

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

The Dangers of the Invitation System

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As a young minister, I once made the “mistake” of closing a Wednesday evening service without extending a public invitation.¹ Early the next morning, an irate husband came to my office. For the first time in years, his unsaved wife had come with him to church. “If you had only given an invitation,” he angrily explained, “she would have gone down the aisle.”

I explained that if the seed of God’s Word had been planted in her, then she would come to faith. Then she could “go down the aisle” on Sunday and share what God had done. My explanation fell on deaf ears. I had missed the opportune time, and if she never came to Christ, I would have to bear her damnation on my conscience for eternity, he retorted.

In the ensuing months, God granted me many opportunities to speak personally with this lady about her spiritual condition. Not only was it obvious that she was not under conviction of sin; but she had little real understanding of the gospel. Through our conversations, she came to see her sin and real conviction made her life miserable. One morning she called and said, “I’ve finally come to Jesus. Now I understand what you’ve been talking about.”

This experience, and many similar that followed, led me to reexamine my views of the invitation system that I had always assumed were as much a part of the gospel as the death and resurrection of Jesus. My involvement with a Christian college ministry, attendance at a number of schools of evangelism, and my denominational traditions had led me to see the public invitation as vital to evangelism. Studying the Scriptures and the history of preaching and revivals began to lead me to a different conclusion. But the process of laying aside something that was so “normal” to me was a great emotional struggle. I needed to know that the dangers of such a system outweighed the benefits that

¹ By the term, the “invitation system,” I mean to include any organized method that requires people to make an outward response to a presentation of the gospel. Various expressions are used in referring to this system including “the altar call,” “the public profession,” “the public pledge,” “going down the aisle,” and “hitting the old sawdust trail.” It usually entails a “going forward” at a specified time but often may be limited to a show of hands or the signing of a decision card.

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everyone claimed.² I needed to know that I could still be evangelistic without extending a public altar call. I needed to see a better way.

It is my hope that this article will help you in these areas. To do a thorough analysis of the system and its history is far beyond the scope of this undertaking. But perhaps as we examine this issue, we can see the dangers inherent in this system and chart a course for a better way.

As we begin, one thing must be made thoroughly clear. I am not advocating that we not invite people to come to Christ. The invitation to come to Christ is one that we are called to make. Should we shrink back from such a call, we would be rightly accused of being “ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” Thus, we should do everything possible to be more proficient in extending God’s great invitation to come to Christ.

However, God’s invitation that must be extended to all is not synonymous with man’s invitation system. Only since the 1800s has this system been employed to bring men to Christ.³ Since that time, this system has been refined and employed to such an extent that many today equate “coming to faith” with “coming down the aisle.” Such an equation is not only inaccurate; it is dangerous because it deceives many into resting their faith on a “profession” rather than on Christ, who alone is “able to save to the uttermost” (cf. Heb. 7:25).

The Dangers

1) The danger of promoting a method not promoted in Scripture

Evangelists often seek biblical support for this practice in a number of passages. One evangelist says, “Christ always called people publicly, and this statement is confirmed by texts such as ‘Follow Me,’ or ‘Whosoever shall confess Me before men, him will I confess before My Father which is in heaven.’”⁴ 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 do we see any example where He (or the apostles, for that matter)

² Many authors have written championing the value of the invitation system. Some of these include: R. Alan Street, *The Effective Invitation* (NY: Fleming Revell, 1984); Leighton Ford, *The Christian Persuader* (NY: Harper & Row, 1966); and R. T. Kendall, *Stand Up and Be Counted* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984).

³ While there is much debate over the precise origins of this practice, most agree that the practice came into prominence in the 1830s with the “new measures” of Charles G. Finney. Since that time, revival and evangelism have come to be largely equated with the methods devised by Finney.

⁴ Billy Graham as quoted in Iain Murray, *The Invitation System* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1984 reprint), 6.

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appealed for people to “come forward” as either a testimony to their decision or as an act of accepting Him?

Furthermore, what is Jesus calling these to? Is it merely to make a “one time” decision about Him, or to follow Him all their lives? The invitation system gives the impression that the former is Jesus’ intent. And what about “confessing Him before men”? Is Jesus saying that by a single act of confession one becomes a believer? Or is He teaching that one mark of true faith is a life that continually confesses Him? Again, the invitation system leads many to trust their eternal destination to confidence in a “confession,” though they openly live in rebellion to Him throughout their lives.

