

Why We Do Not Use The Invitational System

W. R. Downing, Pastor, Sovereign Grace Baptist Church of Silicon Valley

INTRODUCTION

The Invitational System Defined and Described
Personal Experience
A Word of Clarification: Sinners Invited to Christ, Not to The Front

I. THE HISTORY OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

The Beginnings: The Kentucky Frontier Revivals
The Advent Of Charles G. Finney and The "New Measures"

II. THE UNSCRIPTURAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

The Invitational System: No Scriptural Precedent
Charles G. Finney and His Defense of The "New Measures"
Baptism and The Anxious Seat
Billy Graham and His Defense of The Invitational System
The Effects and Legacy of Charles G. Finney
Sola Scriptura: The Deciding Issue

III. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

Unregenerate Man Cannot Rise Above The Psychological
Regeneration and Conversion
Faith and Regeneration: Salvation by Grace or by Works?

IV. THE UTILITARIAN NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

The Invitational System: An Alleged Answer for Every Issue
Acting Scripturally

V. THE SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

Sacrament and Sacrosanct: The Altar
Evangelical Churches with Altars?
Public, Place, Purpose, Posture and Performance?

VI. THE SACERDOTAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

What is Sacerdotalism?
Preacher or Priest?
Priest or Psychologist?

VII. THE HARMFUL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

Doctrine, Practice and an Unscriptural Methodology
A Hybrid Approach to Evangelism
Spurious Conversions
"First-Time Decisions" and Rededication
An Unscriptural Assurance

CONCLUSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses the use of the invitational system. While we do not doubt the sincerity and earnest love for Christ, the souls of men and the good of God's people on the part of those who utilize such methods, yet we lovingly disagree with them on scriptural grounds. While we, for good and necessary biblical and doctrinal reasons, repudiate the system, we love our Christian brethren and seek the unity which is described in Psalm 133. May the Lord use this paper to cause our brothers in Christ and in the ministry to reconsider and reevaluate their evangelistic methodology, if they resort to such methods. Unscriptural methods, unless they are utterly incoherent, derive from unscriptural tradition which in turn derives from unscriptural doctrine.

The Invitational System Defined and Described

The invitational system, as practiced in the past two centuries, is a relatively recent innovation, absolutely unknown for over 1800 years. That prior time included eras of the greatest revivals and spiritual awakenings ever witnessed in Christian history when untold thousands were converted and the moral climate of countries and societies were transformed by the power of the gospel.

This system is inclusive of several well-established entities, such as the “altar call,” the “anxious seat,” the “mourner’s bench,” the “call for decisions,”¹ “rededication,” and the idea that evangelistic results can be immediately known with a given degree of certainty by physical movement and emotional demonstration. This idea of “coming forward” at the conclusion of a religious service serves a utilitarian purpose of being the proper response to almost any religious concern. This “Old Time Religion” is not so old as not to be a relatively new and essential departure from the biblical and historic faith which experienced times of great blessing without such for over 1800 years.

This system has become so entrenched in modern Evangelical Christianity that “coming forward” during “the invitation” is often held to be synonymous with coming to Christ.² This has resulted in what some have termed “decisional regeneration.”³

“Decisional regeneration does not bring men to Christ any more than does baptismal regeneration. It may be true that some are converted under such preaching, but this is in spite of the false methods used, not because of them. The Bible is clear in its declaration that only by the Spirit of God can men be “born again.” True repentance and saving faith come as the result of the new birth and are never the cause of the great change.”⁴

One, however, may come to the “altar” and never find Christ. Indeed, this very action may prove to be a hindrance to true conversion. Spurious conversions are numerous:

There is often a return to “the altar” for a renewed sense of religious feeling. “The consequent peace...is mistaken for spiritual joy. Self-love, of course, prompts a spurious gratitude and praise for it; and causes the heart to love the scenes, the means and the companions of its delicious intoxication. And now we have the “stony ground hearers” reproduced (Matt. 13:20–21). The dead heart, having no true vitality to generate spiritual emotion from within, sinks into a chill and dreary vacuity when alone; and thus it is all the

¹ Cf. “The Origin of the Call for Decisions,” Albert B. Dodd, a reprint of the 1847 article from the *Princeton Review*. *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, December, 1963, pp. 9–15.

² Billy Graham in the London Crusade of 1966, “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.” Quoted by Iain Murray, *The Invitation System*. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973, p. 5.

“You ask me why I am asking you to come forward? It is an act of your will in receiving Christ as Savior,” Billy Graham, *God in the Garden*, a record of the Madison Square Garden Billy Graham Crusade.

³ Harold J. Ockenga, “Some Reformed theologians...teach that regeneration by the Holy Spirit precedes conversion. The evangelical position is that regeneration is conditioned upon repentance, confession and faith.” Quoted by Iain Murray, *The Invitation System*, p. 18.

⁴ James E. Adams, *Decisional Regeneration*. Canton, GA: Free Grace Publications, 1983, 16 pp.

more prone, for a while, to crave a return to the place and the scenes where the exhilarating appliances were enjoyed.”⁵

“I shall fail at this time in setting forth the gospel if I shall lead anybody to think that he can get salvation by going to the church or to the meeting—house or going to a minister, or going into an enquiry room, or going to a penitent form. No, we are to go nowhere but to Jesus. You, as you are, are to come to Christ as he is, and the promise is that on your coming to him he will give you rest....You see there are two persons. Let everybody else vanish, and let those two be left alone, to transact heavenly business with each other.”⁶

The “altar call” is used for various purposes. Some are called forward for salvation, for baptism, for “rededication,” for the call for some kind of religious service or ministry, or for some other allegedly spiritual reason or concern, such as praying for a person or a given religious situation or blessing, for freedom from some kind of addiction. But coming to the “old fashion altar” and coming to Christ for any reason are two entirely different things—and these must never be confused.

Personal Experience

This writer was reared in such a religious environment and in his early days as a professing believer “went forward” for various reasons both before and after his conversion. Having endured hundreds of “altar calls” over many years as a child, a youth, a Bible College student and as a pastor, he is somewhat qualified to comment on the unscriptural nature of this system. Once he learned of its unscriptural character, its history of development and personally witnessed the damage it has caused, he both ceased such activity and has taken an active stand against this unscriptural practice.

A Word of Clarification: Sinners Invited to Christ, Not to The Front

A word of clarification is necessary. While opposing the invitational system, we do *not* oppose inviting sinners to Christ, yea, urging them to Christ during the preaching. We firmly declare the free offer of the gospel to any and all men without exception (Matt. 11:28–30; Jn. 3:16; Acts 2:36–39; 17:30–31; 1 Tim. 2:1–4). What we do oppose is the idea that inviting sinners to come to the front of a church building is identical with or might be confused with inviting them to Christ. We would agree with C. H. Spurgeon, who stated:

“Oh, that you would trust in the Lord Jesus!...Did I hear you say, ‘I will pray about it?’ Better trust at once. Pray as much as you like after you have trusted, but what is the good of unbelieving prayers? ‘I will talk with a godly man after the service.’ I charge you first trust in Jesus... ‘I should like to go into the enquiry room.’ I dare say you would, but we are not willing to pander to popular superstition. We fear that in those rooms men are warmed into a fictitious confidence. Very few of the supposed converts of enquiry rooms turn out well. Go to your God at once, even where you are now. Cast yourself on Christ, now, at once; ere you stir an inch! In God’s name I charge you, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ...!”⁷

⁵ Robert L. Dabney, *Discussions Theological and Evangelical*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967 reprint. Vol. I, p. 564.

