

The True Nature of Belief

Mark 4:3-8

Introduction::

The Modern Invitation System Examined *By Massimo Lorenzini*

The Reality of False Conversions

Parable of the Four Soils (or the Sower)

3 “Listen! Behold, a sower went out to sow. 4 And it happened, as he sowed, that some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds of the air came and devoured it. 5 Some fell on stony ground, where it did not have much earth; and immediately it sprang up because it had no depth of earth. 6 But when the sun was up it was scorched, and because it had no root it withered away. 7 And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop. 8 But other seed fell on good ground and yielded a crop that sprang up, increased and produced: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred” ([Mark 4:3-8](#)).^[1]

The disciples didn't understand the parable. Jesus said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” ([Mark 4:13](#)). In other words, understanding this parable would give them the key to unlocking the mysteries of all the other parables.

Here's the key: *When the gospel is preached, there will be true and false conversions.* Understanding this truth will shed light on the other parables. Consider the following as examples: the wheat and the tares ([Matt 13:24-30](#)), the dragnet ([Matt 13:47-51](#)), the wise virgins and the foolish virgins ([Matt 25:1-13](#)), and the sheep and the goats ([Matt 25:31-46](#)).

Fall-Away Rates

The initial statistics of modern evangelism are very encouraging until one looks at the numbers of those who are actually following through on their “decision for Christ.” In fact, the ultimate results of modern evangelism are so dismal that it's no surprise that it is very difficult to find hard numbers on the results of modern evangelism. As you will see in a moment, it is quite obvious why the numbers are not shouted from the rooftops.^[2]

- Charles E. Hackett, the division of home missions national director for the Assemblies of God in the U.S. said, “A soul at the altar does not generate much excitement in some circles because we realize approximately ninety-five out of every hundred will not become integrated into the church. In fact, most of them will not return for a second visit.”
- In his book *Today's Evangelism*, Ernest C. Reisinger said of one outreach event, “It lasted eight days, and there were sixty-eight supposed conversions.” A month later, not one of the “converts” could be found.
- In 1991, organizers of a Salt Lake City concert encouraged follow-up. They said, “Less than 5 percent of those who respond to an altar call during a public crusade . . . are living a Christian life one year later.” In other words, *more than 95 percent* proved to be false converts.

- A pastor in Boulder, Colorado, sent a team to Russia in 1991 and obtained 2,500 decisions. The next year, the team found only thirty continuing in their faith. That's a retention rate of 1.2 percent.
- In November 1970, a number of churches combined for a convention in Fort Worth, Texas, and secured 30,000 decisions. Six months later, the follow-up committee could only find thirty continuing in their faith.
- A mass crusade reported 18,000 decisions—yet, according to Church Growth magazine, 94 percent failed to become incorporated into a local church.
- In Sacramento, California, a combined crusade yielded more than 2,000 commitments. One church followed up on fifty-two of those decisions and couldn't find one true convert.
- A leading U.S. denomination reported that during 1995 they secured 384,057 decisions but retained only 22,983 in fellowship. They couldn't account for 361,074 supposed conversions. That's a 94 percent fall-away rate.
- In the March/April 1993 issue of *American Horizon*, the national director of home missions of a major U.S. denomination disclosed that in 1991, 11,500 churches had obtained 294,784 decisions for Christ. Unfortunately, they could find only 14,337 in fellowship. That means that despite the usual intense follow-up, they couldn't account for approximately 280,000 of their “converts.”

What about God's Word that says He is “able to keep you from stumbling, And to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy” ([Jude 24](#)). Either He wasn't able to keep these professed converts, or His hand wasn't in their profession of faith in the first place.

We are facing a fall-away rate of 84-97 percent. Some believe we need better follow-up. However, “following-up” with a false convert is like putting a stillborn baby into intensive care.

The Problem #1

Modern Evangelism Methods

The Modern Invitation System and Decisionism

We believe that man’s modern invitation system is unbiblical and leads to false conversions. By invitation system, we mean the use of the altar call, public profession by raising hands or going down the aisle, public pledge, signing a decision card, reciting a sinner’s prayer, etc. By decisionism, we mean the practice of calling people to “make a decision for Christ” that in itself is purported to secure their salvation.

These practices apply heavy psychological pressure on the individual for the purpose of eliciting an external profession of faith usually culminating in leading the person to repeat the “sinner’s prayer.” Those who respond are given immediate assurance of salvation and presented to the congregation as born-again believers and welcomed into the fellowship of the church.