In summary, many passages show that Jesus and the apostles called men to repentance and faith. But no passage indicates that either used any form of “invitation system” in bringing them to faith or in confirming their faith.⁵

2) The danger of eliciting an emotional response based upon the personality of the speaker or the persuasion of the appeal

In Mark 4, Jesus portrays four types of hearers of God’s Word by using the parable of the soils. In the second soil, Jesus describes those who, “when they hear the word, immediately receive it with gladness.” But, Jesus cautions, “they have no root in themselves, and so endure only for a time.” Jesus knew the reality of being heard by crowds who had no desire to truly follow Him.

While this psychological element ought to be reason for concern and caution in using the invitation system, proponents actually argue that this element is all the more reason to extend an appeal for a public decision. Billy Graham teaches that the pressure brought upon the human soul is so great that an emotional outlet must be given. He argues:

Many psychologists would say it is psychologically sound. One of the reasons why our films and dramas usually have such a bad effect is that they stir the emotion to such a high pitch and do not offer any practical outlet for action.⁶

Evangelist George Sweazey agrees: “To stir people religiously without giving them anything they can do about it leaves them far worse off than they were before.”⁷

⁵ Billy Graham notes: “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.” Quoted in Murray, 6.

⁶ *The Christian*. July 8, 1966, cited in Murray, 12.

⁷ Quoted in Sterling W. Huston, *Crusade Evangelism and the Local Church* (Minneapolis: World Wide Publishing, 1984), 29.

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In reality, most psychologists would agree with Graham's assessment of the psychological pressure of the appeal, but would conclude that the response to his call is largely the result of this psychological pressure. One psychologist, George Target, gives such an assessment:

All present are told to pray, instructed to close their eyes and bow the head, and the form of the words is the auto-suggestive one that hundreds of others are already going forward, finding happiness, peace, love, God. ... The counselors planted all over the audience make the first few moves, create the sense that the statement is true even when it very often is not. ... It might all be true, there might be some nameless peace down there with all the others. The tension screws to the breaking point and beyond. The wonder is that so few actually obey.⁸

In his book, Preaching and Preachers, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones cites an example in which the invitation appeal given by an evangelist was, by program necessity, separated from the message by a half-hour of hymn singing. In explanation of the disappointingly small response to his appeal, the evangelist stated that the effect of his appeal was diminished by the half-hour of hymn singing. Lloyd-Jones observes that the evangelist's "admitting that half an hour of hymn singing can do away with the effect of a sermon... is a striking illustration of the fact that direct pressure on the will can produce 'results.'"⁹

Lewis Sperry Chafer, a well-known evangelist and one of the founders of Dallas Theological Seminary, used the invitation system until he saw the inherent dangers:

Because of satanic blindness to the gospel of grace (2 Cor. 4:34), unregenerate man cannot comprehend the true basis of salvation, and is therefore ever prone to do the best he knows. This is to attempt to work out his own standing before God by his own efforts. It is this natural tendency to do something of merit that prompts many to respond to the evangelist's appeal. ... A leader with a commanding personality (and every successful evangelist must possess that characteristic in the extreme) may secure the public action of many, when the issue is made one of religious merit through some public act.¹⁰

To make matters worse, many go away from the "altar," told that they are now Christians, knowing that they are not changed one bit. As a result, their unbelief may harden into skepticism toward anything Christian. R. L. Dabney notes:

⁸ From "How Does Graham Do It?" in *New Christian*, June 2, 1966, cited in Murray, 14. 7

⁹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 273.

¹⁰ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *True Evangelism*, cited in Murray, 22-23.

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They feel that a cruel trick has been played upon their inexperience by the ministers and friends of Christianity in thus thrusting them, in the hour of their confusion, into false positions.... How natural to conclude that those [experiences of conversion] of all others are delusions also? They say: "The only difference between myself and these earnest Christians is that they have not yet detected the cheat as I have."¹¹ 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. Such persons falsely assume that their action has made them right with God. In others, it may drive them further into skepticism and doubt about the reality of the conversion of anyone. Such dangers ought to alarm every person sincerely concerned about the salvation of lost souls.