⁶ C. H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, Vol. 1882, pp. 649–650.

⁷ C. H. Spurgeon, *Ibid.*, 1884, p. 456.

We are also opposed to the unscriptural practice of urging believers to the front or “altar” for any given alleged spiritual purpose or concern.

I THE HISTORY OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

The Beginnings: The Kentucky Frontier Revivals

The idea of inviting or urging sinners or others to the front of a church building or to a designated place for an alleged spiritual reason is a relatively recent innovation in the history of Christianity. The earliest examples of what has become known as the “invitation system” can be traced to the Kentucky Frontier Revivals of the era 1798–1806 and the Methodist camp meetings. About 1793 revivals broke out in various parts of these United States and spread along the western border of the American frontier. As with most revivals, there were physical demonstrations such as ecstasies, “jerks,” swooning, fainting or falling down. The Presbyterians and Baptists, both being strongly Calvinistic and more reverent, sought to discourage such emotional extremes in their meetings, but the Methodists began to promote such. These “fallings” were seen to be the immediate work of the Spirit and identified those who were “saved.” The Methodists desired to have an immediate counting of their “converts” by such means, as they were defensive of their Arminian theology, especially in the context of the prevailing Calvinism.⁸ In the chaos of such meetings, it was soon determined that it was more orderly to have people “come to the altar” to be counseled, prayed for and counted. In their frontier camp meetings, marked by emotional extremes, and lasting for days, a certain part of ground was marked out as “the altar” for this purpose. This seems to have had its origin in their Methodist Episcopal background, in which the front of the church building was designated as “the altar,” the place where the sacraments were dispensed by an Episcopal priest.

This was an altogether new innovation. George Whitefield the Calvinist, John Wesley the Arminian, and the first Methodist preachers never resorted to such, not even in counting converts. As itinerate evangelists, they preached and left the results to God. They did note in their diaries that many were often greatly affected with weeping, fell down under deep conviction, and at times emotionalism broke through in their meetings, but such outbursts were neither promoted nor encouraged. Our Baptist forefathers, some of the most evangelistic preachers in the Colonies and the early years of our Republic, neither knew of nor used the invitational system.

The Advent of Charles G. Finney and The “New Measures”

Charles G. Finney, a lawyer, became a Presbyterian evangelist in the 1820s almost immediately upon his conversion, and took the “altar call,” “anxious seat” and “mourner’s bench” from the Methodists, combined it with his Pelagian doctrine or “New Haven

⁸ Calvinistic theology was preeminent during this era, and no one thought that Arminianism would ever produce such converts as the strong Calvinistic gospel preaching. “Before 1800, as Isaac Backus knew, any argument that Arminianism was more effective in evangelism than Calvinism would have been regarded as absurd.” Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, p. 188.

Theology,”⁹ and these became the “New Measures” which have since increasingly characterized American evangelicalism and its evangelism.¹⁰ Finney was *not* an Arminian. He was a Pelagian, and accordingly reduced his evangelism to a psychological approach.¹¹ To him, and to his followers, salvation was simply a redirecting of the will, not a change of nature necessarily beginning with regeneration.¹² This marked the beginning of the idea of preaching to persuade the will rather than challenge the mind with Divine truth to reach the conscience. Intelligent, biblical preaching would eventually give way to a more psychological and emotional approach. Man, according to Finney, had the power to change his own heart, i.e., the Pelagian doctrine of free will. In Mr. Finney’s own words:

...in our investigations henceforth, let it be understood, that I use regeneration and conversion as synonymous terms.¹³

We have said that regeneration is synonymous, in the Bible, with a new heart. But sinners are required to make to themselves a new heart, which they could not do, if they were not active in this change. If the work is a work of God, in such a sense, that He must first

⁹ The use of the “New Measures” split the Presbyterians into the “Old School,” or orthodox Calvinists who held to the Westminster Standards, and the “New School,” or those who used the “New Measures” and adopted the “Taylorism” or “New Haven Theology” of a semi-Pelagian system, revivalism, moral reform and interdenominational cooperation. See W. A. Hoffecker, “New School Theology,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990. pp. 767–768.

“New Haven Theology,” Taylorism,” or “The New Divinity” was the Pelagian system of plenary human ability taught in New England, espoused, refined and popularized by Charles G. Finney. See W. R. Downing, *Lectures on Calvinism and Arminianism*. Morgan Hill, CA: P.I.R.S. Publications. 2000, pp. 288–290, 320, 324–325, 327–333.

¹⁰ For a brief history of the “altar call” and the birth of revivalism, see Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, pp. 163–190.

¹¹ Arminianism holds that man has a fallen, sinful nature, and that the will of man is brought by the Holy Spirit to a given place where it can either choose or refuse the gospel message—prevenient grace. Pelagianism holds that man does *not* have a fallen, sinful nature and thus man possesses a will which is entirely free [plenary human ability] and thus that man possesses the power of contrary choice. Every man’s will is allegedly as free as that of unfallen Adam. This is a denial of the imputation of Adam’s sin [the immediate imputation of Adam’s sin—original sin] and also a denial of the inheritance of Adam’s fallen nature [mediate imputation]. Speaking of his pastor, George W. Gale, Finney stated about Gale’s Calvinistic convictions: “...in short he held all those doctrines that logically flow from the fact of a nature sinful in itself....These doctrines I could not receive. I could not receive his views on the subject of atonement, regeneration, faith, repentance, the slavery of the will, or any of the kindred doctrines.” Charles G. Finney, *Autobiography*, p. 46.

¹² The idea of simply redirecting the will was based upon the Pelagian idea that command implied ability. “The doctrine upon which I insisted, that the command to obey God implied the power to do so, created in some places considerable opposition at first...the Spirit’s influences are those of teaching, persuading, convicting and, of course, a moral influence, I was regarded by many as teaching new and strange doctrines.” Charles G. Finney, *Autobiography*, p. 157.

¹³ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971. p. 285. Finney equated regeneration at times with a moral persuasive influence upon the mind, with sanctification, and with conversion. This confusion resulted from his Pelagian and Perfectionist presuppositions. See B. B. Warfield, *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, Vol. VIII. *Perfectionism*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981. pp. 3–215.

regenerate the heart or soul before the agency of the sinner begins, it were absurd and unjust to require him to make to himself a new heart...

Regeneration is ascribed to man in the gospel, which it could not be, if the term were designed to express only the agency of the Holy Spirit....

...Regeneration, to have the characteristics ascribed to it in the Bible, must consist in a change in the attitude of the will, or a change in its ultimate choice, intention, or preference ...

...the subject is active in regeneration...regeneration consists in the sinner changing his ultimate choice, intention, preference....Of course the subject of regeneration must be an agent in the work.¹⁴

The emergence of Charles G. Finney, his Pelagian doctrine of human ability, and defective ideas concerning God, man, salvation, grace, society and morality, were largely a reflection of various forces which at that critical point characterized the American mind-set. There were struggles rising with national identity: French Skepticism, German Rationalism, Hegelian philosophy, "Manifest Destiny;" and burgeoning social and political issues such as the abolition of slavery, women's rights, the Temperance Movement.