A Closer Look at Invitations and Altar Calls

INTRODUCTION^[3]

Scripture is clear that we are under divine command to call “all people everywhere to repent” ([Acts 17:30](#)). Inviting people to embrace the gospel and to follow Christ is at the heart of biblical ministry. It’s a *non-negotiable*.

We are to:

- Seek to bring the unregenerate to Christ with passion.
- Give a verbal call to Christ in a most serious way...we “compel” them.
- Explain the basis of assurance...but leave the actual assuring to the Spirit.

DISTINCTION

Extending **God’s invitation** to all, however, is NOT necessarily synonymous with **man’s invitation system**.

An altar call may include one or more of the following *techniques*:

- Music is played softly in the background while the preacher prays and talks to the congregation.
- Those who feel the pangs of conscience and know they need to respond to God’s work in their heart are asked to slip up their hands. All are reminded to keep their “heads bowed and eyes closed...no one looking around.”
- Those who slipped up their hands are possibly then asked to “look up” at the preacher so that he can talk directly just to them.
- If you have raised your hand and/or looked up, you are then asked to leave your seat and make your way down the aisle where the preacher or another counselor can greet you and talk with you further....“I don’t want to embarrass you; I just want to pray with you.”

- Designated counselors may at this time also leave their seats and make their way down the aisle to kneel or stand at the front (to *prime the pump?*).
- If you've come down the aisle, you are asked to go to a room off to the side where counselors are there to continue praying and talking with you.
- At any point in this approach, an invitation hymn may be sung (such as *Just As I Am, I Surrender All, Have Thine Own Way*, etc.). During this hymn you are invited to come to the front to kneel and pray, to rededicate your life, to receive Christ, to talk with the pastor or another counselor, or to join the church. (The altar call has many uses.)
- If several verses of the hymn have been sung, the minister may ask for the instruments to continue playing quietly. This gives those kneeling at the altar some time to finish, or those still resisting the Holy Spirit an opportunity to respond "before it's too late."
- Perhaps one final verse of the hymn is sung.
- If someone has "given their life to Christ" or has joined the church, they may be presented to the congregation at the close of the altar call.

There are many variations to this, some extreme, some very minimal. But generally the altar call is a time at the close of the sermon where, during some form of music, listeners are invited to come to the front in response to the message.

HISTORY

While there is debate over the exact origins of this practice, most agree that it came into prominence in the 1830's with Charles Finney (1792-1875), who popularized it through the *mourner's bench* or *anxious bench* (some today call it the "altar").

Dr. Albert B. Dod, a professor of theology at Princeton Seminary at the time of Mr. Finney's ministry, pointed out the newness of the practice and showed that this method was without historical precedent. In his review of Finney's *Lectures on Revival*, Professor Dod stated that one will search in vain for a single example of this practice before the 1820's.^[4] Instead, history tells us that whenever the gospel was preached men were invited to Christ—not to decide at the end of a sermon whether or not to perform some physical action.

Finney believed that the new birth and revival were not miracles (i.e. something only God can do) but were states accomplished by means of the proper use of the will. He knew that to arrive at regeneration and, on a larger scale, revival, the will must be excited to action. Hence he developed the “new measures,” one of which was the “anxious bench.” In many ways, this anxious bench is the mother of our modern day invitationism.

Reacting to Finney's method, theologian R.L. Dabney commented:

“We have come to coolly accept the fact that forty-five out of fifty will eventually apostatize [fall away].”

On the other side of Finney was the veteran evangelist Asahel Nettleton (d. 1844), whose converts stood. For instance, in Ashford, Connecticut there were eighty-two converts, and only three spurious ones. In Rocky Hill, Connecticut, there were eighty-six converts and they all were standing strong after twenty-six years, according to their pastor. Nettleton rigidly refused to offer public altar calls, believing that it prematurely reaped what would turn out to be false

converts. C. H. Spurgeon, the Victorian “Prince of Preachers,” thought similarly.

Billy Sunday, D.L. Moody, and Billy Graham are other evangelists who contributed to the widespread acceptance and use of the altar call.

Certainly, Graham is the one who is most related to the contemporary form of the altar call in use in many churches today.

DEFENSE

There are four primary arguments given in support of the altar call:

1. Scriptural Argument

Christ always called people publicly. This is confirmed by texts such as, “Follow Me...,” or “Whosoever shall confess me before men...”

2. Psychological Argument

Responding publicly to a gospel appeal “settles it and seals it.” The implied meaning seems to be that a step made publicly is more likely to be decisive and irrevocable. There is something about coming forward and standing in front of the congregation that helps the individual be confident that he’s made a decision that God honors.

