

# Errors of the Invitation System

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## Should We Lead People to Repeat A "Sinner's Prayer"?

*"The hallmark of an authentic evangelicalism is not the uncritical repetition of old traditions, but the willingness to submit every tradition, however ancient, to fresh Biblical scrutiny and, if necessary, reform" (John Stott)*

### I. Introduction

Evangelicals are often quick to criticize the Roman Catholic Church of error because it perpetuates teachings and traditions which run counter to the Word of God (and rightfully so). In doing this, however, we have failed to realize that our churches have, likewise, inherited traditions which contradict Scripture.

One of the more popular traditions that evangelicals are fond of is the modern invitation system. It is the practice of calling people forward at the end of a church meeting or Gospel rally to accept Jesus ("altar call") through a presubscribed prayer ("sinner's prayer"). After repeating the prayer given by the evangelist or Christian worker, the person is usually assured that they are now born-again. They are told that God has accepted them and, when any doubt of their salvation arises, to resist the Devil by claiming the promises of Scripture and to remember their public pledge.

This is, essentially, how it is practiced in many churches, although there might be slight modifications depending upon the evangelist who employs it. Its widespread popularity is evidenced in that every prominent evangelist of the 19th and 20th centuries has used it, including such well-known men as D.L. Moody (1837-1899), Billy Sunday (1862-1935), Luis Palau (1934 --), and Billy Graham (1918 --). It has become an inseparable part of American Christianity and relatively few have bothered to question it. To use the words of Erroll Hulse, it has become the "new evangelical sacrament." Those who refuse to use such methods are frequently accused of not genuinely inviting sinners to Christ. When I was pastoring a small church in Southern California, some of the members were quite perturbed when I did not repeatedly give an invitation to receive Christ at the end of each sermon. One such member even left the church because of this. After carefully explaining my reasons for not doing so, he was still unsatisfied and could only reply, "But how could Billy Graham be wrong?" It is, admittedly, difficult to reason with such people, for their thinking is more influenced by human tradition than the Word of God.

To question our evangelistic methods, however, should not be viewed as theological nit-picking or as evidence of disinterest in reaching lost men and women. Rather, it is because we take Scripture seriously and wish to conform all of our practices (even the popular ones) to its authority that we raise these issues. Why, after all, should we fear such scrutiny? If the invitation system is genuinely based on the Bible, then we have lost nothing in such an endeavor, but only confirmed

our belief. On the other hand, if it can be shown to be contrary to God's Word, then we should abandon such methods and thank God that He has graciously revealed the error of our ways.

Surely, our church traditions, regardless of who endorses them, are not above constructive criticism. But it is these considerations that most unsettles us, for who likes to discover that their beliefs are wrong? Most of us, if we are honest with ourselves, do not enjoy change. The idea of changing cherished traditions takes us out of our comfort zone and leaves us with the stark reality that we have been misled. Nevertheless, the road to change or, better, biblical reformation, is the divinely-appointed path to spiritual growth and, therefore, should not be feared by those willing to follow Christ wherever He leads.

The remainder of our study will briefly examine the origin and history of the invitation system; the key passages used to support it; and the practical and theological problems inherent in the method.

## **II. A Brief History of the Invitation System**

Most Christians are not aware that the "altar call" method in evangelism was not practiced by Jesus or His apostles. It is nowhere to be found in the Gospels or in the Book of Acts which records the evangelistic activity of the early church. This alone should cause the discerning student of Scripture to rethink the validity of such an approach.

In fact, the practice of publicly inviting people to come forward at the conclusion of a Gospel sermon, did not begin until the time of the 19th century revivalist, Charles G. Finney (1792-1850), who was probably the first to employ this method. The fact that it came to be known as the "new measures" shows that it was not previously practiced. This was, indeed, "new" and was never implemented by any prior evangelist such as George Whitefield (1714-1770), John Wesley (1703-1791), or Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758).

The reader might also be interested to know that Finney was less than orthodox in many of his beliefs. For example, he was opposed to the doctrine of original sin (calling it an "anti-scriptural and nonsensical dogma"); the imputation of Christ's righteousness; the biblical teaching of regeneration; substitutionary atonement (preferring, instead, the "moral influence" theory of the atonement); and the Reformation teaching on justification. He also consciously and purposefully molded his theology to conform to his revivalistic practices, which helps to demonstrate that he was motivated more by pragmatism than by Scripture. "Finney was a dogmatic proponent of the notion that methods produced commensurate results, in the absolute sense. The sovereignty of God in salvation exercised no power or influence in his theology, which contrasts completely with that of Jonathan Edwards, who is rightly regarded as the church's foremost theologian of revival."

Finney, in addition, was fiercely hostile to Reformed theology which, if he had seriously studied, could have prevented him from falling into the errors that he did. To show how man-centered

Finney really was, one of his most popular sermons was titled, "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts"!