...Finney's moralistic impulse envisioned a church that was in large measure an agency of personal and social reform rather than the institution in which the means of grace...are made available to believers who then take the Gospel to the world. In the nineteenth century, the evangelical movement became increasingly identified with political causes—from abolition of slavery and child labor legislation to women's rights and the prohibition of alcohol. At the turn of the century, with an influx of Roman Catholic immigrants already making many American Protestants a bit uneasy, secularism began to pry the fingers of the Protestant establishment from the institutions (colleges, hospitals, charitable organizations) they had created and sustained. In a desperate effort at regaining this institutional power and the glory of "Christian America" [a vision that is always powerful in the imagination, but, after the disintegration of Puritan New England, elusive], the turn-of-the-century Protestant establishment launched moral campaigns to "Americanize" immigrants, enforce moral instruction and "character education." Evangelists pitched their American gospel in terms of its practical usefulness to the individual and the nation.

That is why Finney is so popular. He is the tallest marker in the shift from Reformation orthodoxy, evident in the Great Awakening (under Edwards and Whitefield) to Arminian (indeed, even Pelagian) revivalism, evident from the Second Great Awakening to the present.¹⁵

The invitational system has since become entrenched in American Evangelicalism and Fundamentalism. It has become in many instances such an inherent part of evangelism that many believe no one can be saved without or apart from an "altar call." Not to give an "invitation" is now thought by most to be non-evangelistic or even anti-evangelistic! It has been the experience of this author to be asked at times how people can be saved without an "altar call." Once a well-meaning deacon declared, "If you had given an altar call after that message, I *know* that people would have been saved!"

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 365–371.

¹⁵ Michael Horton, *Premise*, Vol. II, Number 3, March 27, 1995.

II THE UNSCRIPTURAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

The Invitational System: No Scriptural Precedent

The invitational system is unscriptural. There is absolutely no precedent in Scripture for this practice. It is not only unscriptural; it is anti-scriptural, for it is based upon unscriptural principles of false doctrine which derive from a defective view of God, grace, salvation and man's condition by nature, the belief in a sacrosanct place within a church building, the idea that a minister has the right to legitimately demand an immediate, public "religious decision" from his hearers, and equating physical movement with a spiritual response to an allegedly spiritual command. No one who believes the Scriptures to be the inscripturated Word of God should have anything to do with such an unscriptural system.

Neither our Lord nor his Apostles ever resorted to such a practice. The exhortation was within the confines of the preached message (Matt. 11:28–30; Jn. 6:28–29, 37; Acts 2:36–41; 17:30–34). This practice of exhorting sinners to Christ in the preaching of the gospel has been the practice of true gospel ministers since the days of the New Testament. We cannot improve upon the ministry of our Lord or his inspired Apostles—we cannot improve upon biblical evangelism and we dare not modify the inspired pattern.

Charles G. Finney and His Defense of The "New Measures"

Charles G. Finney never pretended that his "New Measures" were scriptural. He knew better. He simply based his innovations on psychology [He termed psychology "the philosophy of the human mind"]. When attempting to justify the use of the "anxious seat" or "mourner's bench," he states, "What is the great objection? I cannot see it. The design of the anxious seat is undoubtedly philosophical, and according to the laws of mind."¹⁶ Writing further about the anxious seat, he states:

When a person is seriously troubled in mind, everybody knows there is a powerful tendency to conceal it. When a person is borne down with a sense of his condition, if you can get him willing to have it known, if you can get him to break away from the chains of pride, you have gained an important point towards his conversion. This is agreeable to the philosophy of the human mind.¹⁷

Thus, the use of the "altar call" was to put pressure on the individual and either bring him to make a public commitment or reveal his hypocrisy.

...Preach to...[the sinner], and, at the moment, he thinks he is willing to do anything; he thinks he is determined to serve the Lord; but bring him to the test; call on him to do one thing, to take one step, that shall identify him with the people of God or cross his pride, and his pride comes up, and he refuses; his delusion is brought out, and he finds himself a lost sinner still; whereas, if you had not done it, he might have gone away flattering himself that he was a Christian. If you say to him: "There is the anxious seat, come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord's side," and if he is not willing to do so small a thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything, and there he is, brought out before his own conscience. It uncovers the delusion of the human heart, and prevents a great many

¹⁶ Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d., p. 253.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

spurious conversions, by showing those who might otherwise imagine themselves willing to do anything for Christ that in fact they are willing to do nothing.¹⁸

Baptism and the Anxious Seat

Unable to connect his “New Measures” to Scripture, he came as close as he could, not with the invitations to come to Christ in Scripture, but with the ordinance of baptism.

The Church has always felt it necessary to have something of the kind to answer this very purpose. In the days of the apostles baptism answered this purpose. The Gospel was preached to the people, and then all those who were willing to be on the side of Christ were called on to be baptized. It held the precise place that the anxious seat does now, as a public manifestation of a determination to be a Christian.¹⁹

Billy Graham and His Defense of the Invitational System

The greatest modern purveyor of the invitational system, Evangelist Billy Graham, has tried to base the invitational system on both Scripture and psychology. As to Scripture, he has used passages such as Matthew 10:32 [“Whosoever therefore shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father which is in heaven”], which can hardly refer to this practice.²⁰ His attempt at scriptural justification lacks any substance or coherency.

The psychological defense is the determining issue with Billy Graham, as it was with Charles G. Finney. Graham knew full well of the psychological implications of the “altar call,” and he and his staff have quoted various philosophers and psychologists as to the need for emotional release and public demonstration to seal the religious decision. Some of the names mentioned in particular are William James, William Sargant, George Target and Gordon Allport.

Graham stated, “Many psychologists would say that it [the altar call] is psychologically sound. One of the reasons why our films and television dramas usually have a bad effect is because they stir the emotion to a high pitch and do not offer any practical outlet for action.” *The Christian*, July 8, 1966, p. 24, as quoted in Iain Murray, *The Invitation System*, p. 12. Leighton Ford, of the Billy Graham evangelistic staff in *The Christian Persuader*. “I am convinced that giving some kind of public invitation to come to Christ is not only theologically correct, but also emotionally sound. Men need this opportunity for expression...impression without expression can lead to depression.”²¹

Referring in general to psychiatrists, psychologists and their ideas, one of Graham’s associates, Curtis Mitchell, commented:

A Chicago psychologist once said, “This generation needs converting more than any generation in history.”

A famous British psychologist recently said, “We are so psychologically constituted as to need converting, and if the church fails to convert people, we psychologists are going to

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 264–265.

¹⁹ *Loc. cit.*

²⁰ Iain Murray, *The Invitational System*, pp. 8–9. Matt. 11:28 refers to our Lord’s call for sinners to come to him, not to “the altar.” Rev. 3:20 refers to our Lord seeking fellowship and communion in an apostate church, not standing at the door of the sinner’s heart seeking entrance for salvation.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 11–16.

have to do it.” So even psychology is recognizing the need for man to be converted. “The Bible teaches that you must be converted to enter heaven. The psychiatrist teaches that you must be converted in order to get the most out of life.”

“...Wherever he is, if a man goes forward, either in fact or in spirit, the result is a change. What takes place? Psychologists, psychiatrists, theologians and evangelists have all tried to explain”.²²

The Effects and Legacy of Charles G. Finney

The advent of Charles G. Finney marks the watershed in American Evangelical Christianity and its approach to evangelism. It would never be the same. Finney came to prominence in a time of true revival when scores of great men—men such as Isaac Backus, Asahel Nettleton, Archibald Alexander, Edward D. Griffin, Edward Payson—all Calvinistic in conviction and possessing a true passion for the gospel and a love of men’s souls, had been laboring successfully for years and had seen the beginnings and glorious fullness of the “Second Great Awakening.” But the history has been re-written and the truth concealed from succeeding generations. With Finney came “revivalism,” and with “revivalism” came division and decline.

