Coming Forward at Altar Calls – Why or Why not?

written by Randy Starkey | 09/04/2014

Occasionally I have been asked when I pastored at Victory Church why I didn't normally have people come forward at our altar calls. I am not against that, especially at certain times, but there are several reasons I don't normally do that.

First, it is interesting to note that the practice of coming forward for altar calls did not develop until the 1800's. Around 1830 Charles Finney was the first preacher to use it regularly. For the first 1800 years of the church this was not the method used. And I think with good reason. Which takes me to the next point…

The Scriptures are clear in **Ephesians 2.8-9** that salvation is not the result of any work. ***"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— not by works, so that no one can boast."*** Salvation is a work of grace in the human heart, where conviction of sin and the need for a Savior happens through the preaching of the Word and the work of the Holy Spirit, inside a person's heart, and then that person can respond by faith and open their heart to Christ to experience His saving power. **There is absolutely no "works" involved!** That means baptism doesn't save us, confirmation or communion doesn't save us, church membership doesn't save us, **and neither does coming forward in response to an altar call save us!** The key thing we have to see here is no works contribute to our salvation. It is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit inside of us as a result of our heart's response to God! Works and actions of faith should certainly follow the opening of our hearts to Christ, and things like water baptism are the best way to publicly proclaim we are a Christian, but they should **NEVER** be encouraged as the **WAY** of salvation!

Coming forward in an altar call on the day you are saved does not make you **MORE** of Christian, or a **BETTER** Christian! It can actually at times be a distraction to what God is doing in someone's heart! If you responded to Christ in your heart, repented of your sin and prayed to receive Him as Savior and Lord, you are a Christian, period. (Yes, now go tell someone that you prayed, get baptized, etc.! That's important after you have received Jesus!)

I think sometimes we really don't realize what we are doing in this area. I think sometimes the coming forward of people at an altar call is inadvertently more for US than for THEM! WE want to visually see people get saved. We want the effect of the "show"! We want another notch in our gospel six-gun. **And we don't think about what's going on inside the PEOPLE God is dealing with!** Many people after the Word is preached and the Spirit is working in their hearts, they are really ready to receive Christ, but then we ask them to do something that **GOD HIMSELF doesn't ask them to do!** We ask them to add "works" to it and to step out and come forward in order just to be able to pray and be saved! For some people this can be intimidating, thinking they are being stared at, fearful, and it actually takes their mind and heart OFF of the very thing we want to be happening in their hearts! **Why are we asking people to do something even God doesn't ask them to do? Let's give them the chance to open their hearts and focus on and RECEIVE Jesus through prayer FIRST!** (see **John 1.12**)

One day I was praying and thinking about this, and God spoke to my heart ***"Randy, what if by you insisting people come forward to pray for salvation, you are actually KEEPING people from getting saved!"*** Whoa! That hit me hard! It was at that point that I started to make it simple for people to pray the prayer of salvation right in their seat, them and God, them responding to the work of the Spirit in their hearts right at that moment, just them and God together, right there. I think that is the most respectful treatment of a person trying to process what salvation is and what God is doing in their life, without adding all kinds of works and intimidating actions on them that God Himself doesn't add! I usually do ask people to raise their hands as a sign of their faith and wanting to accept Christ, but to be honest, even that is not necessary! (Yeah, we even like to count hands too much sometimes I think) **What's necessary, and it's all that's necessary, is that one is opening their heart to Christ!** That can be done easily by leading people in a simple heartfelt prayer. **They don't even have to say it out loud if they are praying it sincerely in their heart!** When I personally got saved, I prayed a prayer at the end of a salvation tract, but I was at my desk at work so **I did NOT pray it out loud**, but… Whoa! **I knew something had happened!** Not only was I saved, but I actually got set free from some demonic influence at that very moment of my prayer sitting at my desk in my engineering office! **Isn't God awesome!**

Now, as I said, works and actions need to follow.

So here's also another aspect of this whole dynamic of people getting saved. No matteer how people prayed for salvation, whether they came forward, prayed out loud, prayed silently in their seat, or whatever, the only true test of salvation is **IF THEIR LIFE CHANGES! True salvation is always followed by fruit in one's life!** I have seen people come forward and bawl and squall and then 3 weeks later they are gone. It was all emotion. Then I have seen people pray a quiet prayer and their whole life changed! **The main thing is really what goes on in people's hearts! And that is not the result of any works! If a true work of salvation has happened, the works will follow!** They will declare they are following Christ, get baptized, etc. That happened with me, and it will for anyone who truly surrenders to Christ! **So, let's not make it hard for people to get saved! Let's not add works to what the Bible declares is a work of grace!**

SIDEBAR: 2 caveats worthy of being addressed here.

First, what about Billy Graham and his famous altar calls to "Just As I Am" in huge stadiums? As I said at the top of this blog post, I am not against people coming forward in certain circumstances. In fact, in the venue that Billy Graham operated in, **I think it was the best thing!** My wife was saved at a Billy Graham Crusade! They only get one shot at the people who come to their crusades, and if they are going to generate any follow-up for new believers, they need to gather their information, plus they give them spiritual growth booklets. So the coming forward of people in a Billy Graham Crusade has as many practical reasons as it does spiritual. It is also easier I think for people to come forward in a stadium situation as it is much larger, many people are coming at once making it less intimidating (in a church it is often much more up close and people are much more self-conscious), and people understand it's the way they connect with a Billy Graham counselor who will pray with them. Are there some who maybe don't come because it's intimidating to get out of their seat and go down there? I'm sure there are some, but in the overall picture I think Billy Graham found the best way to connect with people in that venue at his crusades. It's important to note he also never attached the act of coming forward to some kind of "better" salvation by doing it that way. He always just emphasized Jesus.

Another aspect here, also related to churches and how they can be a bit different, is the Billy Graham counselors would often be ministering to people for 30-45 minutes. As I said, they only get one shot at it. In churches, especially with multiple services, if you want to make room and time each week to reach people, the practical implications of people coming forward to pray a salvation prayer does not work well either.

Second, I will never criticize a church who brings people forward for altar calls, if they feel **God has led them to do that!** I am not to judge another church and how they do things! **I am only responsible for where I serve!** Having said that, a church who **DOES** bring people forward for altar calls should never criticize a church who **DOESN'T**, because if they do, **they are making the "coming forward" aspect of a salvation prayer, tantamount to making that person's salvation "better"!** Which is back to salvation by some kind of works, (not to mention spiritual pride) which is the whole point of this blog post. Salvation is by grace, through a faith response in a person's heart, and that can happen in oh so many ways! **Like it did with me! At my desk at work!** Here's a great saying. *"There is only one way to God, and that is through Christ, but there are as many ways to Christ as there are people!"* **Let's not lock God into any one method!**