Furthermore, it should not be thought that Finney went unchallenged during his career as a revivalist, for Lyman Beecher, Asahel Nettleton, Gardiner Spring, and others wrote devastating critiques of his theology and methods. However, because American Christianity was beginning to shift from its Calvinistic heritage to a more man-centered theology, their criticisms, in many respects, went unheeded by the vast majority of professing Christians. At that time, as even now to a much greater degree, there was beginning to be less appreciation for serious theological study (especially of the Calvinistic sort) and more interest in pragmatism and immediate results. It was a period in history that was ripe for such a man as Finney; and he exploited it to the best of his ability. Contrary to what some might believe, Finney was an enemy to Evangelical Protestantism and, for that matter, historic Christianity.

Unfortunately, his style of evangelism has become the norm for almost every popular evangelist which followed, including the likes of Billy Sunday who was more of a show-man than a Bible-centered preacher.

Although the invitation system has been modified since the time of Finney, it has, in many respects, remained the same. People are still assured that their coming forward is a sign of conversion; there is still a highly pressured atmosphere within these meetings to publicly answer the "altar call"; there is still an emphasis upon dramatic conversion stories, as opposed to serious biblical exposition; and there remains, as always, a disproportionate amount of people who come forward, but who eventually return to their former manner of life.

While incredible numbers of people are alleged to have been saved through the invitation system, the facts do not really support this. When the statistics of how many "walked the aisle" are given, they are not only often exaggerated, but nothing is said about the large percentage who never join a church and who return to their sinful lifestyles. It is no wonder that Ernest C. Reisinger has said, "This unbiblical system has produced the greatest record of false statistics ever compiled by church or business." At best, such claims for the success of the invitation system are mistaken; at worst, they are down-right deceptive.

One often hears people say, "I received Christ twenty years ago at a Gospel crusade, but didn't really begin living for Him until last year," without first thinking that maybe they were not truly converted when they made their initial walk down the aisle. Many, however, are offended at this suggestion, but it only proves how deceptive the invitation system is and how strongly we equate it with salvation.

It is interesting to note that the evangelists who have most used and popularized the invitation system have not been marked as particularly keen theologians. This is not meant as a personal attack, for not everyone is as schooled or prepared to teach biblical doctrine. Even still, it seems to me that those who are called to proclaim Christ before the masses should, at least, have a basic

grounding in Scripture, systematic theology, hermeneutics, and church history. Yet, sadly, these men are frequently ignorant of such truths - possessing, at best, an elementary understanding of them. Typical is the evangelist, D.L. Moody, who once said, "My theology? I was not aware I had any?" It seems to me that the complaint of the South Carolina Gazette (1741) still holds true even in our day: "The churches are being overthrown by private persons of no education and low attainment in knowledge and in the great doctrines of the Gospel."

How often do we hear at modern Gospel crusades a serious exposition of the Scriptures or a clear explanation of what took place at Calvary? How often do we hear a substantive presentation of Christ, man's inability, or the sovereignty of God in salvation? How many evangelists bother to first establish human depravity and the judgment we deserve as law-breakers before presenting the remedy to our sin in Christ? Usually, we are given the psycho-babble of how Jesus can make life meaningful and happy; and whatever Gospel is preached, is almost always devoid of repentance. Other evangelists may not be as soft. Like Billy Sunday, they will preach to a sweat against drinking, smoking, and other vices, but say next to nothing about God's holiness or justification by faith alone. They tend to moralize rather than articulate the truths of the Gospel. Even Billy Graham, although a sincere and devout man, has been guilty of this (unfortunately, since this writing of this article, Graham has apostatized from the exclusivity of the Christian faith, believing that "everybody that loves Christ, or knows Christ, whether they're conscious of it or not, they're members of the body of Christ . . . whether they come from the Muslim World, or the Buddhist world, or the Christian world, or the non-believing world - they are members of the body of Christ because they've been called by God"; cf. [ed.] John H. Armstrong, *Reformation & Revival* [Journal], Spring - 1998, Vol.7/No.2, pp.151-164).

To speak of the world's woes or even the unsatisfying nature of this present life, is not the same as forcefully declaring an unadulterated, God-centered Gospel. But, again, these are the men who have most perpetuated the invitation system and whom we should least consider as authorities in our evangelistic methodology.

One also wonders whether our modern revivalists have bothered to study the lives and ministries of past evangelists, such as George Whitefield and Daniel Rowlands (not to mention the preaching and missionary endeavors of saints like David Brainerd, Henry Martyn, and John Eliot). Not one of them employed anything even remotely similar to an "altar call." Special mention should also be made of the great 19th century Baptist preacher, C.H. Spurgeon, of whom contemporary evangelists can learn much. Although Spurgeon proclaimed the Gospel to thousands weekly, he sensed no necessity to urge lost sinners to come forward nor to lead them in a pre-subscribed "sinner's prayer." In fact, he considered any undue emphasis upon public appeals or enquiry-rooms as forms of Roman Catholic ritualism:

Let me say, very softly and whisperingly, that there are little things among ourselves which must be carefully looked after, or we shall have a leaven of Ritualism and priesthood working in our measures of meal. In our revival services, it might be as well to vary our procedure. Sometimes

shut up that enquiry-room. I have my fears about that institution if it be used in permanence, and as an inevitable part of the services. It may be a very wise thing to invite persons, who are under concern of soul, to come apart from the rest of the congregation, and have conversation with godly people; but if you should ever see that a notion is fashioning itself that there is something to be got in the private room which is not to be had at once in the assembly, or that God is more at that penitent form than elsewhere, aim a blow at that notion at once. We must not come back by a rapid march to the old way of altars and confessionals, and have Romish trumpery restored in a coarser form. If we make men think that conversation with ourselves or with our helpers is essential to their faith in Christ, we are taking the direct line to priestcraft. In the Gospel, the sinner and the Savior are to come together, with none between. Speak upon this point very clearly, "You, sinner, sitting where you are, believing on the Lord Jesus Christ, shall have eternal life. Do not stop till you pass into an enquiry-room. Do not think it essential to confer with me. Do not suppose that I have the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, or that these godly men and women associated with me can tell you any other Gospel than this, 'He that believes on the Son has everlasting life.'"

It is clear that church history, prior to the 1830's, will not support the methods of the invitation system. Its origins are relatively modern and was erected at a time when Reformed soteriology was in decline. Moreover, its preeminent advocate, Charles G. Finney, was less than orthodox in many of his beliefs. At heart, he was a Pelagian; and those revivalists who came later merely perpetuated his errors. The end result was a watered-down Gospel and a method of evangelism which duped many into thinking they were regenerate, when they were not.

### **III. Examining Key Proof-texts for the Invitation System**

Aside from the pragmatic reasons frequently given to support the invitation system (e.g., it works; Billy Graham uses it, etc.), there are a few passages which its proponents commonly cite to defend the practice. But, as we shall see, they are greatly misinterpreted and offer no real basis upon which to promote this method. We will look at three of the most popular ones.

Matthew 10:32-33: "Everyone therefore who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever shall deny Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father who is in heaven."

These verses supposedly prove that Jesus demanded a public profession of faith in Him if one was to be counted a true disciple. However, the altar call system can only be seen if we ignore the words in their historical context.

First of all, Jesus is not standing before a mass of unbelievers urging them to make a "decision."

Secondly, Jesus is addressing those who have already professed allegiance to Him (namely, the twelve disciples), not men and women who remain undecided. Matthew 10:1 says that Jesus "summoned His twelve disciples" or "twelve apostles" (v.2). The instructions contained in this chapter are exclusively directed to them (v.5; cf. 11:1). This finds further support from the context

where Jesus gathers His disciples to Himself, separating them from the crowds which surrounded them.

Thirdly, Jesus' words in verses 32-33 are within the context of the early preaching mission of the disciples who were told to avoid the regions of the Gentiles and Samaritans and, instead, go only "to the lost sheep of the House of Israel" (vv.5-6). Since hostility to the Gospel would inevitably come; and because of fear, there would be the temptation to deny Christ, Jesus thus warns His disciples that if they deny Him, He will also deny them before His Father.

It remains obvious, then, that Matthew 10:32-33 has nothing to do with urging sinners to "walk an aisle" or "make a decision"; unless, of course, we want to also insist that everyone who responds to an altar call engage in a missionary journey!?

Romans 10:9-10: "that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

Some have seen in Paul's words justification for a public profession of faith as is commonly done in our modern invitation system; but this is probably not his meaning for the following reasons.

First of all, there is nothing here to suggest that Paul would gather a group of unbelievers and personally lead them in a public prayer of repentance and confession. And neither does the Book of Acts, which records his various missionary activities, ever imply such a practice.

Secondly, although Paul is referring to the preaching of the Gospel and what he communicated to lost sinners (vv.8-10), he is not speaking of what we should prompt or assist people in saying. Granted, if they are sovereignly drawn to Christ in faith, they will, indeed, confess Jesus as Lord and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead. The confession, however, only comes after the heart has been regenerated, not before (v.10). Moreover, it is the individual's responsibility to confess and not that of the evangelist's; it is something the sinner himself consciously chooses to do (vv.11-12), rather than what he mindlessly repeats in the words of another.

Thirdly, it should not be thought that those who oppose the invitation system are against any form of public declaration of faith in Christ. On the contrary, we believe that the place where one makes their public identification with Christ is at baptism. It is here that the new believer openly confesses his allegiance to Jesus and voluntarily submits to water baptism as proof of his union with Him in death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-4).

Revelation 3:20: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me."

This is another popular proof-text for the invitation system. However, like the two previous passages that we have examined, this text also will not lend support to the practice.

First of all, our Lord is not speaking of what we should lead others to say or anything of this sort.

Secondly, it is more than likely that Jesus' words are addressed to the lukewarm members of the church at Laodicea, as opposed to a universal appeal to outsiders (Revelation 3:14-16). As the late Bible commentator, Philip E. Hughes, has written:

Though frequently used in evangelism, this appeal is not addressed to outsiders but to church members. It is an exhortation to the latter to rouse themselves from apathy and lukewarmness and to open their lives unreservedly to Christ so that the pre-eminence may be His alone. In their complacency the Laodiceans have in effect been closing the door against Him. Self has subtly usurped the place of Christ... The appeal to the Laodiceans is an appeal to the church whose lukewarmness has made it careless and unwatchful.

