

that successful counseling must conclude with an individual's absolute assurance of salvation. Counselors are often instructed to assure a person that his salvation is certain because he has repeated a prayer, signed a card, or said "yes" to all the right questions.

An illustration of Decisional Regeneration is when the evangelist or so-called "soul winner" after a message pleads with people to "come forward" hoping to be able to lead them through a series of questions and a prescribed prayer. This being done, those standing at the front are now pronounced "saved" and "born again." This type of evangelism is based upon this *mechanical element* of walking an aisle or repeating a prayer that results in a sinner being assured of his salvation. Regeneration has thereby been *reduced to a procedure which man performs whenever he so desires*.

How differently did our Lord deal with sinners. He didn't have any instant salvation process. He didn't speak to people with a stereotyped presentation. He dealt with every individual on a personal basis. Never in the New Testament do we find Christ dealing with any two persons in the same manner. Consider how differently He dealt with Nicodemus in John 3, and then with the woman at the well in John 4.

This method of Decisional Regeneration produces statistics that would encourage any Christian—*until* he follows up the supposed "converts." In one heartbreaking experience, out of 40 of these "decisional converts" who were contacted, only one person was found who actually appeared to be a Christian. One lady may have been reached, but what were the effects of the encounter on the other 39? Some of them may believe their eternal destinies were determined by their decision, which is an eternally fatal confidence if no change was wrought in their heart and life. The others may have concluded that they had experienced all that Christianity has to offer. Failing to experience any promised change in themselves, they've become convinced that Christianity is a fake, and those who hold it are either self-deluded fanatics or miserable hypocrites.

Robert Dabney, one of the great theologians of the 19th century, made some very

penetrating observations about the disillusionment of people that had been pressured into a decision. He said,

Some of these individuals feel that a cruel trick has been played upon their inexperience by the ministers in thus thrusting them, in the hour of their confusion, into false positions, whose duties they do not and cannot perform, and into sacred professions which they have been compelled shamefully to repudiate. Their self-respect is therefore galled to the quick, and pride is indignant at the humiliating exposure. No wonder they look on religion and its advocates henceforward with suspicion and anger.

Often their feelings do not stop here. They are conscious that they were thoroughly in earnest in their religious anxieties and resolves at the time, and that they felt strange and profound exercises. Yet bitter and mortifying experience has taught them that their new birth and experimental religion was a delusion. How natural for them to conclude that those of all others are delusions, too. They say, "The only difference between myself and these earnest Christians is that they have not yet detected the cheat as I have. They are now not a whit more convinced of their sincerity and of the reality of their exercises than I once was of mine. Yet I know there was no change in my soul; I do not believe that there is in theirs."

Such is the fatal process of thought through which thousands have passed; until the country is sprinkled all over with infidels, who have been made such by their own experience of spurious religious excitements. They may keep their hostility to themselves for the most part, because Christianity now "walks in her silver slippers"; but they are nonetheless steeled against all saving impressions of the truth.

Dabney penned these words 100 years ago, long before today's "mass evangelism" and highly organized campaigns. If 100 years ago the country was "sprinkled all over with infidels, who had been made such by their own experience of spurious religious excitements," what must the situation be today? This is a serious question for every Christian. Who wants to have on their conscience before God the fact that they have led people (even sincerely) into *a false hope*? Many of these false converts who have been pronounced "saved" will no doubt cling to their "salvation decision" all the way to the judgment, only to

hear those awful words from Christ, "Depart from me, I never knew you" (*Math 7:23*).

One may read thousands of pages of the history of the Christian Church without finding a single reference to the "old-fashioned altar call" before the 1800's. Most Christians are surprised to learn that history before the time of Charles G. Finney (*1792-1875*) knows nothing of this type of "invitation." The practice of urging men and women to make a physical movement at the conclusion of a service was introduced by Mr. Finney in the second decade of the 19th century.

Dr. Albert Dod, a professor of theology at Princeton Seminary at the time of Mr. Finney's ministry, pointed out the newness of the practice and showed that this method was without historical precedent. In his review of Finney's *Lectures on Revival*, Professor Dod stated that one will search the volumes of Church history in vain for a single example of this practice before the 1820's. Instead, history tells us that whenever the gospel was preached men were invited *to Christ*—not to decide at the end of a sermon whether or not to perform some physical action.

The Apostle Paul, the great evangelist, never heard of an altar call, yet today some consider the altar call to be a necessary mark of an evangelical church. In fact, churches which do not practice it are often accused of having no concern for the lost. Neither Paul nor Peter ever climaxed their preaching by pressuring their hearers to "make a decision" or "walk an aisle." The altar call is not only in conflict with Church history, but Scriptural history as well.