3. Practical Argument

The altar call provides an easy, organized way to present new converts to the congregation, and to allow non-members to

join. If there is no altar call, the argument goes, how can people publicly identify with Christ and with a local body?

4. Demonstration Argument

To both the saved and unsaved in the congregation, people responding during an altar call is a visual demonstration and proof of the power of the Word of God. This can be convicting to those who are not saved, and encouraging to those who are.

CONCERNS

In answer to the reasons given in support of using an altar call, and to the related issues mentioned above, the following concerns are offered:

1. There is no clear biblical precedent or command related to the modern public invitation or altar call.

As noted previously, some say, “Christ always called people publicly.” It is certainly true that Christ Himself did say such things as ‘Follow Me,’ or ‘Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father which is in heaven.’

But to conclude that Jesus gave altar calls on the basis of those passages is to fail to be honest with the text. No doubt Jesus called men to Himself. But there is no example where He (or the apostles) appealed for people to “come forward” as either a testimony to their decision or as an act of accepting Him.

Jesus did NOT call people to make a “one time” decision about Him, but to follow Him all their lives. He taught that one mark of true faith is a life that continually confesses Him.

2. Many today equate “coming to faith” with “coming down the aisle.”

Those who employ it know this is a problem, and thus go to great pains to make clear that “going down the aisle” does not save anyone.

Examination of the invitation used by Billy Graham shows just how confusing the system is:

I'm going to ask you to come forward. Up there—down there—I want you to come. You come right now—quickly. If you are here 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.

Yet, Graham says that the coming forward is a “testimony of an inward experience that you have had with Christ.” So when is the person converted? Why are they coming?

So it is unclear just *what* is being required of those who come forward.

If the walk forward is an outward declaration of an inner-saving decision already made by the hearer in the seat, is this just an “act of witness”? Why then are people told to “come forward to *receive* Christ”? How is *receiving Christ* related to coming forward? Is there any relation? Most important, are these exhortations truly biblical expressions?

At the altar, the confusion continues: *You have come tonight to Jesus Christ, you have come to receive Him into your heart.* But which is it? Have they already come to Jesus, or are they coming now to receive Him?

The most popular description of the invitation as an *act of commitment to Christ* leaves these questions quite unresolved.

To a greater or lesser extent the sermon has already shown the need of a change in those who do not know Christ. The invitation is represented as providing the opportunity for such a change to take place. The hearer is told that his need is to “let Christ come into his heart.”

All these man-made directives (i.e., *receive Christ, commit your life to Christ, come to Christ, let Christ into your heart, etc.*) end up being shallow substitutes for biblical directives.

Comments on the *sinner’s prayer*:^[5]

The sinner’s prayer came to be attached to the altar call...but this too is not found in Scripture.

A typical sinner’s prayer includes:

- a. An acknowledgement of sin...but this is not the same thing as repentance.
- b. An expression of belief in the act of Christ’s death...which is not necessarily the same as trust in His person and work.

- c. “Inviting Christ into the life” which hangs on nothing biblical ([John 1:12](#) and [Rev. 3:30](#) are used out of context in support).

The question must be asked: Is this the same as God’s command to repent and believe?

Many consider the *prayer* to be a pivotal and necessary instrument for becoming a true Christian.

REMEMBER: It is not the accuracy, or even the efficacy of a prayer, that saves. It is Christ alone who saves. Yet many who desire to evangelize the lost live in fear that they didn’t properly “close the deal” or help an individual say “the right thing.” And the one desiring to embrace Christ lives in fear of not being truly saved because they didn’t say the words the right way.

In reality, if it’s in His will to do so, God quickens an individual (regeneration) and gives them the ability to repent and believe (saving faith) totally independent of that person’s ability to “get the words right” (or for that matter, to say any words out loud or privately at all).

3. There is a danger of giving assurance to those who are unconverted.

After someone has prayed the sinner’s prayer, it’s typical to give him or her immediate assurance that they are now part of God’s family.

Such a system leads some to believe that their decision “settles things with God” for all eternity. It actually encourages people to make a response that “settles things” and, through subsequent counseling, to never doubt that decision.

This is dangerous because it deceives many into resting their faith on a “profession” rather than on Christ, who alone is “able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him” ([Heb. 7:25](#)). Scripture makes a sober statement about those who think they are saved when they are not: “The Lord will say to many, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me’” ([Matt. 7:22-23](#)).

The invitation system leads many to trust their eternal destination to confidence in a “confession” even though they may openly live in rebellion to Him throughout their lives. In other words, their assurance is coming from an act on their part, rather than a genuine trust in the promises of God along with recognizing the Holy Spirit’s work of sanctification in their life. They can point to a date when they walked down an aisle, but they would be hard-pressed to point out proof of regeneration.

