

The Use of Altar Calls

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I'm going to take this afternoon and share with you something of, we like to use the phrase what we have learned so far because you never quit, you never quit understanding, you never quit reforming, you never quit repenting, you never quit learning. Hopefully, the Lord does bring us to places where we are in a healthy and good place so that the corrections are more minor. And this whole area of the invitation system, or I'm going to call it the use of altar calls, is an area that we so wrestled with and struggled with here for some many years and to be honest I think we did it very, very wrong and so much I want to share with you, this is from our own mistakes. I'm not giving you some sort of absolutes, some sort of final word but some things that may sharpen and encourage you in this journey.

Let me just get on with it: the use of altar calls, First of all, let me give you just a brief definition of what I mean and by an altar call or the invitation system, I mean the implying or the saying outright that coming to the front is a part of one's salvation. Very simply, that any type of system at the end of preaching that either implies or states outright that that helps one get converted that's what I want to talk about.

Now, I call this "Old Time Religion" or "New Fad." When you consider the origin of the modern invitation system, all roads seem to lead to Charles Finney. He began his ministry in the 1830's in the Northeast. Charles Finney, according to Ian Murray, and his helpful booklet "The Invitation System" was the first to use a call to the front at the end of the service. I think for Finney, he was calling men to a mourner's bench or maybe to an inquiry room but he was the first in a very popular way to use this type of system at the end of preaching. Because Finney was the first and the most popular, he is considered the pioneer of modern evangelistic methods and that troubles me in itself. How can evangelistic methods be modern when the Bible is 2,000 years old? Finney called these new methods "The New Measures," and it certainly was new because for 1,600 years before Finney, there seems to be no organized system or method of calling people to come forward at the close of preaching. Now, other men of the past were greatly used of God in the conversion of souls. I always go to Wesley and Whitefield and Jonathon Edwards. They preached about 100 years before Charles Finney yet never employed such systems or methods. Charles Spurgeon, the famed pastor of the Metropolitan Tabernacle in London was a contemporary of Finney and he rejected any notion of a specific method to help men "get saved," at the close of a service.

In the middle of the 19th century, Spurgeon saw these new measures becoming very popular. He saw that they were rapidly accepted by the churches. And in concern for maintaining a pure gospel, he warned and I quote, "Sometimes shut up that inquiry room. I have my fears that if that institution be used in permanence and if you should ever see a notion that it's fashioning itself, that there is something to be gotten in a private room that is not to be had at once in the assembly we may blow at that notion at once." Now, that is an interesting and prophetic statement. Spurgeon said in affect, that if you are using a come to the front system, at least change it because people will tend to think that that is a part of their salvation. That that movement or that system is an essential part of true evangelism or bringing people to Christ. So his point was if you see that men are beginning to think that something you planned to do at the close of a service is helpful to get a man to Christ, then get rid of it at once. Spurgeon said that.

Well, obviously Finney's new measures which at their core at least implied that one comes to the front to be saved and also Finney would add that you could confirm if someone was truly converted in just a few moments at the end of a service at the inquiry room, or at the mourner's bench. This system, as such, became as Spurgeon feared an essential part of gospel preaching. Fred Zaspel has written a helpful article on the modern invitation system. He asserts that the practice of Finney was used to force decisions or just to get results. Zaspel quotes Finney from Finney's own lectures on revival. Listen to what he says Finney would say, "Preach to him and at the moment he thinks he is willing to do anything, bring him to the test. Call on him to do one thing, to make one step that shall identify him with the people of God. If you say to him, 'There is the ancient seat. Come out and avow your determination to be on the Lord's side,' and if he is not willing to do a small thing as that, then he is not willing to do anything for Christ." So in that quote, Zaspel is pointing out that Finney was equating this moving forward, this changing of geographical places with their coming to Christ and I think that is terribly dangerous.

Well, many of the most noted evangelists if not practically all of the most noted evangelists and preachers of the last 150 or so years, more or less follow the pattern developed by Charles Finney. But one might ask, if there is no system to call people to the front, no invitation system, before Finney's New Measures came along, 150-180 years ago, then what did people do? Or as I have been asked before, if you don't call people to the front, how are they going to get saved? I have heard that so many times. Well, let's consider what Whitefield and Wesley did during the Great Awakening of the 18th century. Arnold Dallimore has written an excellent two volume biography of George Whitefield and Dallimore notes that Whitefield refused to count or consider one genuinely converted at the end of a service or at the end of a series of meetings. He refused to. Dallimore points out that it was Whitefield's practice of returning after several weeks or a few months to the place he previously preached to see if there was any lasting fruit. Ian Murray in his excellent book on John Wesley and his associates shows that Wesley followed a somewhat similar principle. Wesley would require a person to be mentored for about three months before he would discern or conclude that that one was genuine and allow him into his Methodist society.

Now, Whitefield I am convinced was the leader of this revival called the Great Awakening and Whitefield often preached to as many as 20,000 people or so and John Wesley was noted to do the same. History records that much of the fruit of this awakening was genuine and long lasting. I would like to point out that I have a tendency and I bet we all do, to over romanticize the past. I want you to know that during the Great Awakening in the middle part of the 18th century, they had a lot of false fire. They had a lot of false converts. They had a lot of counterfeiting but there was a great amount of lasting fruit. I liked what I saw on a DVD recently on John Wesley. It said that John Wesley was such a giving man that at the end of his life he only had a couple of dollars, oh and he left behind the Methodist Church.

