

Altar Calls

Grace Church Position Papers

A common question that we hear from people is, “**Why doesn’t Grace Church have an altar call at the end of the service?**” There are many members of our congregation who have come from denominations and churches where the altar call is a common practice and a regular part of most services.

As we answer this question, it is important to separate **form** from **function**. The *function* of an altar call is evangelism: the proclamation of the good news and providing people the opportunity to respond to what they have heard. While Grace Church is committed to its function, we do not use the form of an altar call.

The altar call is a relatively new form of offering an invitation for people to accept Christ as their Savior and to trust him with souls for eternal salvation. Charles Finney created the modern altar call during the 1800s with his flamboyant preaching and revivals. The style has been used in many similar forms for the last 150 years.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the New Testament is there a parallel to the modern altar call. There is no mention of Jesus or the apostles asking people to come forward and pray to receive Christ. Nowhere in the book of Acts is there any record of anything resembling our modern altar call. Even Peter’s great sermon at Pentecost in Acts 2 shows something far different from the calls to come forward that we see today. When Peter concludes his sermon, it is the people who ask what to do:

Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” – Acts 2:37-38

It seems that in the modern evangelical church, we have come to equate inviting sinners to come to Christ, which is most definitely our **function** at Grace Church, with using the **form** of an altar call to do this. The altar call and “sinner’s prayer” of today and other prayers of salvation are modern inventions, “forms”, that the church uses to reach the unsaved. But they are not the only “forms” that may be used and in fact were not used for over 1800 years of church history.

It is important to take a serious look at anything that we do that is not firmly rooted in the Scriptures and question its validity. While the modern altar call can be an effective method of evangelism, there is little doubt that it has also been abused

over the years. Many preachers seek an emotional response from people and some go to extreme measures to get that response. Most people have probably seen some obvious techniques used that are meant to stir and move a person’s emotions. A gifted, articulate communicator can use various emotional techniques, emotional stories, and music to manipulate people and elicit an emotional response to the invitation.

What is the result of these emotional responses? Obviously a person can be genuinely converted in this environment; sadly, though, there are also many people who are not being converted, but are merely caught up in the emotion of the moment. So then, is the person who has an emotional response to an altar call converted? Maybe, but maybe not.

Have you known anyone who has responded to an altar call more than once? Or have you known someone who has responded to an altar call and quickly returned to his or her old lifestyle? Do you know anyone who views his or her response to an altar call as a form of “fire insurance policy” and has never turned away from a sinful lifestyle? What is going on?

The person who is truly converted has heard and understood the truth of the Word of God because the Holy Spirit has moved in this person’s mind and heart. Over time, that person’s life will reflect the change that has taken place.

At Grace Church, we are an “equipping” church and we strongly believe that the Word of God, faithfully preached, is the best means to produce lasting change in a person’s life. It is not an emotional response that we seek, but a complete change. It is the entire person—the mind, the emotion, and the will—that must respond in faith.

While we occasionally preach evangelistic messages, our Sunday morning service is geared primarily for believers. The Sunday service is our means of equipping believers for Christian service. Obviously, we welcome non-believers into our service, and we also believe that the faithful preaching of God’s Word is the form that the Holy Spirit will use to bring about a non-believer’s conversion. We feel deeply that it is our responsibility to teach in a way that gains the attention of people during the service and to preach God’s Word in a way to help them to understand and comprehend the ultimate truth of God’s Word.



A person's decision to yield to the truth they have heard and be moved to act upon that truth is a work entirely dependent on the Holy Spirit. It is not the job, and cannot be the job, of the preacher to compel a person to yield his will through manipulation of his emotions. It is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit that brings a person to a saving faith.

So the form that we have chosen during weekend teaching is the expository preaching of God's Word and his truth. We attempt to explain each week the meaning of the Scriptures, verse by verse, book by book. "So faith **comes** from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ (Romans 10:17 ESV).

If a person is truly converted during the service, there is no further need to prompt them to come forward. The Holy Spirit has acted in a supernatural way and brought that person to a saving faith. The proper forum for the public acknowledgement of the new birth is a believer's baptism. At Grace Church, we invite people to visit with pastors or ministry leaders following the service or to contact us through the connect cards to discuss their salvation and relationship with Christ.

None of this implies that the altar call has not been effective in bringing many people to Christ, nor does this imply that we in anyway denigrate the altar call. God can use any method he chooses to bring people to faith. The altar call is just one method, one form. We will preach God's Word every week, and we will trust the power of God's Word to convince, convert and change individual lives. That is the form we have chosen.