...there can be no question that by 1900 the impression was almost universal that Charles Grandison Finney had introduced revivals in nineteenth-century America and that his usefulness so exceeded that of all who went before him that there was little evangelistic endeavour before him that deserved serious attention. The belief has been repeated so often that it is commonly regarded as an unquestionable fact. Billy Graham, for instance, writes of Finney: ‘Through his Spirit-filled ministry, uncounted thousands came to know Christ in the nineteenth century, resulting in one of the great periods of revival in the history of America.’ Another modern writer claims: ‘When Charles Finney was converted and filled with the Holy Ghost the American churches were in a sickly state. Most churches were either Hyper-Calvinist or Universalist...apathy prevailed.’²³

Such statements are historically and factually false and misleading. Finney’s advent did not signal the beginning of these revivals, but rather their demise.

Sola Scriptura: The Deciding issue

Sola Scriptura, or “Scripture alone” has always been the standard and cry of true Christianity. That the invitational system is unscriptural ought to settle the issue once-for-all, but some, even among those inclined toward sovereign grace, resort to such means at times because of religious tradition, religious and psychological pressure from contemporaries, the emotionally-charged atmosphere of a given meeting or a hybrid approach to evangelism and Christian commitment. This accommodation to unscriptural, merely traditional practices ought to humble those have prided themselves in being scriptural in all things!

²² Curtis Mitchell, *Those Who Came Forward*. The World’s Work, Ltd., 1966, p. 22, as quoted by Iain Murray, *The Invitation System*, pp. 14–15.

²³ Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism*, pp. 297–298. Murray’s work does much to correct this revisionist view. Finney himself constantly denounced the great and useful Calvinistic preachers of his day in his preaching, witnessed some of them being put out of their pulpits due to his inflammatory influence and measures, and later further promoted such fiction in his *Autobiography*.

...the cry of *Sola Scriptura* is more often an indication of good intention than it is fact. [Evangelical Christianity]...is saturated with doctrine and practices which have no Biblical foundation. Many teachings and habits touching the Gospel are as much the products of human invention and tradition as the indulgences of Tetzal. And certain doctrines in our midst are quite as dangerous.²⁴

III THE PSYCHOLOGICAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

Unregenerate Man Cannot Rise Above The Psychological

By nature unregenerate man cannot rise above the psychological level. He seeks to do so, however, by his attempts at magic, mysticism, drugs, the occult or religious excitement. The emotional religious excitement generated in “revivalism” befits more Old Line Pentecostalism or the more modern Charismatic Movement than it does Evangelical or Fundamentalist Christianity. Religious excitements, however, are not only true of Christianity, but of other religions as well—consider “Turkish fanatical dervishes, Hindoo–Faquirs or our own [native] Indian medicine men.”²⁵ Unless the Spirit of God is effectually at work within the heart, soul or personality—i.e., in regenerating grace, adoption and conversion—such attempts at true spirituality must prove futile. Man is limited to the psychological plane. He can only rise to the truly spiritual plane through the effectual work of the Spirit of God—and the Spirit of God is pleased to move in terms of His Holy Word.

As delineated in the previous section, the invitational system is limited to the psychological level. This is not to say that God may not sovereignly save sinners under such a system, but such conversions will be in spite of such unscriptural religious innovations, not because of them. Those converted under such circumstances may remain spiritually–crippled and scripturally ignorant until brought under the influence of proper biblical teaching. Such emotionally–charged and psychologically–manipulated invitations only work confusion, of which God is not the author.

Regeneration and Conversion

True conversion is spiritual. It is much more than merely a question of man’s will or seeking to redirect it under preaching. Conversion is the result of the effectual work of the Spirit of God in regeneration. Conversion is the immediate and spontaneous outward manifestation of regeneration or the “new birth.” The very nature of the regeneration itself reveals its utter necessity before man can savingly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. The necessity of regeneration or the new birth is found in the utter spiritual impotence of man (Jn. 3:3, 5; 1 Cor. 2:14), the blinding power of the devil (Matt. 13:4, 19; 2 Cor. 4:3–6), the eternal redemptive purpose, and the righteous character and omnipotence of God. If any human being is to be saved or delivered from the reigning power of sin, his own innate animosity toward God, the blinding power of Satan, and ultimately delivered from eternal hell, God must initiate the work of salvation (Isa. 64:6; Matt. 13:3–4, 18–19; Acts 16:14; Rom. 1:18–25; 3:11, 27–21; 8:5–8; 1 Cor. 2:14; 2 Cor. 4:3–6; Eph. 2:1–10; 4:17–19; Titus

²⁴ Walter J. Chantry, *Today’s Gospel: Authentic or Synthetic?* London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1972, p. 12.

²⁵ Cf. Robert L. Dabney, *Op. cit.*, p. 558–559.

3:5; 1 Jn. 5:19). To say all this is to declare that salvation is by grace; anything less would be a denial of the same.

There are six essential spiritual realities which comprise regeneration, or the “new birth.” If any one of these realities is not true or actual within the personality, the individual is yet unregenerate: first, the impartation of Divine life (Jn. 3:3, 5; Eph. 2:1, 4–5). Unless the individual receives such a principle of spiritual life, he cannot even “see” the kingdom of God, much less enter it. He may perceive, know or understand much, even so as to be without excuse, but his will is bent toward sin and evil and his inner being is darkened (Rom. 1:18–25; 1 Cor. 2:14).

Second, the breaking of the reigning power of sin (Rom. 6:3–14, 17–18, 20, 22). Every human being by nature is a willing bondsman of sin. This power is broken by God in a definitive act of grace, and a radical cleavage is made with the reigning power of sin in the life. This aspect of sanctification—definitive sanctification—is contemporaneous with regeneration.

Third, the removal of natural heart-enmity against God and his truth (Rom. 8:7–8; 1 Cor. 2:14). Man by nature has an innate aversion to God and his truth. This animosity is removed by a sovereign act of God, enabling the sinner to savingly turn to God in the context of his truth.

Fourth, the re-creation of the image of God in principle (Eph. 4:22–24; Col. 3:1–10). Both these passages refer to a past act, not to an entreaty.²⁶ Man was created as the image-bearer of God. In the Fall, this image was devastated spiritually, morally and intellectually; the thought-process became fragmented and given to futility. The physical body, with its appetites and desires, assumed a controlling influence over the individual (Rom. 6:6, 11–14; Eph. 4:17–19). In regenerating grace, God re-creates the image of God anew in principle in righteousness, holiness of the truth and knowledge—a spiritual, moral and intellectual transformation. With the mind thus freed, and a holy disposition given to the personality, the sinner is enabled to freely turn to Christ in faith as presented in the gospel message.

Fifth, the removal of satanic blindness (2 Cor. 4:3–6).²⁷ Above and beyond all matters of the will or heart, looms the awful, evil power of Satan, who specifically blinds sinners to the truth of the gospel. He further seeks to remove any influence of the gospel in any way he possibly can (Matt. 13:3–4, 18–19; Mk. 4:4, 15; Lk. 8:5, 12). This blinding influence is removed by an act of God’s grace.

Sixth, the gift of saving faith (Eph. 2:4–10). Conversion, or repentance from sin and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, is inseparable from regeneration. Conversion is the infallible and immediate consequence of the work of the Holy Spirit upon and within the personality (Acts 16:14). The Scriptures usually consider regeneration and conversion inclusively as

²⁶ Eph. 4:22–24. The use of the aor. inf. of purpose [ἀποθέσθαι...ἐνδύσασθαι] reveals this to be a past fact, not a present exhortation. This alone coincides with aor. ptcs in Col. 3:9–10 [ἀπεκδυσάμενοι τὸν παλαιὸν ἄνθρωπον...ἐνδυσάμενοι τὸν νέον].