As stated, the biblical perspective is that the Holy Spirit is the one who gives assurance, not the evangelist or any other person. We are to help people understand the *basis* of assurance, but leave the actual assuring to the Spirit (see the outline on Assurance in Appendix 2 of *Witnessing Without Fear* (www.frontlinemin.org/wwfapp2.asp) for a biblical understanding of assurance of salvation.)

It is man’s tendency to take the place of the Spirit in assuring the one praying the sinner’s prayer. The result is that many

who are not truly regenerate are deceived into thinking they are.

(See *Witnessing Without Fear* Appendix 1 “Questions for Discerning Genuine Salvation” (www.frontlinemin.org/wwfapp1.asp) for the marks of a true Christian.)

Two centuries ago, evangelist George Whitefield said: *There are so many stony ground hearers, who receive the Word with joy, that I have determined to suspend my judgment till I know the tree by its fruits. I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.*

Spurgeon warned: *Sometimes we are inclined to think that a very great portion of modern revivalism has been more a curse than a blessing, because it has led thousands to a kind of peace before they have known their misery; restoring the prodigal to the Father’s house, and never making him say, “Father, I have sinned.”*

It very often happens that the converts that are born in excitement die when the excitement is over.

It is vital that we share the “good news,” but it behooves us equally to be certain that we not give assurance to those who show no evidence of conversion.

4. A large number of people who are “converted” during through decisionism fall away.

The sad fact is extremely high numbers of these “converts” never show any competent sign of being converted.

Leighton Ford argues: *The inner decision for Christ is like driving a nail through a board. The open declaration of it is like clinching the nail on the other side, so that it cannot easily be pulled out.*

In other words, the giving of an invitation *ought* to result in an even higher percentage of “converts” living out their profession. Yet the opposite seems to be true.

We already mentioned some of the statistics that show that only a small percentage of “professors” show any signs of conversion even a few weeks after the decision.

Toward the end of his life, Charles Finney, after reflecting on the many who claimed conversion but had since fallen away, had mixed thoughts about the genuineness of his work. In fact, his development of a doctrine of perfectionism (“entire sanctification”) came out of his attempt to answer the questions as to why so many of his “converts” lived such godless lives. The use of an invitation system eventually leads to a two-tiered approach to the Christian life to explain the difference between those few who have been changed by their “decision” and the multitudes who have not. [See “Did You Know?” *Christian History* Vol. 8 (1988)]

This is not to say that no one can be saved during an altar call. It just isn't the best way to invite people to Christ. If we use an altar call, we can have both true conversions and false professions (yet both are presented to the church as being genuine). If we do not use an altar call, but leave it to God to use the teaching and preaching of the Word to save whom He chooses in His own

time, you are more prone to look for real fruit of repentance before treating an individual as a genuine convert.

5. The altar call can be effective in getting people to respond even if a clear, biblical presentation of the gospel and accurate biblical preaching are absent.

The altar call method can be tacked on to just about any type of service, no matter whether the gospel was presented or not. If the music and lighting is right, if the speaker is persuasive, then people can be emotionally manipulated to respond during an altar call.

The extension of an appeal for public decision may result in a purely psychological response that provides a catharsis for the emotional pressure of the sermon or event. And persons who respond to such an appeal falsely assume that their action has made them right with God.

6. Scripture already explains how a convert is to make his profession public.

Many pastors are quick to publicly introduce the one who has prayed and who has just been told that he or she is a Christian... sometimes within minutes of the last verse of the invitation hymn. This may have been someone who wasn't even known to the pastor/evangelist until that moment.

But Scripture gives us God's way of publicly making a confession of belief in Christ. First of all, there is baptism. Through this ordinance a convert to Christ proclaims to the world his new life in Christ. Many churches also require a

verbal testimony at the time of baptism, which allows the individual to give more detail of their understanding of the gospel and the events of their conversion.

Comment on *baptism*:

Many churches are quick to baptize their new “converts.” This is based merely upon an individual’s profession. But baptism is for true believers. God knows the heart; we, on the other hand, can only come to a reasonable conclusion about the validity of someone’s profession by observing the fruit of their life ([Matt. 7:16-23](#); [13:8](#)). Many “professors” do not really love the brethren nor the atmosphere of godliness. Therefore they fall away because they were not really saved.

Second, the tenor of Scripture is that a holy life that is lived to the glory of God is a profound public testimony to the life-changing power of Christ.