3) *The danger of confusing the "coming forward" with salvation*

Here we have one of the greatest dangers of the invitation system. Even those employing it go to great pains to make clear that "going down the aisle" does not save anyone. We are saved by faith in Christ alone, they contend. Billy Graham, for example, says:

There's nothing about the mechanics of coming forward that saves anybody's soul. Coming forward is an open acknowledgment and a testimony of an inward experience that you have had with Christ. But this inward experience with Christ, this encounter, is the most important thing.¹²

But examination of the invitation used by Graham shows just how confusing the system is. Keep in mind that Graham has already noted that the coming forward is a "testimony of an inward experience that you have had with Christ." When is the person converted? Why are they coming?

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. ...¹³

At the "altar," the confusion continues as he addresses those who have come: "You have come tonight to Jesus Christ, you have come to receive Him into your heart. ..." Which is it? Have they already come to Jesus, or are they coming now to receive Him? Graham continues: "He receives you; He died for you; He says, 'Thy sins are forgiven.' You accept

¹¹ R. L. Dabney, *Discussions*. I: 572, cited in Murray, 27.

¹² Street, 119.

¹³ Cited in Murray, 5.

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that. The past is forgiven, God forgets.... He cannot even see your sins.”¹⁴ Then he leads them to repeat a prayer known as “the sinner’s prayer.” The question again is obvious: have they been forgiven, or will they be when they pray the prayer?

To make matters worse, many often add so many things to the invitation that one cannot be certain what he is being asked to do. This was especially true in the invitations of Billy Sunday who often exhorted people to “Come on down and take my hand against booze, for Jesus Christ, for your flag.”¹⁵

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Even Spurgeon warned about the potential for confusing any system¹⁶ with salvation:

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. ... 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.¹⁷

Who can observe the invitation system today and not see that many are in danger of confusing this practice with coming to faith in Christ?

4) *The danger of counting great numbers who only discredit their profession by their lives*

In fact, Leighton Ford argues:

I am convinced that the giving of some kind of public invitation to come to Christ is not only theologically correct, but also emotionally sound. Men need this

¹⁴ Ibid., 5-6.

¹⁵ Erroll Hulse, *The Great Invitation* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 1986), 99.

¹⁶ Here Spurgeon is referring to the practice of inviting inquirers to come to a room, often called the “inquiry-room,” to hear more about their state. Unlike the invitation system which usually counsels inquirers about assurance now that they have come, the inquiry room was used to counsel about the nature of true conversion and to warn seekers about having false hopes. This can be seen in a letter from Asahel Nettleton to a friend (cited more fully below in the text) about experiences with inquirers: “My first business now [after they expressed signs of conversion] was to warn them against a false hope.” Invitation counseling today is typified in the interview that Charles Riggs (Director of Counseling at the 1966 Greater London Crusade) conducts with an inquirer: “You’ve come forward to receive Christ. How do you know that this is what you must do?” “Well, it says so in the Bible.” “Then God is saying it, isn’t He?” “Yes, I guess He is.” “And there’s no higher authority than God, is there?” “No, of course not.” “Then you accept the Word of God, don’t you?” When the answer is in the affirmative, Riggs goes on to further assure the inquirer: “Think of it like this: God says it. On faith, you believe it. And that settles it.” Quoted in Murray, 78. (Note also the close connection in Riggs’s words about coming forward to receive Christ as something that the inquirer has done.)

¹⁷ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *All Round Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 reprint), 372-73.

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opportunity for expression. 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.¹⁸

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

Even the statistics compiled using the invitation system show that only a very small percentage of “professors” show any signs of conversion even a few weeks after the decision. According to Sterling Huston, a survey after a crusade in the Pacific Northwest indicated that only 16 percent of the inquirers became new additions to the churches. While one should be appalled at the low rate of retention, Huston actually considers this a significant fact showing the value of the crusade!¹⁹

While pastoring in New England, our church participated in two Graham crusades. We received the names of 10 converts from one crusade and six from the other. In our follow up, not one was interested in church, the Bible, or even talking about their “new-found faith in Christ.” Other pastors reported the same results.

