

Why We Need to Seriously Reconsider the Idea Behind the Altar Call

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We are so desperate to have people make a decision that we rarely, if ever, tell them about the costs associated with making that decision.

Asking people to *make a decision* to have their sins forgiven, but spending little time calling them to *become disciples*, is like telling someone half a story, while leaving them to figure out the rest on their own.

Our preoccupation with getting people to make a decision is not only contrary to the biblical call to make disciples, it also short-circuits the message of the Gospel and short-changes the recipient in the process.

We are so desperate to have people make a decision that we rarely, if ever, tell them about the costs associated with making that decision. And, the effects of this lopsided emphasis are obvious, with the ultimate indication being a lack of true commitment.

I Didn't Sign Up for This

As soon as people begin to experience any degree of adversity because of their decision—adversity they were probably never warned about—they begin to second guess their decision and drift away.

Why? **Because they were never told the whole story.** They were only provided with a very small portion of the story—the part of having their sins forgiven—and were never given the part...

- a. about counting the costs;
- b. about the Kingdom of God;
- c. about devoting one's life completely to Jesus;
- d. about the associated risks involved;
- e. about the demands the Gospel will call upon all of us to make.

If we only tell people one-half of the story, we will end up with people who only want that half and little more.

They will want the sins forgiven part, the get-out-of-hell part, and the Jesus-will-give-me-the-life-I've-always-wanted part, but have less excitement for the real Kingdom of God type stuff that demands total allegiance, dedication and a life-long commitment.

The Altar Call in a Nutshell

Please allow me to paint a picture of what a typical Sunday morning altar call scene looks like—

The pastor preaches a classic get-your-sins-forgiven message, followed up with a call for salvation—with the primary emphasis on personal forgiveness and the escape from hell. Then they tell everyone

to bow their heads, close their eyes, (we never want to make people feel uncomfortable or awkward), raise a hand, say a 30-second prayer and BAM—they're in. After the service ends, they invite them to the side of the platform to speak with a counselor, receive a Bible, Christian literature, and away they go. Good luck!

And that's about it.

You're in.

All is done.

Sit back, relax and enjoy the ride.

As people who claim to be of the Book, the typical call to action outlined above must be similar to what Jesus used, right? Certainly there must be some degree of biblical precedent from which we derived this style of evangelism?

Not really.

There are many problems with this rather unbiblical approach to making converts, the first being that we were never called to make converts—but disciples.

Furthermore, we need to realize that we've never been completely honest with people during the easy-call, raise-a-hand and repeat-after-me ritual we've been so conditioned to use during the altar call.

If people begin their Christian journey with the promise that they will never be made to feel uncomfortable in any way, as the close-your-eyes, no-one-look-around, quickly raise your hand approach communicates, the moment they begin to realize this isn't true, they'll quickly begin to question their decision, realize they'd been had and walk away feeling like they've failed—which isn't true at all.

Why? Because they never failed—we did.

In our attempt to get as many people as we can to make a decision, we've ended up creating a sugar-coated Jesus in order to make Him as palatable as possible.

Similar to when my parents would crush a baby Aspirin in a spoon of strawberry jam so I could swallow it more easily as a kid, we have diluted (thanks [Benjamin L. Corey](#)) a Gospel that demands total allegiance, with an easy-to-swallow, half-baked evangelical script that not only doesn't resemble the call to discipleship Jesus demonstrated in the Gospel accounts, but short-circuits the message entirely.

Follow Me

"Follow me" means there will be costs involved.

"Follow me" isn't a part-time job that only requires us to work on Sunday mornings for an hour and a half, but a full-time vocation that requires a lifetime commitment in service to others.

"Follow me" means whatever direction I was traveling in before will be the exact opposite direction that I will travel in going forward.

In essence, everything will be different.

So, when we sugar-coat the Gospel and dilute it with our Westernized, easy-to-swallow, no commitment required, self-help message we've grown accustomed to offering, sometimes throwing in the reward of heaven and escape from hell for good measure, we shouldn't be surprised when we end up with churches filled with consumers, who look out for their own interests, rather than disciples, who occupy themselves with service to and for others.

As Martin Luther once said,

A religion that gives nothing, costs nothing, and suffers nothing, is worth nothing.

And, if this is true, why do we tell people following Jesus will cost them so little?

Setting the Mood

We set the mood from the very beginning by telling people during the altar call that we promise never to make them feel uncomfortable. How did we ever arrive at such a silly idea?

Tell that to the first disciples—most of whom were decapitated—only because they followed Jesus.

Tell that to Paul who suffered greatly—being beaten, malnourished and ship-wrecked many times—only because he followed Jesus.

Tell that to the thousands of Jesus-followers ever since who have been severely persecuted and often killed—only because they followed Jesus.

When we cheapen, sugar-coat and dilute the call to follow Jesus by offering people an easy ride to heaven, we not only dishonor those who have gone before us, but we dishonor Jesus himself and the Kingdom He gave His life to bring.

Counting Converts and Making Disciples

Asking people to make a commitment to follow Jesus is definitely, without question, an important part of the process. Every journey begins with one step, and this first step is critical.

However, we need to stop this unhealthy and unbiblical preoccupation with counting converts and seek to implement Jesus' own directive to make disciples. To call people to a lifetime commitment with Jesus and the Kingdom He inaugurated. And, to be honest with everyone from the beginning that this will cost us everything.

In the process, however, we should also tell people that the costs will never outweigh the dividends of a restored relationship with God and the absolute joy of working with God by participating in His Kingdom dream—a dream of a world consumed by love, justice and peace.

This is the message of Jesus.

This is our mandate and commission.

Not to save souls from hell, but to save people for God. To invite them to embrace Jesus and His Kingdom. To dedicate their entire lives to Him and to join with others, at home and around the world, in working toward His Kingdom dream.

And, when you inhabit God's dream for the world, you can expect various forms of opposition. The counter-cultural dynamic built into the Kingdom of God runs across the grain of the kingdoms of this world and opposition should be anticipated. We should never go looking for it, but it will come.

We Get Out What We Put In

When it comes to our message, we get out of it what we put into it.

If we only want people to make a decision so we can count converts, we've already failed. Jesus isn't something you add to your life—he demands your whole life. A weak invitation to follow Jesus will create weak followers.

Another concern is that people will feel secure in their decision because we've told them that all they had to do is "repeat this prayer after me and you're in," when we know the call to follow Jesus is far more significant than repeating a 30 second prayer.

The thing is, Jesus never asked anyone to "say this prayer after me." Jesus never told the crowds to "bow their heads and close their eyes" so no one would be embarrassed.

Jesus never promised anyone a rose garden. In fact, he told us to expect the opposite. We would suffer persecution, imprisonment, torture, even death. And to promise people anything else is to set them up for failure.

Re-capturing Jesus' Discipleship Message

Maybe we need to re-capture Jesus' discipleship message if we truly desire people to follow him along the path of discipleship.

Maybe we need to begin creating a gospel culture of discipleship (thanks, [Scot McKnight](#)) that sets people up for a lifetime of loving devotion to Christ and his Church, rather than a short-lived, saved-from-our-sins, get-out-of-hell-free-card, system of salvation.

Maybe we all need to re-consider the cost.