Robert H. Mounce similarly writes:

Verse 20 is often quoted as an invitation and promise to the person outside the community of faith. That it can be pressed into the service of evangelism in this way seems evident. Compared with other world religions the seeking God of the Judaeo-Christian heritage is perhaps its major uniqueness. In the context of the Laodicean letter, however, it is self-deluded members of the church who are being addressed. To the church Christ says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock." In their blind self-sufficiency they had, as it were, excommunicated the risen Lord from their congregation. In an act of unbelievable condescension He requests permission to enter and re-establish fellowship.

Thirdly, there is a sense in which Jesus' invitation is particular, since it is for those who "hear His voice." This appears to be what theologians have termed the "inward call" or "effectual call." Although it is true that many people hear Christ's call to repentance and faith outwardly (via the preacher), only those who have been given ears to hear will respond inwardly to that call ' as Loraine Boettner states, "The cause of any person believing is the will of God; and the outward sound of the Gospel strikes the ear but in vain until God is pleased to touch the heart within" (The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination [Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1974], p.359). This explains why Jesus so often said, "He that has ears to hear, let him hear" (Matthew 11:15; 13:9; 19:11-12).

Fourthly, however one chooses to interpret Revelation 3:20, it must not be thought that the sinner possesses the power to open his own heart to Christ. Only God can do this (John 6:44; Acts 16:14; James 1:18). Although God's sovereignty in salvation does not negate our responsibility to proclaim the Gospel to all men, we must never suggest to people that the power to convert their hearts lies within them (Psalm 110:3; Philippians 1:29; 2 Timothy 2:24-26).<sup>9</sup>

#### **IV. Practical and Theological Problems of the Invitation System**

Numerous problems are inherent within the modern invitation system. The following is a small sampling of some of the major ones.

1. It is always dangerous to promote a practice which cannot be substantiated from the Word of God. Our methodology or philosophy of evangelism must always be formed by a careful study of Scripture, rather than by what "works." Yet, it amazes me how little painstaking exegesis is offered by the proponents of the "altar call" method. Even the twenty-two reasons given in support of the invitation system by R.T. Kendall (Stand Up and Be Counted [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984]), are based more on pragmatism than a direct treatment of clear, biblical passages. The reader might be interested to know, however, that Erroll Hulse has refuted, point-by-point, the various reasons offered by Kendall in his outstanding work, *The Great Invitation* (England: Evangelical Press, 1986), pp.172-176.

2. The invitation system tends to equate the act of coming forward with salvation. According to Billy Graham, "Coming out, settles it and seals it... There's something about coming forward and standing here. It's an outward expression of an inward decision." Even though the supporters of the invitation system attempt to explain that "walking down an aisle" doesn't save anyone, the practice still subtly suggests that coming forward is an act that leads to salvation. This notion is reinforced when those who respond are assured that, because they came forward and prayed the "sinner's prayer," they can have confidence that they're saved. The modern evangelist may not wish to imply this, but the people who "walk the aisle" and who possess less theological sophistication than the preacher, are clearly given this impression.

Although regeneration will always result in an outward change of behavior or lifestyle, it is not, in itself, a physical thing; but inward and spiritual. It is the sovereign and supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in making alive those who were formerly spiritually dead (John 3:3-8; Acts 16:14; Ephesians 2:1-5; Colossians 2:13); transferring them from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of God (Acts 26:18).

If they are regenerated and granted faith to believe the Gospel (Acts 18:27; Philippians 1:29), there is no further need to prompt them to come forward. If regeneration has, indeed, taken place, their lives will demonstrate "deeds appropriate to repentance" (Luke 3:8-14; Acts 26:20). If it does not, we can be assured that our Gospel preaching has fallen on stony ground or hardened hearts (Matthew 13:19-22).

Our primary concern, however, is not with their response per se, but in whether we have faithfully articulated the true Gospel message; making certain that we have not spoiled its truth with human opinion or unnecessary theological baggage. Unfortunately, this is probably not the foremost concern of the modern evangelist, but rather in securing large numbers of people to come forward. In fact, I have personally witnessed the frustration which some evangelist's undergo when very few respond. Because they base the success of their crusade upon what they can do to illicit a



response, they may tend to doubt their abilities, the performance of the music, or other factors, when very few come forward. But this only shows how much more they trust human devices, than the Spirit of God.

3. The invitation system tends to attach an undue importance on numbers. We have already explained that the numbers given to demonstrate the effectiveness of the invitation system are greatly exaggerated. Its proponents wrongly assume that all or, at least, most of the people who come forward get saved. A large percentage, however, simply return to their former manner of life once the excitement wears off or when the cares of this world choke whatever has been sown in their hearts (Matthew 13:19-22).

The emphasis or preoccupation with numbers goes contrary to Scripture which is not especially concerned with how many people make a "profession" or "decision." Although Luke records the conversion of three thousand souls on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41), he is also quick to note that these and others were added by God's doing (v.47), and not through any manipulative techniques of an evangelist.