Ernest Reisinger notes: “This unbiblical system has produced the greatest record of statistics ever compiled by church or business.”²⁰ But such an observation is not new to our times. A century ago, Dabney observed, “The thing is so well-known that in many regions the public coolly expect about forty-five out of fifty, or even a higher ratio, to apostatize ultimately.”²¹

Such was not the common experience before the use of the invitation system. Those who were converted were so thoroughly changed that there was no need of a system to encourage decisions or record them before there was fruit. False conversions were the exception rather than the rule in the ministry of Finney’s contemporary, Asahel Nettleton. For example, of the 84 converts in an 1818 revival in Rocky Hill, Conn., all 84 had remained faithful according to their pastor’s report 26 years later! Similarly, only three

¹⁸ *The Christian Persuader*, 24.

¹⁹ Huston, 141.

²⁰ Ernest C. Reisinger, *Today’s Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1982), 76.

²¹ Dabney, 566.

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spurious conversions out of 82 professions were noted in a similar pastor's report on a revival in Ashford, Conn.²²

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" was the term preferred by Finney) came out of his attempt to answer the question 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.²³

5) The danger of giving assurance to those who are unconverted

This is perhaps the greatest alarm for those who sincerely desire to see men enter the Kingdom of Heaven. If our use of such a system leads some to believe that their decision "settles things with God" for all eternity, then we may be responsible for many of those in Matthew 7 who hear the words of our Lord saying, "I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" 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.

That is exactly what the invitation system does. It encourages people to make a response that "settles things" and, through subsequent counseling, to never doubt that decision. Anyone who is involved in personal evangelism can share countless examples of persons who, though presently living in gross sin, will nonetheless tell the evangelist that they are fine because they "made a decision for Christ" a certain number of years ago. They have never had any change in their life; they have no interest in church, the Bible, or even God. But they have made their "decision." Can we not see how dangerous such a system is to the souls of men?

Two centuries ago, evangelist George Whitefield warned about this danger:

I am glad you know when persons are justified. It is a lesson I have not yet learnt. 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. That makes me so cautious now, which I was not thirty years ago, of dubbing converts

²² Consult John F. Thornbury, *God Sent Revival* (Durham, England: Evangelical Press, 1977) for many accounts of how this contemporary of Finney was greatly used of God although he never used an invitation system.

²³ "Did You Know?" *Christian History* Vol. 8 (1988): 4.

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so soon. I love now to wait a little, and see if people bring forth fruit; for there are so many blossoms which March winds you know blow away, that I cannot believe they are converts till I see fruit brought back; it will never do a sincere soul any harm.²⁴

Likewise, 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."²⁵

In *The Soul Winner*, Spurgeon cautions against using pressure to secure quick decisions:

It very often happens that the converts that are born in excitement die when the excitement is over.... Some of the most glaring sinners known to me were once members of a church; and were, as I believe, led to make a profession by undue pressure, well-meant but ill-judged.²⁶

For years, we have heard about the values of the invitation system. It is even widely intimated (often plainly stated) that one who failed to give public invitations could not be concerned for the souls of men. Yet could it be that the very opposite is true: that the very extension of such an appeal might be the means for deluding many into a false state of assurance ultimately resulting in their damnation?

A Better Way

But some will ask, "What other way is there to bring people to Christ?" I would respond: "The way that was used by Jesus and the apostles, the Reformers, the Puritans, and most others until the 1830s." 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 (cf. John 3; 6:44, 65; etc.).

To explain a little more fully, let me give you two "musts" for those who would be evangelistic apart from using the invitation system.

²⁴ Quoted in Murray, 32-33.

²⁵ Quoted in Murray, 34.

²⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Soul Winner* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963), 19-20. 15

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1) We must learn to trust the power of God's Word to convince, convert, and change lives

Paul said: "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes" (Rom. 1:16). In I Corinthians 1:18, he contended: "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." Peter was likewise convinced that the Word of God has power to convert. He reminded believers that they had been "born again, not of corruptible seed but incorruptible, through the word of God which lives and abides forever" (1 Peter 1:23).

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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. Remember the evangelist whose appeal was separated from his message by a half-hour of hymn singing? It is obvious that he was not convinced of the power of God's Word apart from the addition of his appeal. We must be, or we will be tempted to add things to the preaching of the Word to secure greater commitments.

