can confuse people regarding “sacred” things and “sacred” places, as the name “altar call” suggests.
8. The altar call is not sensitive to our cautious and relational age where most people come to faith over a period of time and often with the interaction of a good friend.
9. The altar call is often seen as “the most important part of the service”, and this de-emphasizes the truly more important parts of corporate worship which God has prescribed (preaching, prayer, fellowship, singing).
10. God is glorified to powerfully bless the things He has prescribed (preaching, prayer, fellowship, singing), not the things we have invented. We should always be leery of adding to God’s prescriptions for His corporate worship.