Furthermore, those who were converted went on to demonstrate the genuineness of their faith by being baptized, gathering with God's people, and by "continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching" (vv.41-46). In fact, if we were to look only at numbers, we might be tempted to conclude that Jesus Himself was not an especially gifted evangelist. He started His ministry with a multitude of followers, but ended with only eleven faithful disciples. He often spoke words that offended His hearers (John 6:41-56; 8:31-59), which eventually provoked many of them to abandon Him (John 6:60-66). His discipleship demands were also hard (Matthew 10:34-39; 16:24-26; 19:21; Luke 9:57-62). Nevertheless, everything He said and did was in complete accord with the Father's purpose. Thus, we should never conclude that a large, positive response to the Gospel message, by itself, proves that God is blessing our methods or that such a response is genuine (John 2:23-25). Instead, we must faithfully declare the whole counsel of God (Acts 5:20; 20:27) and leave the results to Him, who alone is able to add to the church (Acts 2:47; 13:48; 1 Corinthians 3:6-7; Psalm 127:1).

4. The invitation system gives assurance to people who may not yet be converted. It is not our place to give assurance of salvation to others, regardless of how sincere they may initially appear to be. This alone is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:16; 1 John 5:10). In fact, to give assurance to people who may not be converted is to deceive them and, perhaps, even harden them to any future suggestion of not being genuinely saved. Because we humans are so prone to self-deception, especially in spiritual matters, the Bible repeatedly urges us to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith (2 Corinthians 13:5) and to make certain about God's calling and choosing of us (2 Peter 1:10). Let us, then, be careful in dealing with the souls of men, for those who continue to deceive others into believing something that is not true of themselves, will one day answer to God Himself (Romans 14:10-12; 1 Corinthians 3:10).

5. The invitation system seeks to condition people for a response through the use of such externals as uplifting music, dynamic personalities, and a charged or emotional atmosphere. The problem with this is that it tends to provoke a response which is based on factors other than the truth of the Gospel. If we appeal to the emotions of people we will probably only secure an emotional response. This is, essentially, dishonoring to the Gospel which is a message wed to redemptive truth. This is not meant to suggest that reverent music has no place, but rather, that whatever music is employed should not seek to psychologically condition sinners to come forward.

We need to remember that emotions, by themselves, are a poor indicator of inward regeneration. Humans are fickle and can be easily swayed towards an emotional reaction depending upon what form of stimulation is used. Not only do our emotions come and go, but convictions which are not deeply rooted within the mind and heart can also be easily discarded. The great preacher and pastor of the Westminster Chapel in London, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, offers one such example:

In the church where I ministered in South Wales I used to stand at the main door of the church at the close of the service on Sunday night, and shake hands with people as they went out. The incident to which I am referring concerns a man who used to come to our service every Sunday night. He was a tradesman but also a heavy drinker. He got drunk regularly every Saturday night, but he was also regularly seated in the gallery of our church every Sunday night. On the particular night to which I am referring I happened to notice while I was preaching that this man was obviously being affected. I could see that he was weeping copiously, and I was anxious to know what was happening to him. At the end of the service I went and stood at the door. After a while I saw this man coming, and immediately I was in a real mental conflict. Should I, in view of what I had seen, say a word to him and ask him to make his decision that night, or should I not? Would I be interfering with the work of the Spirit if I did so? Hurriedly I decided that I would not ask him to stay behind, so I just greeted him as usual and he went out. His face revealed that he had been crying copiously, and he could scarcely look at me. The following evening I was walking to the prayer-meeting in the church, and, going over a railway bridge, I saw this same man coming to meet me. He came across the road to me and said, "You know, doctor, if you had asked me to stay behind last night I would have done so." "Well," I said, "I am asking you now, come with me now." "Oh no," he replied, "but if you had asked me last night I would have done so." "My dear friend," I said, "if what happened to you last night does not last for twenty-four hours I am not interested in it. If you are not as ready to come with me now as you were last night you have not got the right, the true thing. Whatever affected you last night was only temporary and passing, you still do not see your real need of Christ."

In addition, we should not put much stock in preachers with dynamic personalities or in dramatic conversion stories. Although it is true that good preaching involves the whole person (which includes his unique personality and enthusiasm), the message should never be presented flippantly nor should the preacher's dynamics within the pulpit overpower the Gospel proclamation.

We want sinners to be strongly attracted to Christ and His glorious Gospel, not to the antics of the speaker. While the God-centered preacher is moved by both his love for sinners as well as the

eternal realities he is presenting (Lloyd-Jones terms it "theology on fire"), he is to be serious in his demeanor and absorbed in only declaring what is revealed in Scripture.

We must also make sure that people do not confuse a dramatic conversion story with the Gospel itself. To tell others what Christ has done for us or of the circumstances surrounding our conversion, is not the same as telling them what God has done in Christ at Calvary. Although one's testimony may have its time and place, it should never replace a clear presentation of Christ's Gospel. As a matter of fact, if presented properly, the redemptive event of the cross is itself quite dramatic! If the Gospel is truly "the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16), why would we declare anything else?

6. Invitation system preachers frequently appeal to the will of their listeners and virtually by-pass their minds. Because the modern evangelist is less concerned with propositional truth in the more abstract sense (although the Gospel should never be presented as merely abstract truth), he tends to by-pass the minds of his hearers and put an undue pressure upon their wills.