One may ask, "How did preachers of the gospel for the previous 1800 years invite men to Christ without the use of the altar call?" They did so even as the apostles. Their messages were filled with invitations for all men everywhere to come *by faith* to the Lord Jesus Christ. He's not down at the front; He's on His throne in glory!

When Peter preached at Pentecost, his hearers "were pricked in their heart, and said...Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (*Acts 2:36-37*). This response to the apostle's sermon was the result of the work of the Spirit of God, not Peter's clever appeals, repeated

pleadings, or psychological pressure. And three thousand souls were truly converted to Christ.

Charles Spurgeon invited men to come to Christ, not to an altar. He said as he preached,

Before you leave this place breathe an earnest prayer to God, saying, "God be merciful to me a sinner. Lord, I need to be saved. Save me. I call upon Thy name...Lord, I am guilty, I deserve Thy wrath. Lord, I cannot save myself. Lord, I would have a new heart and a right spirit, but what can I do? Lord, I can do nothing; come and work in me to do of Thy good pleasure.

*Thou alone hast power, I know,
To save a wretch like me;
To whom, or whither should I go,
If I should run from Thee?*

But I now do from my very soul call upon Thy name. Trembling, yet believing, I cast myself wholly upon Thee, O Lord. I trust the blood and righteousness of Thy dear Son...Lord, save me tonight, for Jesus' sake." Go home alone trusting in Jesus. You say, "I would 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 at once, before you stir an inch!

Today the altar call has become the climax and culmination of the entire meeting. Many stanzas of a hymn are usually sung, during which time all kinds of appeals are made to the sinner to walk the aisle, and the clear impression is given to the sinner that his eternal destiny hangs on the movement of his feet.

"*Just As I Am*," the precious hymn perhaps most frequently sung for the altar call, was written in 1836 by Charlotte Elliott:

*Just as I am, without one plea,
But that Thy blood was shed for me,
And that Thou bid'st me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*

The phrase, "O Lamb of God, I come, I come," has been widely used to encourage people to "come" down the aisle. But it is significant that Miss Elliott wrote that hymn for the *infirm* and that it first appeared in a hymnal prepared especially for *invalids*. To Miss Elliott, coming to Christ was not walking an aisle.

While most who use the altar call realize that coming to Christ is not synonymous with coming down to the front, they *do* give the impression to sinners that the first step in coming to Christ is walking the aisle. I grew up in Christian circles unaware that evangelical Christianity existed without the altar call. In many services during this time my mind was centered on the glorious person of Christ and His suffering on the cross only to find the whole focus of the worship service suddenly changed at the conclusion from seeing the glory of Christ to walking an aisle. Many others have spoken of the same experience—that the altar call and the clever appeals at the conclusion of meetings, and wondering how many will respond, have distracted them from seeking Christ and from worshipping God in spirit and truth.

Do you remember how the crowds physically followed our Lord until He began to preach some unpopular truths? Then the crowds turned back (*John 6:66*). Why? Had they not come to Jesus with their feet? Yes, but this is not the coming to Him that is necessary for salvation. People need to be reminded today that coming to Christ is not walking an aisle, but is casting oneself on Christ for life or death—“Lord, save me, or I perish!” True converts will never leave! (*vv 67-69*).

One of the greatest American theologians, Charles Hodge (*1797-1878*), points out the danger of this altar-call teaching:

No more soul-destroying doctrine could well be devised than the doctrine that sinners can regenerate themselves, and repent and believe just when they please...As it is a truth both of Scripture and of experience that the unrenewed man can do nothing of himself to secure his salvation, it is essential that he should be brought to a practical conviction of that truth. When thus convicted, and not before, he seeks help from the only source whence it can be obtained.

The apostles taught that God saves the elect through the foolishness of preaching (*1 Cor 1:18,21*). All new methods devised by man can only fall far short of this ordained means of converting the sinner. The Church must forsake its carnal inventions and once again be guided by the teaching of Scripture if it is to expect God to bless its efforts and multiply the

harvest. The Scriptural means of evangelizing is to “preach Christ crucified” (*1 Cor 1:23-24*).

Decisional Regeneration does not bring men to Christ any more than Baptismal Regeneration does. It is 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 power and will of God can men be born again (*John 1:13; Rom 9:16; James 1:18*); the Spirit of God moves in creative power as it pleases Him—“The wind bloweth where it pleaseth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit” (*John 3:8*). True repentance and saving faith come as *the result* of the new birth and are never *the cause* of this great change. Repentance and faith are the acts of those who have been born again, not of those who are “dead in sin.”