²⁷ 2 Cor. 4:3–6. The words, “...God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness...” refers to the sovereign creative act of God in Gen. 1:3. There is a distinct parallel between the Divine work of physical creation and spiritual regeneration.

one. It is conversion, pointedly personal faith in the Lord Jesus and repentance from sin, which necessarily and infallibly expresses the work of God within the personality (Acts 13:12, 48; 14:1; 16:14, 27–34; 17:4, 11–12, 34; 18:8, 27; 19:18; Rom. 10:9–10, 13, 17; 1 Cor. 2:4–5; Eph. 2:4–10).

Faith and Regeneration: Salvation by Grace or by Works?

The idea that conversion—man’s repentance and faith—is prior to regeneration, and that regeneration is simply the Divine response to man’s faith necessarily brings conversion down to the psychological level.²⁸ Indeed, it brings all of salvation down to the psychological level. If man, of his own “free will” [the fanciful idea of the power of contrary choice] can harness his human trust and direct his will savingly to Christ by his own self-effort, then salvation is altogether by works [human ability] and not by grace. And is this not the predominant religious “feeling” of our time? Salvation by grace to many means that we did not deserve salvation, but God sent the Lord Jesus to die on the cross for sinners; thus grace remains a bare, passive and inactive principle until enlivened by man’s alleged free will, faith and religious activity.

IV THE UTILITARIAN NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

The Invitational System: An Alleged Answer for Every Issue

The invitational system has become so entrenched in—so essential and necessary to—modern evangelical Christianity that it is used for any and every condition within the religious experience. Sinners are emotionally urged to “come forward” to “the altar” for salvation. Those who have made their religious “decision” are invited to respond to the “altar call” for baptism and church membership. Those who want to join themselves to the church are invited to do so at the “altar call.” Those who want to “rededicate” their lives to God after falling into some kind of sin or have some kind of guilt or want to “make Jesus Lord of their lives” are invited to “come forward.” If anyone wants to give himself to God in Christian service such as the Gospel ministry or the mission field, he “goes forward” to settle the issue and make it known publicly. Folks who desire freedom from addiction, find meaning in life, are seeking to keep their families together or to find “a meaningful relation with God,” are all invited to respond to the “altar call” where, at times, someone will pray with them. No public confession of sin. In fact, there is often no confession of sin at all, either public or private. Sin often remains irrelevant, as does repentance. No reconciliation with an offended brother or sister. No restitution for wrongs. The act of “coming forward” by itself settles the issue in many congregations. There is something mysterious, effectual and final in responding to the invitation before a religious congregation. The individual and congregation both sense that something allegedly spiritual has occurred.

Acting Scripturally

What would and should the average church do without the invitational system? The answer: act scripturally, obediently and responsibly. Put all of the fervency and passion into the preaching of the gospel. Act publicly when necessary and privately when Scripture and

²⁸ See footnote 3 and the remarks of Harold J. Ockenga regarding the priority of faith to regeneration.

discretion demand it. Sadly, many may go to “the altar” and yet never deal with sin, relationships or with their own religious experience in a scriptural manner.

V THE SACRAMENTAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

In the following two sections, it is not our intention to be crass, insensitive or irreverent, but to be truthful and to put the invitational system, as an unscriptural practice, into such a practical light that its true, ritualistic and unscriptural nature may be seen.

Sacrament and Sacrosanct: The Altar

The term “sacrament” derives from the Latin *sacramentum*, meaning something sacred or holy.²⁹ Something which is sacrosanct [*sacer*, “sacred” and *sanctus*, “holy”] is a thing or place which is very holy or sacred. Some place which is sacrosanct is designated as very holy or sacred by virtue of its religious significance. The altar of the Romish and Episcopal Churches is at the front of the sanctuary, or holy place. This is the place where the officiating priest dispenses the sacraments—i.e., sacerdotally manipulates the bread and wine and these allegedly become in some mysterious way the body and blood of our Lord. Something mysterious and spiritual occurs at “the altar” through the power of the priest.

The Methodist frontier revivals, as noted in Part II of this study, hearkening back to their Methodist Episcopal roots, designated a certain piece of ground or area as “the altar” at their camp meetings. This place, by this designation and terminology, became, in principle, sacrosanct and the action of coming to “the altar” was, in principle, sacramental and thus spiritual. Those desiring to make a religious commitment were urged to “come to the altar” as a sign that they were subjects of great religious impressions—and to be counted as the immediate results of the evangelistic techniques used. Performing this religious act soon became synonymous with a saving act.

Evangelical Churches with Altars?

Today, in Evangelical Protestant, Fundamentalist and Baptist churches, the front of the building [“sanctuary”?] becomes “the altar” during the use of the invitational system. Having the right purpose by coming to a given location at the command of a religious leader, publicly assuming a given posture [“coming and kneeling at the old fashioned altar”] and performing a given ritual such as praying or repeating a set form of prayer and signing a card are equated with something of a transforming religious and spiritual nature and a spiritual commitment. How can this be? Is it really a spiritually-transforming matter of being public, of place, of purpose, of posture and of performance? Many sincerely believe it to be so.

This demonstrates how strong an unscriptural tradition may become, and how such unscriptural tradition may supplant the truth until the truth itself is looked upon as error! One must never underestimate the strength of religious tradition. The manner in which one is reared in religious tradition usually determines what one considers to be scriptural or unscriptural—whether in fact this distinction is true or not.

²⁹ The Greek term is μυστήριον [*mysterion*], the source of our word “mystery.” This implies something more than that which is material—something mysterious, holy, having supernatural power or significance.

Public, Place, Purpose, Posture and Performance?

Let us put the matter plainly and visualize its true character step by step: first, the matter of doing this publicly. There is something constraining about performing a religious act before a congregation of religious people.³⁰ One either must sincerely believe that he is doing his best to obey God in the purpose, place, posture and performance of such a public ritual, or he has the self-conscious burden of keeping up an outward appearance of what he has publicly professed in his religious excitement, even if he has no sense of an inward reality after the excitement has waned. What if one left the church building during the “altar call” to be alone with God to sort out his pressing issues, to weep, to cry out to God apart from human eyes (Matt. 6:5–6), or even to seek out an offended party to seek forgiveness or reconciliation—would this not be acceptable? To leave the building and congregation at such a critical time as the public invitation, informing no one of the purpose, would be considered by most folks as turning one’s back on God and even quenching the Spirit. Their ignorance would become their prejudice.

Second, the matter of place. The front of the building is the place where men meet with God—at “the altar.” The preacher has said so. The congregation believes it. The individual may believe it. The urgent command is to “come down to the front” if one is serious with God. In the minds of many, this place is sacrosanct. It is the one place where God may be found at that particular time. Not to respond in the intended way is allegedly to be out-of-step with both God and man.

Third, the matter of purpose. “Coming forward” is an act of the will in receiving Christ as one’s personal Savior,³¹ or the purpose may vary to include a whole array of religious concerns: baptism, church membership, “rededication,” a call to the ministry, finding fulfillment and meaning in life, deliverance from addiction, to pray for a given situation, etc. Responding to the “altar call” allegedly clinches the reason, whatever that reason may be, and makes the purpose spiritually effectual.³² And this is done before a congregation. A public step has been taken, a public commitment has been made which is decisive. Not to respond to the “public invitation” is considered tantamount to stubbornly refusing God and the work of his Spirit.