But this is surely a misguided approach, since it tends to illicit a response which is motivated more by influences other than the truth. We should, instead, appeal to their minds; provoking them to think of their plight before a holy and wrathful God, their transgression of the Divine Law, and the remedy found only in Christ's atoning death. It is only after their minds are persuaded by truth (Jeremiah 23:28), that their wills follow in obedience, not the reverse. All of this presupposes, of course, that such a response is sovereignly and powerfully granted by the Holy Spirit. Lloyd-Jones further explains:

The first is that it is wrong, surely, to put direct pressure on the will. Let me explain that. Man consists of mind, affections and will; and my contention is that you should not put direct pressure on the will. The will should always be approached primarily through the mind, the intellect, and then through the affections. The action of the will should be determined by those influences. My scriptural warrant for saying that is Paul's Epistle to the Romans chapter 6, verse 17, where the Apostle says: "God be thanked that ye were servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered to you." Observe the order in that statement. They have "obeyed," yes; but how? "From the heart." What was it [that] made them do this, what was it [that] moved their hearts? It was this "form of teaching" that had been delivered to them. What had been delivered or preached to them was the Truth, and Truth is addressed primarily to the mind. As the mind grasps it, and understands it, the affections are kindled and moved, and so in turn the will is persuaded and obedience is the outcome. In other words, the obedience is not the result of direct pressure on the will, it is the result of an enlightened mind and a softened heart. To me this is a crucial point.

7. The modern invitation method implies that sinners have the power inherently to believe on Christ any time they so choose. I have heard contemporary evangelists declare to their audience more times than I wish to count words to the effect, "God has done His part, now you must do yours," or "It's all up to you! Christ can do no more. He now waits for you to make your decision."

This is the modern equivalent of Finney's famous sermon, "Sinners Bound to Change Their Own Hearts."

The truth is, the sinner cannot change his own heart nor is the moment of salvation dependent upon his choice or timing. Only God can do this, for "Salvation is from the Lord" (Jonah 2:9). Men and women, as we have previously pointed out, must be sovereignly granted grace in order to respond to the Gospel message (John 6:44; Acts 13:48; 16:16; Romans 9:15-16; 2 Timothy 2:24-26; James 1:18), for in their own strength, they are powerless (Jeremiah 13:23; Romans 8:7; 1 Corinthians 2:14; 2 Corinthians 4:3-4; Ephesians 2:1-3). Thus, while people must be commanded to repent and flee to Christ in faith, they must never be given the impression that the ability to do so resides within them. They ought to be urged to seek Christ that He might grant them the grace to believe (Deuteronomy 29:4; Isaiah 65:1; Jeremiah 24:7; Acts 8:22).

8. The invitation system tends to produce spurious converts. Although we have already made this clear, it is interesting to note that even some prominent evangelists have said the same. They, too, recognize that a disproportionate amount of people who "walk the aisle" eventually return to their old sinful ways. Like Demus, they desert the assembly of the righteous, "having loved this present world" (2 Timothy 4:10).

Unfortunately, very few seem to consider that much of this is due to the kind of Gospel presented and the methods used to procure conversions. But what else are we to expect when the Gospel is watered-down and replaced with a "felt needs" kind of theology? Why should anyone sense their condemnation as lawbreakers when nothing is said about God's righteous standards? Why should anyone sense their spiritual inability when they are repeatedly assured that they possess the power to come to Christ at will? Why should any person have a deep conviction of sin when nothing or, very little, is said about God's holiness? Why should anyone want to endure the Christian life which is marked by self-denial, suffering, and rejection, when they are told that Christ will make them happy and self-fulfilled? Why would anyone endure the hostility of the world when they were never advised about the cost of discipleship? Why should they ever seek to be covered by Christ's righteousness alone when a minimal amount is said about their own unworthiness? Why should they ever fear the flames of everlasting judgment when the reality of hell is not soberly declared? Why should any person tremble at the thought of God's wrath when only the love of God is preached? Why should any person despise those inward sins which spring from the heart when only external vices such as smoking, intoxication, and cursing are condemned? Why should any person possess a heavenly hope when they are assured that they can have the best of both worlds?

The reader should, hopefully, see my point. If we desire to see sinners saved, but begin our endeavors with a faulty Gospel coupled with a deceptive evangelistic methodology, we should expect nothing more than apostasy and lives which make mockery of the Gospel. If we start with a man-centered message which seeks to present as little as possible any doctrinal content, we might indeed see people come forward, but very few (if any) will truly comprehend the Gospel and most will soon return to the passing pleasures of sin.

This is what upsets me most about the state of today's church: We are preoccupied with making America a "Christian nation" (which, in the biblical sense, it never was) and in turning the tide of secular humanism, but rarely seem to think that something might be horrifically wrong with the kind of Gospel we preach. Those issues that matter little in the eternal scheme of things, we are completely absorbed with; while that which has everlasting consequences, namely the kind of Gospel we should proclaim, seems to scarcely raise a brow!