Those who ministered before the development of the invitation system saw the awesome power of the Word to work in men's hearts. David Brainerd testifies to the:

preaching God made use offer the awakening of sinners, and the propagation of this "work of grace among the Indians." ... There was then the greatest appearance of divine power, in awakening numbers of secure souls, promoting convictions begun, and comforting the distressed."²⁷

Accounts from the ministry of Nettleton show the deep and penetrating work of the Word of God on hearers:

As he was speaking, a youth sitting near a window cried out like one shot with an arrow. The people were so engrossed in the evangelist's message that it hardly caused a diversion. Several in one family were aroused at this meeting and went home weeping. The head of the house had gone to bed when they arrived. He listened as their carriage drove up and was startled by a wail of distress coming from without. He leaped from his bed, rushed outside and was met by his daughter-in-law who threw her arms around his neck and exclaimed, "My father,

²⁷ "The Life and Death of the Rev. David Brainerd" in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988 reprint), 1:416-17.

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what shall I do? What shall I do?" It was a miserable night for this young woman, but before morning all was well. She received Christ as Saviour and peace came.²⁸

Such occurrences while ministering in the power of God's Word were not uncommon. In letters to his friend, Philander Parmele, Nettleton described many similar conversions. After a meeting in New Haven, Nettleton wrote:

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One young man seized my hand exclaiming "I am a sinner. I am a sinner. What shall I do?" They [people at the meeting] left the house and went home sighing, & sobbing in every direction. I came home & found a number around the door of Mr. Williams' house, in the most awful distress, Some were standing, some sitting on the ground, & some on the door steps exclaiming "What shall I do?" I shall die. I shall die. "I Can't live." This alarmed the neighbors who called to witness the awful scene. With much ado I got them into the house, about eight or ten in number. The fact was, the young man aforementioned, who left the meeting house in such distress, was walking in company with them, when all at once he found relief and exclaimed, "I have found the Saviour." He was now very joyful. *He sat clothed and in his right mind: and they were afraid.* My first business now was to warn them against a false hope. Prayed with them and enjoined it particularly on them not to go home together, but to go alone, & be alone, for the business must be settled between God and their souls. Maria (a young woman living in this family) was one of the number. She retired to her chamber, sighing and sobbing, and crying for mercy, and exclaiming 'I shall die, I shall die.'" She came down and went out doors, and returned in the same awful distress to her chamber. And suddenly all was still and hushed to silence. I sat still below and said nothing. I soon heard the sound of her footsteps descending the chamber stairs. She opened the door and with a joyful countenance exclaimed O, Sir, I have found the Saviour. I continued to warn her of the danger of a false hope. She exclaimed "I love Christ. I do love him. O how sweet." In the morning, early, she called to see one of her anxious mates, who was so distressed the night before; and Lo: Barsheba exclaimed "I have found the Saviour." That was a happy meeting. The young man aforementioned resided in the same family (this was John Towner's house). On Saturday evening about midnight another, equally distressed, found relief. Within a few days 8 or 10 are rejoicing in hope. What will be the end. I know not. Do pray for us, and your friend, A. Nettleton."²⁹

²⁸ Thornbury, 97. Also see Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar, *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labors* (Carlisle, 17 PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1996 reprint of 1854 original), 116-17.

²⁹ Letter to Philander Parmele, dated December 1, 1817. All grammatical errors and spellings have been retained as in the original handwritten letter.

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Such was often the nature of conversion in the days before the invitation system when the Word was boldly preached and left to do its work in souls. Many modern examples of conversions could also be given, such as that of C. S. Lewis, who, after being confronted with the truth, struggled with it until one day he was strangely converted riding in his sidecar.

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”? You will never be able to do without the invitation system until you are thoroughly convinced of the power of God’s Word.

2) We must urgently appeal to all men to come to Christ now

After reading this far, one may be tempted to avoid giving any appeal for people to come to Christ. Please do not misunderstand: we are under divine command to call “all people everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Erroll Hulse reminds us: “The preacher is free to exhort and command, to plead and implore, to reason and invite. He is an ambassador who speaks on behalf of the great King and whose purpose is to bring about reconciliation.”³⁰

Allow me to note a few particulars about this responsibility.