Fourth, the matter of posture: “Come down right now to the front and kneel down at the old fashioned altar!” What if one did not kneel, but simply stood? Would coming and not kneeling be acceptable? It would seem that the work was not yet wholly done and the person was not properly or sufficiently “broken down,” to use Finney’s terminology.

A revival will decline and cease, unless Christians are frequently re-converted. By this I mean, that Christians, in order to keep in the spirit of revival, commonly need to be frequently convicted, and humbled and broken down before God, and “re-converted.” This is something which many do not understand, when we talk about a Christian being re-converted. But the fact is, that in a revival, the Christian’s heart is liable to get crusted over, and lose its exquisite relish for Divine things; his unction

³⁰ See Part II and the quotations of Charles Finney and his defense of the “New Measures.”

³¹ See footnote 2.

³² “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 is not easily pulled out. Impression without expression can lead to depression.” Leighton Ford, quoted by Iain Murray, *Op. cit.*

and prevalence in prayer abate, and then he must be converted over again. It is impossible to keep him in such a state as not to do injury to the work, unless he passes through such a process every few days.³³

Must he not be talked to and reasoned and prayed with until he *kneels* at “the altar” before the congregation after the accepted fashion?

Fifth, the matter of performance: Repeating a prayer? Would not the Spirit of God lead the individual to cry out, as did the poor Publican, “God be merciful to me the sinner”? Was not this the announcement of Saul’s conversion to Ananias, “...behold he prayeth”? (Acts 9:11). Signing a card? This is as unscriptural as genuflecting, is it not?³⁴ This may be allegedly necessary for a record of the person and his or her purpose in coming to the front, but it has no spiritual efficacy. Yet tracts and other commitment cards often have a line for a signature so that one may seal his religious decision with his name in his own handwriting as a means of committing himself to Christ for any given religious reason.

Now, let us consider the reverse of these things in order to visualize the strength of such an unscriptural tradition. What if, for the sake of argument, the preacher or evangelist asked people, not to come to the front, but to go to the back of the building [“sanctuary”?] if truly serious about the state of their souls or any other serious religious issue, and not to kneel, but to sit on the floor and put their hands over their heads in a hostage–type of posture and remain there praying silently or softly humming a hymn? Would not the congregation think that the preacher was completely amiss or had lost his senses? Would not everyone immediately object to this alleged confusion? This would be something entirely new, different, innovative, pragmatic—and would it not seem inherently wrong to the congregation? It would be a radical break with a long–accepted practice which had assumed the place of being essential. People simply do not respond by going in the “wrong” direction away from the public view, to a different place than “the altar,” or assuming the “wrong” posture or not praying the proper prayer!

Does it really come down to the issues of being public, going to the proper place, having the stated purpose, demanding a certain posture and performing a certain ritual? Are not all these sacramental? Is the place where these unscriptural practices held truly sacrosanct? Not one of these—the public, place, purpose, posture or performance—can be substantiated from Scripture. Is not the whole system unscriptural, and thus deceptive and dangerous? Is not the whole system psychological and emotional, rather than spiritual? Who would not stand up against such a decidedly unscriptural practice? Only a few, sadly, and these have often been severely criticized as being uncooperative and non–evangelistic.

VI THE SACERDOTAL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

What is Sacerdotalism?

The term “sacerdotal” derives from the Latin *sacerdos*, a priest. “Sacerdotal” then refers to a religious system which functions through a priestly work. Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christianity, being gospel–centered, have nothing to do with either an altar

³³ Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, p. 281.

³⁴ Genuflecting is the motion of making the sign of the cross on one’s chest and head according to the Roman Catholic ritual.

at which the sacraments are dispensed or with an earthly priesthood. The priest stands between God and men. The very thought is repugnant to Evangelical Christians. But is this *really* so? Do not Evangelicals and Fundamentalists in reality have their own sacramentalism and sacerdotalism? We have already seen the contradictory and unscriptural nature of the invitational system, which is sacramental in principle. What of the sacerdotal nature of this system?³⁵

The preacher has preached a stirring message. Religious excitement is running high. The emotions of the congregation are deeply stirred. Both the preacher and the people anticipate the “altar call.” They both believe in the invitational system. It is allegedly and traditionally the right the thing to do at this critical time. Everything throughout the entire religious service has led up to—not the preaching—but to this time of spiritual crisis. Those who are used to such services and have accepted the unscriptural tradition of the invitational system are psychologically and emotionally geared to either act in response to the minister’s call to “come to the front” for any variety of reasons, or to earnestly pray for those who do.

Preacher or Priest?

What is the exact role of the minister who stands at the front—at “the altar”? Is his role not sacerdotal? He has just stood before this very congregation as a man of God, powerfully declaring Divine truth. All eyes are focused upon him and every ear is filled with his commanding voice. Emotions are have been brought to a high pitch. Does he not stand between the congregation and God, as did Aaron? Does he not, as it were, become the vocal mediator between God and sinners? He declares that if anyone wants or needs to come down to the front for any reason, that God will meet him or her there at “the altar.” He stands, as it were, as did the Old Testament prophet or New Testament Apostle. His command or urging in the emotionally-charged atmosphere becomes the message of God in the minds of the people, just as it was in the preaching. Not to respond, he declares, is to refuse God, to quench his Spirit, to reject his grace and offer of salvation—or whatever else may be of a serious spiritual issue. Both the minister and the people hold the voice of the minister and the voice of God to be one and same, do they not? Was not this true in the preaching? Was he not declaring God’s Word faithfully with the alleged unction of the Holy Spirit? Did the Spirit of God leave this man when the sermon ended? It cannot be! Surely he is filled with Spirit as he declares, commands and urges people to respond to the “altar call.” He stands at “the altar,” as the one man sinners must listen to and obey as he gives directions pertaining to salvation and spiritual commitment. *Vox sacerdotis, vox Dei*, “The voice of the priest is the voice of God.” The sacerdotal nature of the invitational system is unavoidable if

³⁵ This writer has often heard such commanding words as, “Come down to the front right now. Do not delay! Give your hand to me and your heart to Christ!” Is not this sacerdotal in the minds of those who would respond? Is not the preacher and his word of authority necessary for this transaction? It all depends on whether or not one believes in this unscriptural system.

one believes that there is any true spiritual reality to it at all.³⁶

Priest or Psychologist?

There is another approach to the role of the minister within the invitational system. Considering that this system is unscriptural, unspiritual, entirely pragmatic and merely psychological, is not the role of the minister more that of a psychologist than a priest? The man's presence and voice are commanding and demanding. He has just concluded a powerful, emotionally-filled sermon. The music or singing heightens the anticipation. The atmosphere is emotionally-charged. The minister is the focus of the congregation. He is the Man of God. His word is as determinative as when he was preaching. It is in his power and prerogative to woo, demand, urge or entreat and to direct. He has, at this point, tremendous power with and influence over those who are assembled before him if they, too, believe in the invitational system.