This is, undoubtedly, due to our assumption that the Gospel currently proclaimed from our pulpits is the same one that Paul preached; and because this is so widely assumed, we evangelicals seem content to turn our attention to other matters like secularism or recapturing the political landscape for traditional values. But we have assumed wrongly. Our modern Gospel differs in many ways from the apostolic one. Regardless of how bad things may morally and politically appear, the church's priority must always be directed toward fidelity to Christ's Gospel. Comparatively speaking, nothing else really matters. This explains why proponents of the contemporary invitation system must rethink not only the kind of Gospel they tell sinners, but also the methods they employ to "get them saved." Unless we begin here, our churches will continue to spew forth false disciples.

Perhaps someone will reply, "But haven't people been saved through the use of the invitation system?" Yes, they have; but this should not be construed as God's full endorsement of our modern methods. We must always remember that God often uses the faulty methods of men to accomplish His Divine purpose. However, He does so not because our current system is right, but in spite of its errors. The modern evangelist generally says enough that is true of Christ for God to use in the salvation of His elect. If anything, this demonstrates how sovereign and powerful He is, since He is able to work above our misguided attempts at evangelism to redeem sinful men and women. The "altar call" method, however, is not God's best and we would be wise to dispense with this approach altogether.

Simply because God can use the invitation system for His greater purposes, does not absolve us from the responsibility of warning people of its dangers. We must speak out and identify its errors, rather than tolerate its existence as a necessary part of evangelism. Its two-hundred year or so history provides no justification for its continual use any more than the long history of Roman Catholicism provides legitimacy for its existence. The fact that our churches have historically had only one man serve as pastor offers no warrant for its continued practice, since the New Testament is clear that local congregations are to be shepherded by a plurality of pastors (Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:17; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Our churches continue to also limit corporate instruction to one man alone (usually the "senior pastor") in direct violation of the New Testament pattern (Acts 13:1; 15:35; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 5:17). None of these firmly established traditions should be perpetuated or condoned merely because they have a long history or even because some good has come from them. In the same way, neither should the popular "altar call" method find continued acceptance among evangelicals because of its long history or seemingly positive results.

9. The "altar call" proponents tend to approach evangelism in a fixed, mechanical manner. Contemporary revivalists seem to think that one approach or method is sufficient for all. The problem with this is that it ignores the variety of approaches found in Scripture.

Although the message remained the same, the New Testament records a multiplicity of ways in which sinners can be reached. For instance, the way Jesus dealt with Nicodemus in John chapter three is not quite the same approach He took in dealing with the woman at the well in John chapter four; nor is it the same strategy used when addressing the rich young ruler in Matthew chapter nineteen.

Neither is Paul's approach the same when evangelizing Jews in Thessalonica as it was when witnessing to the Greek philosophers in Athens (Acts 17). While the message remained the same in both instances, he approached lost sinners in ways that were unique to their individual culture and concerns. In contrast to the modern invitation system, there was no one standardized method guaranteed to reach all; nothing mechanical or pre-subscribed which every missionary was to employ; and there were absolutely no recorded instances of leading people in a "sinner's prayer." Each person is different and so also is there knowledge of spiritual matters, not to mention the degree to which they are sensitive to their own sin. Thus, we should use discernment in addressing each individual in order to make our Gospel opportunities more profitable.

It is understandable when a Christian first begins his witnessing endeavors to use a prearranged approach (perhaps in the kinds of questions asked or in the Scriptures cited), but as he matures in Christ and in his knowledge of God's Word, he should become less dependent upon such crutches. He ought to be able to think on his feet and creatively apply God's truth to the direction of the conversation.

Being creative, however, does not mean employing what I term the "survey method." This is the practice of telling people that you are taking a religious survey and, after a series of very general questions, begin to press them about their personal standing before God. Such an approach does not fulfill our Lord's advice to be "wise as serpents and innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16), since it is deceptive at the core. These so-called "surveys" are not promoted by any legitimate statistical organization nor is there any real intention in gathering statistical data. Lost sinners do not need the Gospel sneaked up on them, but openly and faithfully declared by honest Christians!

10. When engaged in evangelism, there is no need to employ a "sinner's prayer." People who begin to sense their own wretchedness before a holy God should themselves be urged to seek Christ in prayer, as opposed to being given the words to say (a rather artificial approach it seems to me). Allow them, on their own and apart from any outside pressure, to begin to pour out their hearts before the Savior. Isaiah 55:6 commands the sinner himself to seek the Lord and to call upon Him while He is near. To tell them, then, what to say is a greatly mistaken approach, especially since the evangelist's words may not even be their own convictions; it may not be what they sense at all

Besides, if a man is truly being drawn to Christ in faith, no evangelist will have to tell him what to say or confess, for he will naturally cry out on his own as the Spirit of God begins to prompt him to "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6). In fact, his prayer and contrition will probably be much deeper and sincere than any evangelist could provide, since they spring from the person's own mind and emotions. Granted, the seeking sinner might pray in simple words devoid of any eloquence or sophistication, but Christ is not looking for these anyway. Rather, He desires sincerity, honest confession, and contrition (Psalm 138:6; Isaiah 66:2; Luke 18:13-14).

I cannot help but believe that the "sinner's prayer" is a contemporary form of incantation; a mystical formula that magically brings forth the desired result. Although modern evangelists may not see it as crudely as this, far too many of them treat it as a powerful key that unlocks the doors to salvation. However, we ought never to trust in pre-subscribed prayers or religious exercises, but only in Christ who alone possesses the power to resurrect sinners to new life. Our focus must be on Him and what He can accomplish, not upon what we can do.