Churches who do not use an altar call have no difficulty presenting new members to the congregation. A presentation at the conclusion of a worship service of new members who have completed membership interviews and/or membership classes is a common approach taken by churches who believe that only true believers should be counted as part of the fellowship. In other words, church membership is taken seriously.

7. For some, the use of an altar call uncovers a lack of trust in the sovereignty of God.

“If we don’t provide an opportunity to respond to the gospel, someone might leave and never have another opportunity to be

saved. They could die in an accident this week and their eternal judgment in hell would be our fault. Their blood would be on our hands.”

This is a theological problem...a total misunderstanding of the sovereignty of God in salvation. Scripture makes it clear that salvation is of the Lord. And that whom the Lord has foreknown and predestined, He does indeed call and justify. And whom He justifies He will indeed someday glorify. [Romans 8:28-30](#) present this *chain* as completed from God’s perspective.

Our lack of obedience to the Lord when we are not faithful in calling people to repentance IS sin on our part. But the eternal destiny of souls is totally in God’s hands, not ours. It is His job to convert sinners; it is ours simply to be faithful.

So we are to trust God in all matters, including the evangelization of the lost.

8. The invitation system is based on a faulty view of regeneration.^[6]

The main issue here is that of regeneration or the new birth. According to our Lord Jesus Christ, the new birth is a sovereign work of the Spirit of God in the heart of man.

“The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit” ([John 3:8](#)).

God’s Word teaches us that:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God ([John 1:12-13](#)).

Note the past tense is used (“were born”) indicating that those who believe in His name are *already* born of God.

Yet Finney made the shocking statement, “Religion [i.e. true Christianity] is the work of man.” This statement is especially shocking as it is found on the very first page of his *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, the most influential of all of Charles Finney’s writings. The questions must be asked, is true religion the work of God or of man. At best, decisionism attributes the new birth partly to man and partly to God.

J.H. Merle d’Aubigne (1794-1872) in his *History of the Reformation in England* stated:

To believe in the power of man in the work of regeneration is the great heresy of Rome, and from that error has come the ruin of the Church. Conversion proceeds from the grace of God alone, and the system which ascribes it partly to man and partly to God is worse than Pelagianism.

One of the greatest American theologians, Charles Hodge (1797-1878), also pointed out the danger of this teaching:^[7]

No more soul-destroying doctrine could well be devised than the doctrine that sinners can regenerate themselves, and repent and believe just when they please . . . As it is a truth both of Scripture and of experience that the unrenewed man can do

nothing of himself to secure his salvation, it is essential that he should be brought to a practical conviction of that truth. When thus convicted, and not before, he seeks help from the only source whence it can be obtained.

We must ask ourselves, “What is the spiritual condition of man?” Can a man be born again by answering “yes” to certain questions? Can a man be born from “above” by walking to the front of a building and repeating a prayer? The answers to these questions will be determined by our view of man’s spiritual condition.

Man is spiritually dead and cannot please God ([Eph 2:1](#); [Rom 8:8](#)). Our Lord Himself portrayed man’s condition as one of utter helplessness: “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him . . . no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My Father” ([John 6:44a](#), [65b](#)).

God alone is active in the regenerating of a spiritually dead sinner. Man contributes nothing to it:

“I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them” ([Ez 36:26-27](#)).

Only when a spiritually dead sinner has been made alive by God can he then repent and believe (though often these happen simultaneously, regeneration is logically prior to faith and repentance). We must present to the lost person his helpless condition that he may cast himself completely on God’s mercy.

QUOTES

- Jim Elliff, “Closing with Christ” (*Viewpoint*, January—March 1999, p. 13):

It is interesting to note that the Bible account focuses attention on the object of our faith, Jesus Christ, and His life and work, when presenting the gospel to those who do not believe. There is virtually no explanation of the nature of repentance and faith; merely its mention seems to be enough. Why is that so? It is because of this wonderful reality. When the Word is preached and the Spirit is at work, the sinner is brought to conviction of sin and he cannot love his sin anymore. He must repent. And when the Word presents Christ as the only hope and the Spirit is at work in the sinner, he sees no refuge for his soul but Christ. He must believe. Where else could he possibly go?

On the main, evangelism, after laying out the awfulness of man and his sin, and the consequence and offense against God, focuses its gaze on Christ and His work on behalf of sinners. And the people simply believe. There is no emphasis on anything else. They just believe—no laboring of mechanics or methods or perfectly worded prayers, or walks to the front. They believe it is all they can do.