While one may not doubt the earnestness and utter sincerity of the preacher and the assembled people, for those who do not believe in this unscriptural, pragmatic system, he is viewed as stepping outside of Scripture and thus from any God-given authority. All at this point, after the preaching and exhorting men to flee to Christ (Acts 2:40), is simply psychological and emotional, whatever the motive might be and however "spiritual" it might appear. It then becomes a matter of a strong, demanding or wooing personality seeking to bend the will of others to obey his demands. It is a contest of wills, and that is all—a contest of wills enforced by an alleged ability on the part of the presiding minister to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart as he publicly asserts that some are dishonest, insincere or grieving the Holy Spirit if they fail to respond!³⁷ Those in attendance find this a spiritual crisis only in their own minds and according to their own religious traditions. While the minister is free to speak, demand, accuse, intimidate or cajole, those who refuse to respond in the accepted traditional manner must remain silent and be viewed as reticent, inconsistent, dishonest and unspiritual, or even as grieving the working of the Spirit of God in that meeting. But to those, who hold to scriptural truth and not to this unscriptural system, it is simply the use of psychological pressure and manipulation which, to some, may even

³⁶ The natural transition from the emotionally-charged sermon to the invitation is critical. The emotional pressure must be maintained. It is the high point—the most critical time—of the service. Why should anyone listen to or obey the commands of the preacher once he has finished his sermon? Because there is the belief that he remains a man of God with commanding spiritual authority, and the invitation becomes to those who believe in such, a spiritual imperative. That the invitational system is unscriptural and that this man has no biblical authority for what he then does or asks is of no consequence. The sermon and the invitational system have become one spiritual experience in the minds and emotions of the congregation.

³⁷ How does the minister know the person's heart? Does he have supernatural discernment? Or does he only *presume* to know the person's heart? He either possesses the Apostolic gift of Divine revelation and an inspired infallibility, or in his overly zealous, emotional state, he seeks to psychologically pressure his hearers to surrender to his will? We suspect it is the latter, and not the former. And does he not expect the congregation to agree with him in his ignorant, but bold assertions? This is certainly a sacerdotal approach.

seem at times to border on abuse as others are made to feel dishonest or guilty if they do not respond.³⁸

VII THE HARMFUL NATURE OF THE INVITATIONAL SYSTEM

Doctrine, Practice and an Unscriptural Methodology

Any unscriptural system or methodology assimilated into Biblical Christianity does much harm. It does doctrinal harm because it brings into Christianity an incoherence or contradiction which is noticeably unscriptural. It necessarily opens the way for more and more doctrinal error to accommodate the unscriptural practice. Both faith [belief] and practice [Christian experience] are affected. It does everlasting harm to those who are victims of such an unscriptural methodology. Spurious conversions are the bane of modern Evangelical Christianity. Further, it does great social harm as society witnesses to the sad state of Christianity when professing Christians apostatize or bring the name of our Lord and his churches into disrepute.³⁹ Four troublesome issues are considered in closing:

A Hybrid Approach to Evangelism

First, the scriptural truth of salvation becomes increasingly mixed with error. While it may be possible to retain the truth of God's free and sovereign grace in salvation from the Scriptures, the tendency of the invitational system is toward a Pelagian system which centers on plenary human ability. Free will and free grace are utterly opposed to each other. A hybrid approach which seeks to align free grace to the invitational system must inevitably detract from the pure gospel of the grace of God. The message and the methodology must coincide. Even some sovereign grace preachers, anxious for visible results, tend toward an "easy-believeism" when the invitational system enters into their evangelistic methodology. The results of such hybrid evangelism have often been bitterly disappointing and at times, tragic.

Spurious Conversions

Second, the invitational system promotes spurious conversions. By its very nature, it promotes the idea that spiritual results may be immediately and infallibly known. Those under conviction of sin or who make an open profession may be hurried through the process of defective evangelistic methodology and given an assurance, when only the curiosity may be aroused or the conscience may only be troubled concerning a specific sin or sins and the agent in such conviction is not the Spirit of God. Not all conviction of conscience, even though it may be great and grievous, is saving conviction which leads the sinner to repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus (Jn. 8:9; Acts 26:9). Saving faith is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8-10) as is saving repentance (Acts 11:18). True, saving faith is utter, unreserved

³⁸ This writer recalls times when the minister has become abusive to pressure individuals to respond. E.g., "Why, I came forward and received Christ as my personal Savior the first time I heard the gospel! You are dishonest if you do not come down at this very moment!" This is a mild example; some accusations have been plainly personal and abusive. Such an accusative and presumptive attitude has been all too common in the experience of this writer.

³⁹ Cf. Robert L. Dabney, *Op. cit.*, pp. 557-574, who dealt thoroughly with the dangers and destructive nature of the invitational system as seen in his day.

commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.⁴⁰ There is no question concerning the Lordship of Jesus Christ in salvation.⁴¹

The invitational system has the tendency to promote an “easy-believeism.” There is a great difference between biblical conversion and religious “decisionism.” Biblical conversion means the commencement of a transformed lifestyle. It is the immediate and inevitable manifestation of regenerating grace.⁴² In our day, there are many spurious conversions—people professing faith in Christ and some even added to our churches without the sufficient manifestation of saving grace.⁴³ The Scriptures describe and warn against such things as a “temporary faith” (Matt. 13:20–21; Mk. 4:16–17; Lk. 8:13), a faith which “gawks at the sights” or the truth, but soon vanishes (Jn. 2:23–25), a merely theoretical faith which is held for a time for the sake of convenience (Jn. 12:42; Acts 26:27–28) and a mere intellectual faith (1 Cor. 15:1–2). Professing believers are exhorted to self-examination (2 Cor. 13:5). But if the invitational system is valid, as its adherents claim, then all of those in the foregoing passages must be truly converted! Most of these had made some kind of “religious decision”! No one desires to promote spurious conversions. But if the invitational system is valid, then all those who respond must be considered as “saved.”

“First–Time Decisions” and Rededication

Third, once these profess faith—have made a “first–time decision”—they are often insulated from further evangelistic probings of mind and heart. They believe themselves to be “saved,” and if they do not shortly fall away (Matt. 13:20–21), continue in their empty profession of faith, although “they bring no fruit to perfection” (Lk. 8:7, 14). They are given an unscriptural assurance. If these fall into known sin or have doubts as to their alleged spiritual state, they are urged to once again “come to the front” at the “altar call” and “re-dedicate” themselves to God.⁴⁴ No one can dare to suggest that their “first–time decision” was defective. After all, they have had the momentary, isolated experience, time and place to prove they are “saved.” To question one’s salvation experience, derived through the

⁴⁰ The technical formula “to believe into” Christ [πίστευειν εἰς] as found in Jn. 3:16 and other key passages, means utter, unreserved commitment to our Lord. Cf. H. E. Dana, and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*. New York: Macmillan, 1957, p. 105.

⁴¹ Cf. Acts 2:36; Rom. 10:9–10; 2 Cor. 4:5. In the latter two passages the predicate use of the double accusative should read “Christ as Lord.” As God constituted the Lord Jesus Christ as “Lord” at his resurrection and ascension, no one can savingly come to him as anyone less. Coming under His Lordship is the beginning of a truly converted life.

⁴² See “Regeneration and Conversion,” pp. 10–11 of this paper.

⁴³ In *The Oberlin Evangelist*, in 1875, Finney wrote, “If I had my time over again, I would preach nothing but holiness. My converts are a disgrace to religion, and if I had my time over again, I would preach nothing but holiness.” Quoted by D. M. Lloyd–Jones, *Conversions: Psychological and Spiritual*. InterVarsity Press, 1974. p. 31. Finney’s Perfectionist leanings caused him to think that more sanctification would keep his “converts” justified, but holiness is foreign to graceless individuals.