The "sinner's prayer," as commonly used, also suggests that one instance of prayer will usher in regeneration. Church history, however, reveals that many saints have not experienced peace and reconciliation with God until after long, agonizing periods of prayerful searching. In some cases, a span of several months passed before they sensed any relief from heaven. In no way am I suggesting that God always works in this manner, but only that people must not be given the impression that God's response to their prayers will be instantaneous; that no amount of Scripture meditation or wrestling in prayer is necessary, for the Lord may indeed require great periods of despair and anguish before He sovereignly grants peace within one's soul.

But how often does the modern evangelist tell his hearers this? Because we live in an instantaneous society where almost everything is quickly provided, we tend to carry this same mindset into the spiritual realm; thinking of God as some Divine bellhop who can be beckoned at will to do almost anything and that at breakneck speed!

Lastly, the reader should not conclude that I am against inviting sinners to the Savior. On the contrary, having previously engaged in several years of street evangelism, in addition to my preaching duties as a pastor, I know what it is to give a Gospel invitation to the lost. But mark this: An invitation is not something which one attaches to the end of a sermon; but rather, the Gospel message is itself the invitation. When one declares the Gospel message and urges sinners to flee to Christ for refuge, he is, at that very point, engaged in inviting sinners to the Savior. There is nothing in the New Testament to suggest that the two are to be separated, for the Gospel message is a summons to repent and believe. Under this scenario, the Spirit of God may cause the unregenerate to see their spiritual bankruptcy and look to Christ without ever standing up and walking an aisle.

## **V. Conclusion**

The invitation system, as we have seen, is riddled with one problem after another. Among the items noted, it violates the New Testament pattern of evangelism; tends to produce spurious converts; gives assurance to people who may not yet be regenerated; raises a superficial conviction of sin; equates the mere act of coming forward with salvation itself; and seeks to illicit a response through emotional and psychological factors.

It is a human invention that attempts to do what can only be accomplished by the powerful hand of God. This explains why, at first, it appears so successful but, eventually, results in so many returning to their sinful patterns. Within the invitation system, the so-called "saints" do not persevere because most of its adherents are not saints to begin with. It is man saving man apart from a clearly defined Gospel and with no real need for a sovereign God "who does according to His will in the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth" (Daniel 4:35).

Our modern methods in evangelism are only symptoms of a much great problem. The real culprit is the semi-Pelagian theology which permeates this unbiblical system. It is wrong conceptions of God, the message of the Gospel, and the nature of salvation itself, which gives life to this practice ' and so long as today's church continues to wallow in the mire of semi-Pelagian error, turning its nose against Calvinistic soteriology, the invitation system will remain. But so will our ignorance, superficial holiness, and general disdain for biblical theology. Thus, evangelists committed to continuing the legacy of Charles Finney are guaranteed to perpetuate the errors found in today's church into the twenty-first century.

What, then, can be done to correct the errors of the invitation system and reverse our semi-Pelagian trend?

First and foremost, God must bring about a powerful reformation and revival to His church. Our problems are so severe and deeply-rooted, that nothing short of such measures can return us to the "ancient paths" (Jeremiah 6:16).

Secondly, we must boldly speak out against its errors and warn believers of the inherent dangers in using it. The popularity of the invitation system demonstrates the need for Christians to think deeper about matters of soteriology and evangelism. Far too much sloppy theology is allowed to pass as Christian doctrine because of poor exegesis and spiritual laziness amongst our modern evangelists. We need to hold them to a higher standard, both morally and theologically, if they are going to represent Christ in the public arena.

Thirdly, we must pray for a resurgence of Calvinistic soteriology within our churches. Our prayers, however, should not be merely limited to seeing believers return to their Reformation heritage but, ultimately, to New Testament Christianity in all its soteriological and ecclesiological forms.

Fourthly, those men within our congregations gifted to teach and who possess a strong grasp of the Doctrines of Grace, must begin to take on the responsibility of teaching such truths to others, seeking to influence as many saints as possible. I fear that there exists far too many capable men



within our churches who have a deep knowledge of Reformed theology, but who choose to do nothing or very little with it. Many of them seem perplexed about what role or function they are to exercise within the church but who, in the meantime, do nothing to remain active or develop their teaching skills. Absorbed in the conflict of whether God is calling them to pastoral ministry or not, they allow repeated teaching opportunities to slip by because they imagine that only speaking behind a pulpit can secure any real influence. Such confused and direction-less men will rarely be agents that God will use to reform the church. Remember: Knowledge brings accountability. If God has graced you with a deeper knowledge of His Word, you are responsible, within your abilities and sphere of influence, to share it with others.

Fifthly, we must all do what we can to promote sound, God-centered literature into the hands of others. In this sense, every Christian is a publisher.

Finally, we should pray that God will raise a host of Calvinistic evangelists who possess caring hearts to reach lost men and women within our culture. This would not only profit the unregenerate, but serve also as a corrective and model to the Arminian revivalists who have inundated our churches.