You may not agree with my assessment, but it is my contention that our use of the altar call and the accouterment of a “sinner’s prayer” is a sign of our lack of trust in God. Do we really believe that God can save, that His gospel is powerful, that His Spirit is effectual in His work?

- Thomas Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986):

Those who have reservations about equating immediate post-sermonic calls for physical response (initiated by a planned appeal for such) with following the will of God desire strong biblical rationale before they can approve it. Baptism, incorporation into a believing group, regular worship and fellowship with other believers, and day-by-day pursuit of holiness and acts of Christian love—all these have the character of confessing Christ before men and are specifically commended, as well as notably exemplified, in Scripture. Where is either the mandate or example of the engineered call to ‘come to the front’ stated as an act of obedience to God’s call to repentance? When walking down an aisle is tantamount to following Christ and professing Him before men, the biblical idea of godliness has vanished. The system that relies on the altar call encourages these perversions.

- John Kennedy, a nineteenth-century British minister (quoted in *The Invitation System*, by Iain Murray, p. 30):

Faith (by those using the invitation system) is represented as something to be done, in order to gain salvation; and pains are taken to show that it is an easy thing.

I know well the tendency there is, at a certain stage of anxious inquiry, to ask, “What is faith, that I may do it?” It is a legalist’s work to satisfy that craving; but this is what is done in the “inquiry room.” Explanations of what faith is are but trifling with souls.

How different is the Scripture way! The great aim there is to “set forth” the object, not to explain the act, of faith. Let there be conviction, illumination and renewal, and faith becomes the instinctive response of the quickened soul to the presentation by God of His Christ; and without these, no explanation of faith can be helpful to any one. The labor to explain it is too often the legal spirit. It were wiser to take pains in removing ignorance and error regarding God, and sin and Christ. Help them know these, if you would not build them up with “untempered mortar” in a false peace. If you would be wise, as well as kind, work in that direction, rather than hurrying them to belief.

- Jim Ehrhard, “The Dangers of the Invitation System,” (Christian Communicators Worldwide, 1999) pp. 22-23):

We must be patient to allow the Holy Spirit to work conviction in the heart. That may happen in a few moments, a few hours, days, or even years.

To be biblically evangelistic, we must be certain that what we do leads men to faith, not just to decisions.

CONCLUSION

Faith Comes by Hearing and Hearing by the Word

The biblical method of focusing on the gospel itself, without props, and allowing God to save whom He wills, when He wills, *demand*s the hearing of the Word. And it demands trust that God will call His elect to Himself according to His own timetable.

When the Word is preached, there will be varying responses ([Acts 17:32-34](#)). Just be faithful to preach the Word . . . and leave the results to God. He will save His elect according to His own timing.

This was the way used by Jesus, the Apostles, the Reformers, the Puritans, and most others until the 1830's. That way is simply to proclaim the truth, to call men to repent and believe, and to leave the results in the hands of the Spirit who alone can bring people to faith.

To be evangelistic, we must be convinced of the power that God's Word has in converting men without the help of our man-made systems.

The real question is: ***How powerful is the Word of God?*** Can it change men from sinners into saints without an extension of an altar call? Will it convict and convert (as God promises), or will we need to add something that helps men "settle it"?

- "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek" ([Rom 1:16](#)).
- "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" ([Rom 10:17](#))
- "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" ([1 Cor 1:18](#)).
- "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" ([2 Tim 2:15](#)).
- "and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation

through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work” ([2 Tim 3:15-17](#)).

- “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all long-suffering and teaching” ([2 Tim 4:2](#)).
- “For the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” ([Heb 4:12-13](#)).
- “. . . having been born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever” ([1 Pet 1:23](#)).
- “Of His own will He brought us forth by the word of truth” ([Jas 1:18a](#)).

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” Now when they heard this, they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” Then Peter said to them, “*Repent*, and let every one of you *be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call.” . . . Then *those who gladly received his word were baptized*; and that day about

three thousand souls were added to them. ([Acts 2:36-39](#), [41](#), emphasis added).

^[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture citations are from the *New King James Version*.

^[2] Statistics are cited from Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort, *The Way of the Master* (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004), pp. 61-63.

^[3] Much of following material is adapted from teaching notes from Carey Hardy, “The Invitation System” from *2003 Shepherd’s Conference* (Sun Valley, Calif.: Grace Community Church, 2003)

^[4] Albert B. Dod, “The Origin of the Call for Decisions,” *The Banner of Truth Magazine* (London, Dec., 1963), Vol. 32, p. 9.

^[5] Jim Eliff, “Closing with Christ,” *Christian Communicators Worldwide* (<http://www.ccwonline.org/closing.html>).