⁴⁴ “Rededication” is another unscriptural ritual inherent in the invitational system. The only “rededication” known in Scripture was that of Zerubbabel’s re–laying the foundation of Solomon’s Temple (Ezra 3:10–13). This rite in practicality seems to correspond roughly to the Romish confessional in dealing with sin and making a new beginning, except there is no necessity of revealing or openly confessing sin. The simple act of a public “rededication” is usually sufficient.

invitational system, would discredit the entire system itself. These *must* be “saved,” whether they manifest the characteristics of a true believer or not. If they do continue living in sin, they are usually conveniently considered as “carnal Christians” who are “saved,” although their manner of life may prove to be overtly sinful. They can always “go forward” again and “rededicate” their lives or “make Jesus the Lord of their lives.” Thus, they can go from being “carnal Christians” to being “spiritual Christians.” Can these things be squared with Scripture?

The idea that Christians may be either “carnal” or “spiritual” is a dichotomy which is unscriptural. The Corinthians were termed “carnal” (1 Cor. 3:1–4) because they looked to their human heroes rather than our Lord. They were not termed “carnal” because they were living unconverted lives. The statement of the Apostle Paul in Romans 7:13 as being “carnal,” is literally “made of flesh”—his sense of infirmity in the light of God’s absolutely righteous and holy Law. Romans 8:1–11 is not a contrast between “carnal” and “spiritual” Christians, but rather between converted and unconverted persons. (It must be carefully noted that the entire section, Rom. 6:15–8:11, is concerned with the believer’s relation to the Law of God. There is no division at 8:1, and therefore Rom. 7:13–25 does not end on a note of defeat, but rather in 8:1–11 on a note of victory). Also inherent in this system is the idea that salvation is only from eternal punishment. There is often little or no thought given to the biblical reality that salvation is presently from the reigning power of sin (Rom. 6:14–18) and ultimately from eternal punishment. This is also a denial of the believer’s union with Christ and the necessity of a subsequently converted life (Rom. 6:2–6; 2 Cor. 5:14–17).

An Unscriptural Assurance

Finally, the invitational system promotes an unscriptural assurance of salvation. From the witness of the New Testament, we might affirm that a degree of assurance is normally the culmination of the conversion experience. It is inherently related to the very nature of saving faith itself. The believing sinner, in the context of God-given faith and repentance (Eph. 2:4–10; Phil. 1:29; Acts 11:18; 18:27), through the comprehension of Divine truth (Jn. 17:17; 1 Jn. 2:20, 27), the witness of the Spirit of God (Rom. 5:5; 8:11–16), and the realization of the dynamic of Divine grace in the life (Rom. 6:1–14, 17–18; 8:11–16), possesses a reasonable certainty that he is a new creation in Christ Jesus and rejoices in the same (2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 5:1–2). He is made aware of God’s unreserved love, which is constantly vouchsafed to him by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). This elementary assurance is:

- Inferential—one may infer from various Scriptures that he is saved—that he has put his faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior (Jn. 3:16; 5:24; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9–10, 13, 17).
- Evidential—one bears the marks of grace or exhibits the characteristics of a converted life (Rom. 5:5, 6:1–18; 8:11–16; Gal. 5:16–18, 22–23; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 12:14; 1 Jn. 2:3–5; 3:3–10, 14).
- Internal or immediate—the witness of the Holy Spirit to the reality of one’s spiritual

life (Rom. 5:5; 8:1–16; 2 Cor. 3:17–18).⁴⁵

Never in Scripture is one's salvation based on an isolated, momentary religious experience ["decision"], a time and a place. Yet this is the kind of unscriptural assurance which is fomented by the invitational system, and has become common in Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christianity.⁴⁶

CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed some major reasons why we do not use the invitational system. This system is not neutral and thus optional; it is plainly unscriptural, and thus harmful. Its history reveals its true psychological and pragmatic character, and how it puts both places and men into positions which are quite contrary to the Word of God by those who accept this unscriptural system. We see how it is in principle and practice both sacramental and sacerdotal in nature. In their anxious zeal for immediate, tangible results, ministers may become demanding and even abusive in their appeals. Its evil fruits are often seen in the lives of those who have been seduced by its errors. As a system, it gathers to itself a host of other unscriptural beliefs and practices.

This is a stern lesson in the ability of the human religious nature to accommodate error through tradition and replace the truth of Scripture with a pragmatic and manifestly unscriptural system. While we do not doubt the sincerity, earnestness, zeal and love for souls on the part of those who use this system, we must maintain as much as is humanly possible, by the grace of God, the principle of *sola scriptura*. The words of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah are noteworthy and ought to be carefully considered:

“To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, *it is* because *there is* no light in them” (Isa. 8:20).

“The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love *to have it* so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?” (Jer. 5:31).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adams, James E., *Decisional Regeneration*. Canton, GA: Free Grace Publications, 1983. 16 pp.

Dabney, Robert L., “An Exposition of 1 Corinthians 3:10–15,” *Discussions Theological and Evangelical*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967 reprint. Vol. I, pp. 551–574.

⁴⁵ A note of caution and explanation might be appropriate. The inferential aspect of assurance—the usual and only approach in most Evangelical circles—by itself might be presumption. The evidential aspect by itself might be mere legalism, and the internal or immediate by itself might tend toward a mysticism. But taken all together, these form a broadly-based biblical assurance of faith.

⁴⁶ When some do doubt, they are asked, “Were you not serious when you made your decision?!” Of course they were. Then they are told never to doubt. And if they do doubt, they are told with all authority, “You just point to the time, the place and the prayer, and call the devil a liar!” To doubt or to come to the conclusion that they were not “saved” when they made their religious “decision” would discredit the entire invitational system. Some, however, including this writer, were later converted long after they had made their “first-time decision.” These see the baneful effects and know the emptiness of this system as it is commonly practiced.

- Dana, H. E. and Mantey, Julius R., *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament*. New York: Macmillan, 1957, 368 pp.
- Dodd, Albert B., “The Origin of the Call for Decisions,” An 1847 article from the *Princeton Review*. Reprinted by *The Banner of Truth Magazine*, December, 1963, pp. 9–15.
- Downing, W. R., *Lectures on Calvinism and Arminianism*. Morgan Hill, CA: P.I.R.S. Publications. 2000, 514 pp.
- Elwell, Walter, A., Ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990. 1204 pp.
- Finney, Charles G., *Autobiography*. Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, n.d., 477 pp.
- _____, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*. New York: Fleming H. Revell, n.d. 445 pp.
- _____, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1971. 622 pp.
- Horton, Michael, *Premise*, Vol. II, Number 3, March 27, 1995.
- Justice, Laurence A., “Why We Don’t Use The Altar Call.” A tract published by Victory Baptist Church of Kansas City, Missouri, n.d.
- Lloyd-Jones, D. Martyn, *Conversions: Psychological and Spiritual*. InterVarsity Press, 1974.
- Murray, Iain, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*. London: Banner of Truth, 1966. 223 pp.
- _____, *The Invitation System*. London: Banner of Truth, 1967. 40 pp.
- _____, *Revival and Revivalism*. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994, 455 pp.
- Packer, James I., *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. 1970. 126 pp.
- Reisinger, Ernest C., *Today’s Evangelism: Its Message and Methods*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Craig Press, 1981. 157 pp.
- Spurgeon, Charles Haddon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, Vols. 1882 and 1884.
- _____, *The Soul Winner*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1963. 319 pp.
- Tyler, Clive, “Finney and the Disappearance of Revival,” *The Way Ahead*. Haywards Heath, Sussex: Carey Publications, 1975. pp. 56–68.
- Warfield, Benjamin B., *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield Vol. VIII: Perfectionism Part II*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981. 611 pp.