

## Why Doesn't The Village Do Altar Calls?

**Summary:** *While The Village Church does offer a time for members and attendees to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit after a church service, we do not call it an altar call due to theological confusion surrounding the practice.*

The practice of the altar call is relatively new in Christian history. Though it existed in a limited scope within the 1700s, it was within the 19th century 2nd Great Awakening that the activity began to flourish. Charles G. Finney, a prominent evangelist of the American revivals, was a leading proponent of altar calls. For Finney, the practice served as one of a number of coercive techniques used to influence the will of man to decisively respond to the gospel.

To understand Finney's use of the altar call, we must consider his underlying theological convictions. According to Finney's anthropology, 1 man existed in a state of moral neutrality even after Genesis 3. Therefore, man's will is not radically and naturally predisposed to sin, but rather can be persuaded toward either righteousness or sin. While he emphasized that all men did in fact sin, he maintained that they were neither depraved by nature nor unable to overcome this tendency upon their own volition.

In light of man's neutrality, Finney viewed his job as a preacher as employing various means to overcoming obstacles and hindrances to belief. For Finney it was only a matter of breaking through to the neutral nature of man in order to bring one to salvation. With the proper techniques and methods, the preacher could practically produce revival according to Finney. The altar call served as one of these coercive techniques.

Historic Christian orthodoxy has disagreed with Finney's anthropological convictions. Put simply, man is not morally neutral. He is radically and terribly sinful, and this depravity extends universally through his heart, mind, and will. Our problem is not merely environmental, but intrinsic.

To overcome this inherent wickedness, we need something much more radical than influential techniques. Only the Spirit working through the Word can effectually break mans' natural resistance to God and His gospel.

This gospel is not "reasonable," but is rather perceived as foolishness (1 Corinthians 1:18-31) by the unconverted mind (1 Corinthians 2:14). Therefore no amount of passion, proficiency, or preparation by the preacher can decisively overcome mans' hardened heart. The duty of the preacher is not to influence and coerce a neutral will, but rather to clearly articulate the gospel message as a means through which the Spirit will work to grant new life.

In addition to the altar call's misleading theological foundation, it is sometimes viewed as a means of assurance of salvation and a public profession of faith. However, the biblical ground for assurance is not that one has once stood in church, but rather that one is currently loving, trusting, and obeying Christ. Furthermore, the biblically-prescribed public profession of faith is not walking down an aisle, but being immersed in the baptismal waters.

Our hope each week is that the Holy Spirit would prompt our people to respond to the preached word. For many of us, our response will consist of singing, confessing, repenting, standing, sitting, contemplating, or some combination of the above. For some, the desire to respond will lead to a longing to come forward and talk to one of the men and women who are available for prayer and counsel. Whether an unbeliever who wants to know more, a new Christian facing some hardship, or a more mature believer who simply needs prayer or counsel, we desire to minister to all who are convicted by the Spirit's ministry.

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### Recommended Resources

- An **article** describing a brief history of the practice of the altar call
- A **blog** with a number of articles on the theological implications of the practice

<sup>1</sup>Anthropology is the study (logos) of mankind (anthropos). In theology, it relates to one's understanding of the nature of man, particularly in regards to the condition of the fallen nature.