^[6] The following is summarized from James E. Adams, *Decisional Regeneration* (Pensacola, Fla.: Chapel Library, n.d.), pp. 16-19.

^[7] Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, 1970), Vol. 2, p. 277, quoted in *Decisional Regeneration*

Problem # 2

Heresy promoted as Orthodox and Evangelical

The megachurches were not without their critics. Theologian David Wells leveled a massive critique of the doctrinal minimalism, methodological pragmatism, and managerial culture of many megachurches. Os Guinness accused the megachurch movement of “flirting with modernity” to a degree that put the Christian identity of the massive congregations at risk.

Steven Furtick

“If you know Jesus, I am sorry to break it to you, this church is not for you.” – Steve Furtick, *Confessions of a Pastor*

But that's ok, he's not teaching about Jesus, he's teaching about something he made up. Jesus is the New Testament, Jesus is all over the Old Testament, but not in the Elevation church:

“We don't teach from Books of the Bible because it gets in the way of evangelism. We don't offer different kinds of Bible studies because it gets in the way of evangelism. We don't teach doctrine because it gets in the way of evangelism.

If you want to be fed God's word or have the Bible explained to you then you are a fat lazy Christian and you need to shut up and get to work or you need to leave this church because we ONLY do evangelism.” - Steven Furtick

Andy Stanley

Evangelical Christianity has a big problem, says Andy Stanley, and that problem is a reliance on the Bible that is both unwarranted and unhelpful. In a message delivered at North Point Community Church and posted online,

Stanley identifies the evangelical impulse to turn to the Bible in our defense and presentation of Christianity as a huge blunder that must be corrected.

Some years ago, in light of another message Stanley preached at North Point, I argued that his apologetic ambition was, as we saw with Protestant liberalism a century ago, a road that will lead to disaster.

What road as we saw with Protestant liberalism Andy Stanley charts for the church is a road to abject disaster.

In the end, we simply have no place to go other than the Bible as God's authoritative revelation. Christ, not the Bible, is the foundation of our faith — but our only authoritative and infallible source of knowledge about Christ is the Bible.

A true defense of the Christian faith has never been more needed than now, but an attempt to rescue Christianity from its dependence upon Scripture is doomed to disaster. We are left in the same predicament as Martin Luther at the Diet of Worms. If Scripture cannot be trusted, then we are doomed.

Albert Mohler

Lesson:

The Nature of True Saving Faith

It was one of the most celebrated times in the Jewish calendar. It was the Passover(See **Exodus 12:1-13**📖). Jews would all gather together in Jerusalem to celebrate this feast. Now on one of these occasions Jesus appears on the scene. And what does he do? Miraculous signs. The beloved disciple states very clearly the purpose of these miraculous signs was so that people may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God(**John 20:30-31**📖). People saw these miraculous signs, John writes, that Jesus did at the Passover Feast and many believed in His name(**John 2:23**📖). What was Jesus' response?

“But Jesus on His part did not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people 25 and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.”

John 2:24-25📖

It ought to shock you that the verse does not begin with the term “therefore” or “so”. That would signify there was something positive in Jesus' response, such as, “So Jesus on His part entrusted Himself to them”. But that is not what it says. Instead, the verse begins with a contrasting term, namely “but”. Why did Jesus not entrust Himself to them? The text of Scripture is clear. Because of Christ's omniscience. He is all-knowing. Specifically it mentions twice that Christ “knew” what was in man.

Christ knew that this was not saving faith, but superficial faith. As the God-Man He knew that

“the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick”(**Jeremiah 17:9**📖).

This kind of spurious faith was throughout Christ's ministry. On another occasion the crowds were asking Jesus to show them a

sign so that they may see and believe([John 6:30](#)). Earlier Jesus exposed their false motives for coming to Him([John 6:26](#)). It was these same people who later on were proven to be apostate([John 6:66](#)).

Furthermore, James says that even the demons believe and that belief is orthodox([James 2:19](#)), yet it is not saving faith. So what is the nature of true saving faith? Let's look at 6 elements that will help us not jump to immediate conclusions that whoever says that they believe in Jesus or that has grown up believing in Jesus is automatically saved.

1) Saving faith is a commitment.

2)

Systematic theology recognizes three elements of genuine faith, notitia, assensus and fiducia.

Notitia is a recognition and understanding of the truth that Christ saves. Assensus is the settled confidence and affirmation that Christ's salvation is applicable to one's soul. And fiduciariness the personal commitment to and appropriation of Christ as the only hope for eternal salvation.