There are always certain doctrinal pre-suppositions which underlie the methods used in evangelism. These altar-call methods are popular today because of *the prevailing ignorance of man’s spiritual condition before God*.

The grand old Scottish theologian Thomas Boston (*1676-1732*) very vividly illustrated man’s spiritual condition by comparing the unconverted person to a man in a pit. He can only get out of the pit in one of two ways: he may through much toil and difficulty scale the sides of the pit to the top, which is the way of works; or, he may grab hold of the rope of grace let down by Christ and be pulled out of his misery. Yes, he may decide to pull himself up by the rope of the gospel, “But, alas! the unconverted man is dead in the pit, and cannot help himself either of these two ways.”

Man is spiritually “*dead* in trespasses and sins” (*Eph 2:1,5*), has a heart that is “*deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked*” (*Jer 17:9*), and “*loves darkness rather than light*” (*John 3:19*). “There is *none that understandeth*, there is *none that seeketh after God*...there is *none that doeth good*, no, not one” (*Rom 3:10-12*). “The carnal mind is *enmity against God*...they that are in the flesh *cannot please God*” (*Rom 8:7-8*). “The natural man *receiveth not* the things of the Spirit of God: for they are *foolishness* unto

him: neither *can* he know them, because they are *spiritually discerned*” (*1 Cor 2:14*).

No wonder Scripture teaches that faith is the *gift* of God! (*Eph 2:8-9; Phil 1:29*). It must be! as well as repentance! (*2 Tim 2:25-26*). Christ taught in no uncertain terms the truth of man’s natural condition. He pictured it as one of complete and utter helplessness: “No man *can* come to me, except the Father which hath sent me *draw* him...No man *can* come unto me, except it were *given* unto him of my Father” (*John 6:44,65*).

This state of death and bondage to sin cannot be changed by making a decision or walking an aisle. Only the Spirit of God can create a new man in Christ Jesus. God in His grace gives men new hearts. Only then do they willingly repent and truly receive the Lord Jesus Christ. Otherwise, they have nothing but an *empty* religious profession—and our churches are filled with them. Jesus said, “As the Father raiseth up the dead, and quickeneth them; even so the Son *quickeneth whom he will*” (*John 5:21*).

The greatness of God’s mercy, grace and power in saving sinners can only be seen in the light of man’s desperate condition. What a glorious doctrine the new birth is to a helpless sinner! “The things that are impossible with men are possible with God!” (*Luke 18:27*). Let us return to Biblical preaching and apostolic methods as seen throughout the book of Acts, that our evangelizing might be to the praise, honor and glory of God.■

—Adapted from the writings of James White

*How helpless guilty nature lies, unconscious of its load!
The heart, unchanged can never rise, to happiness and God.
The will perverse, the passions blind, in paths of ruin stray;
Reason, debased, can never find, the safe, the narrow way.
Can aught, beneath a power divine, the stubborn will subdue?
Tis Thine, almighty Saviour, Thine, to form the heart anew.
O change these wretched hearts of ours, and give them life divine!
Then shall our passions and our powers, Almighty Lord, be Thine!*

—Isaac Watts

THE ALTAR CALL

DECISIONAL REGENERATION

“Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”—John 3:3

Regeneration, or the new birth, is a sovereign work of the Spirit of God. It is not the work of man, nor is it in his hands; it is totally in the hands of God. The new birth is a change wrought in us, not an act performed by us. Those who truly receive Christ are “born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (*John 1:12-13*).

The history of the Christian Church has seen many errors concerning the new birth. These teachings depart from Scripture by saying that man has the ability to regenerate himself. The Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican, the Lutheran, and many others have all been corrupted at different times and to different degrees by the doctrine known as **Baptismal Regeneration**. Because of this false concept of man and the new birth, these churches have embraced false practices.

In the 19th century few controversies were so heated as the one over Baptismal Regeneration. Charles Spurgeon (*1834-1892*), the most prolific preacher of that century, had printed in 1864 more copies of his sermon denouncing Baptismal Regeneration than of any other sermon. Baptismal Regeneration teaches that the new birth is conveyed by the waters of baptism. The sacrament is performed by man and is in his control.

The Church today, though, has a more subtle falsehood to deal with—**Decisional Regeneration**. Decisional Regeneration differs from Baptismal Regeneration only in the fact that it attaches the certainty of the new birth to a different act. This doctrine, just as Baptismal Regeneration, sees the new birth as the result of a mechanical process that can be performed by man.

There are numerous counseling courses and “soul-winning conferences” which teach