First, our invitation must be universal. It matters not (for the purposes of this article) whether you view the atonement as limited or unlimited or whether you accept the doctrine of election or not: the scope of our appeal must be universal. Charles Spurgeon, one of the greatest evangelistic preachers, was a thorough-going Calvinist. Yet he understood that our appeal must be universal.

In one of his sermons, Spurgeon reminded his congregation about the doctrine of God’s electing some from the foundation of the world. But he noted that our task is to “preach the gospel to every creature,” not to find the elect. Spurgeon said that if God had painted a yellow stripe down the back of each of the elect, he would run up and down the streets of London, lifting up shirrtails, and preaching the gospel to the elect. But, Spurgeon reminds us, God has not done so. Instead, He has commanded us to “preach the gospel to every creature.” We must urgently appeal to everyone to come to Christ.

Second, our invitation must be urgent. When preaching or counseling about salvation, we must never give men the idea that repenting is something they can put off. Some who have dropped the invitation system because of its dangers have also dropped the urgent

³⁰ Hulse, 6.

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call to believe. We must say to men, "You must repent and believe the gospel." Should they say, "But I cannot," we must say, "But you must. God has commanded all men everywhere to repent. Your failure to do so only shows the wicked state of your heart. If you saw your sin as God sees it, you would flee to Him as the only salvation for your soul."

John Kennedy, a nineteenth-century British minister, provides some additional instruction concerning counseling inquirers. Notice that he puts the focus of counseling inquirers on the object of their faith:

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. Better far than this would it be to see it, that those with whom they deal are truly convinced of sin, and to labour to set forth Christ before them, in his glorious completeness as a Saviour. To explain faith to them, that they may do it, is to set them still to work, though setting an easier task before them. 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." "Who is He, that I may believe in Him?" was the question asked by one who approached the dawning of a day of salvation. 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 labour 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.³¹

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. But we must remain imperative in our appeal. Our message and our urgency must not change—people must repent and believe today.

Finally, our invitation must call them to Christ. The focus of all the evangelistic appeals in Scripture is the same. Jesus said, "Come to Me ... and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

³¹ Quoted in Murray, 30.

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Our appeal must be to come to Christ, not to follow any prescribed method that might cause some to equate their “coming” as coming to Him.

Conclusion

An examination of the invitation system is not an easy one. It is an emotional one. “To reduce sense of shock that some may feel, I would remind them that for well over 1800 years the Holy Spirit completed successfully all His work of saving sinners without this method. It was only with the advent of Charles Finney (1792-1875) that the ‘appeal’ as an organized method really got under way.”³² Even then, it met with much resistance until near the end of the nineteenth century. Today it is accepted as if it was used by Jesus and Paul. Be warned—many will consider you non-evangelistic if you even question the validity of this system, much less consider no longer using it as a method to bring people to Christ.³³

But we must be honest about the dangers that we have examined in this article. Is it not clear that the Scriptures “provide an invitation to sinners which is perfect and does not need addition?”³⁴ Are you concerned about asking people to do something for salvation that was never promoted in the Bible or in early church history?

Do you wish to eliminate possibilities that persons might respond to an emotional appeal or your persuasion rather than to the gospel? Do you wish to reduce the confusion that many have in equating “coming forward” with being saved?

Are you tired of seeing great numbers coming forward only to discredit the name of Christ by professing something that has no reality in their lives? Are you really concerned to see people converted—truly converted—instead of falsely assured? Then please examine this system carefully and honestly.

On the other hand, we must not confuse the invitation system with inviting people to Christ. This we must do with all urgency. “The Great Invitation of the gospel is an awesome and glorious subject. While we are in this world, we should never cease making ourselves more proficient and winsome in the employment of invitations.”³⁵

³² Hulse, 2.

³³ Hulse notes: “It is more or less taken for granted that all evangelists use the invitation system of calling people forward at the end of their meetings. A few, like John Blanchard, do not use it. Not to employ the method seems inconceivable to many evangelists.” [emphasis mine]. Ibid., 9.

³⁴ Ibid., 11.

³⁵ Ibid., 1.

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Still, the dangers of this system are serious. The souls of men are at stake. To be biblically evangelistic, we must be certain that what we do leads men to faith, not just to decisions.

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[http://www.gracesermons.com/hisbygrace/invitation.html#notes:](http://www.gracesermons.com/hisbygrace/invitation.html#notes)

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