Note that faith is not just mental assent as many would have you falsely think. Just give mental acquiescence and you are saved.

NO! Though faith is an acknowledgement of the historical facts of the Gospel(i.e. Jesus died on a real tree), it goes beyond that. It is a personal commitment.

Jas 2:19

19 You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!

Jn 8:30–32

30 As He spoke these words, many believed in Him.

31 Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, “If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed.

32 And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.”

Lk 14:25–33

25 Now great multitudes went with Him. And He turned and said to them,

26 “If anyone comes to Me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and his own life also, he cannot be My disciple.

27 And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple.

28 For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has *enough* to finish *it*—

29 lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see *it* begin to mock him,

30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’

31 Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?

32 Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace.

33 So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple.

“We cannot be said to believe that which we distrust too much to commit ourselves to it.”

B.B. Warfield

“Saving faith, then, is the whole of my being embracing all of Christ. Faith cannot be divorced from commitment.”

John MacArthur(Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles, p. 45)

2) Saving faith is a gift of God.

“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,”

Eph. 2:8 

What is an antecedent?

The antecedent is the noun closest in proximity that a pronoun refers to. In this case, the antecedent to the pronouns “this” and “it” is “faith”. Of course the whole of salvation is all of God, but here Paul is specifically stressing that faith is not our own doing because faith itself is the gift of God.

“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake,”

Phil. 1:29 

The term granted comes from the same Greek word from which we get the term grace. Here Paul is saying that faith to believe in Him is granted by the grace of God.

3) Saving faith is a command to be obeyed in response to the Gospel.

While in jail, Paul and Silas were praising God. Then God sent an earthquake to release them from prison. In fear the Phillipian jailer fell down before them.

“And he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” So they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

Acts 16:30-31

Their answer to his question was a command, believe. Jesus said that if you do not believe you stand condemned already(**John 3:18**) and you will die in your sins(**John 8:24**). After all, without faith it is impossible to please God(**Hebrews 11:6**).

4) Saving faith has Christ as its object.

The references to Christ as the only object of faith are so many that I suppose the world would not contain them all(See **John 21:25** ; **John 3:16** ; **John 8:24** ; **John 20:31** ; **Acts 16:31** ; **Acts 20:21** ; **Romans 3:22** , **26**). Saving faith must be in the person and work of Christ.

You must believe in His person, who He is, namely...

...the only Savior(**Acts 4:12**)

...Lord(**Romans 10:9a**)

...Man – the incarnation, His humanity(**1 John 4:2-3** ; cf. **1 John 1:1-3**)

...God – His Deity(**1 John 5:20**)

You must believe in His work, what He has done, namely...
 ...His substitutionary atonement([John 10:11](#)^L, [15](#)^L; [Romans 5:8](#)^L; [Ephesians 5:25](#)^L; [Titus 2:14](#)^L)
 ...His resurrection([Romans 10:9b](#)^L; [Acts 2:24-29](#)^L; [Acts 13:30-37](#)^L)

5) Saving faith is manifested by the fruit of good works.

“For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

[Ephesians 2:10](#)^L

Note that we are not saved by works([Ephesians 2:9](#)^L), but we are saved unto works([Ephesians 2:10](#)^L).

We are His workmanship. We are created in Christ for good works. And it is these good works which God prepared beforehand for us to walk in.

([James 2:14-26](#)^L),

14

What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him?

15 If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food,

16 and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit?

17 Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.

- 18** But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.
- 19** You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble!
- 20** But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead?
- 21** Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?
- 22** Do you see that faith was working together with his works, and by works faith was made perfect?
- 23** And the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “*Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.*” And he was called the friend of God.
- 24** You see then that a man is justified by works, and not by faith only.
- 25** Likewise, was not Rahab the harlot also justified by works when she received the messengers and sent *them* out another way?
- 26** For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

Good works are the natural consequence of faith so much so that Jesus

“gave himself for us...to purify for Himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”(**Titus 2:14**📖). We are saved by faith alone but not by a faith that is alone!

6) Saving faith perseveres through trials.

This is **Hebrews 11**📖. The Hall of Faith. This cloud of witnesses that is listed here is for our endurance(**Hebrews 12:1**📖)

because they persisted in the face of trials...by faith... by faith... by faith. Trials are God's ordinary means that He uses to test the genuineness and authenticity of faith(1 Peter 1:6-7📖). True saving faith is persevering faith!

- 6 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials,
- 7 that the genuineness of your faith, *being* much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ,
- 8 whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see *Him*, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory,
- 9 receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of *your* souls.