So from history, we seem to see and it seems quite obvious that these men had great fruit that lasted so much so that a whole denomination was started out of it. I wish they had not been quite so Arminian but yet the fruit seemed to be valid and solid. So history bears out that the great evangelistic revivals of the 18th century though they used no invitation system or altar call at all and they required weeks of good evidence before they considered a person genuinely converted, was a move of God and was used by God. Then move forward about 100 years to the 1830's and Charles Finney and you have a radical change. You have an immediate call for a public response and then in just a few minutes at a mourner's bench or in an inquiry room, the declaring of those who came converted. So you see a huge shift, a great change from the 18th century to the 19th century in evangelistic methods as they were especially at the end of the preached word.

Now, part of my own journey. I was converted at the age of 19. I had no church background. I did not know anything, as someone said before, I did not even suspect anything. I was converted in my car listening to a Presbyterian preacher on the radio and my life was radically transformed. I did not know I was converted. I just knew God did something to me. I knew I felt deeply the wickedness of my heart and the weightiness of my sin and I knew Jesus Christ through his cross loved me and had forgiven me and great, great joy was in my life. I joined a Baptist church because I heard the Bible preached and I was totally convinced that every person in that church would love the Bible and obey the Bible as I was trying to do. And I wasn't there long until I realized things were bad out of whack in churches. To be honest, I was part of the problem. I had too much pride, I had more zeal than I had knowledge or understanding but yet my initial discernment was accurate. The churches were in bad, bad shape.

I remember in my early years as a preacher that Billy Graham was the unquestioned authority on evangelism. When older pastors would reference Billy Graham, they would always speak of his methods and when I asked about, "Well, why are his methods so good?" They would say, "Results. Look at the results." I want to say something very clearly: Billy Graham is one of my heroes. Billy Graham is a great man and God has used Billy Graham to bring many, many souls into the kingdom of God and we ought to admit that and honor that. Yet I am convinced though there is much to commend of Dr. Graham's ministry, any honest knowledgeable person should find his invitation system at least troubling. Again, I look to Ian Murray and his booklet on the invitation system and here is what Ian Murray says of Billy Graham's invitation system, he said, "Here it is

told," he is talking about what Graham would tell them here, "to let Christ come into his heart." Then he further explains this means you need to repent, you need to receive him by faith. Now, who would have a problem with that? But Murray goes on to point out, then Dr. Graham will say, "Now, this is how we are going to do it. Get up right now and come to the front." Again notice, true doctrine with a step in there that troubles us.

Now, Murray goes on to quote a man by the name of Curtis Mitchell who is the author of "Those Who Came Forward" and Curtis Mitchell points out that Graham's invitation system was very similar everywhere he went and he quotes one of them and I am going to quote from Curtis Mitchell now and here is what Mitchell says Dr. Graham would say, "I'm going to ask you to come forward, up there, down here, I want you to come. You come right now, you come quickly. If you are with friends or relatives, they will wait for you. 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." To those who hesitate, Graham would add, "God is speaking to you. Get up and come right now. A little voice says you ought to come to Christ. Come now quickly. You may never have another moment. You have to come by faith. You need Christ, get up and come." So, you have the mixture of it's faith but you have to come forward in Dr. Graham's invitation.

Now, Ian Murray, his booklet additionally notes that Dr. Graham admitted or has admitted that the majority of those who respond are not genuinely converted. I remember in my early years reading a biography on Billy Graham and this person was not a, would you say, a friendly biographer? He was quite complementary and so much to Dr. Graham's ministry but he said the change in the churches, in the cities where Dr. Graham had even his biggest crusades was very, very minimal. There was just not any measurable lasting change in the number of people who came to the churches and stayed in church life. That troubled me as a young Christian. I thought, "How could that be? With thousands and thousands and thousands responding but the churches themselves in those cities are not seeing hardly any measurable lasting proof." Dr. Graham would say that he realized that the majority of those who came were not genuinely converted. explained that it was a good thing to do because having so many come to the front would encourage greater attendance as the week progresses.

Now, this system that Dr. Graham used that was really pioneered by Charles Finney, I am convinced that it has lead to millions of professed believers who came forward but since have never darkened the door of the church house. This might explain why at the turn of the 19th century, church historians note that a common thing was for church membership to be significantly lower than church attendance. If you read church history, I think that is very interesting. If they had three hundred in attendance they would have two hundred or so members. Today it is right the opposite, you have three hundred members and hundred and fifty in attendance or maybe two hundred in attendance. Maybe that is one of the real problems that we have. Today's prominent invitation system or altar call implies if not out right states that coming forward is a part of one's conversion. Well friend, that is simply not old time religion. Actually, it is less then two hundred years old. And in view of 2,000 years of church history, that is not old time religion that is a new fad.

II. Consequences. Now, the consequences I want to give, the list I want to list, is not an exhaustive list. I believe it is accurate though it is not exhaustive and though there are other factors that have affected these consequences, I'm convinced the modern invitation system is significantly responsible for these. In a broad and over-arching way, I would like to say that it seems like in our churches this system has led to this conclusion or this situation, I'll say, that instead of having sound biblical principles driving our methods, we have a dreadful trend of pragmatism. When you embrace unsound practices in evangelism, it is like a domino: that one falls and strikes another and strikes another and then strikes another and you begin to create other unsound practices to serve holding up the crumbling house that had a faulty foundation from the start. Brothers and sisters, if we don't bring them in the door right, everything else is going to be out of whack. If that first step is wrong, everything else has to be tweaked to accommodate that type of congregation.

What are some of the pragmatic unsound practices that have fallen like dominoes perhaps all around us? Well, I take the first one from Finney's life. I understand from church historians that Finney later in his ministry began to look and observe that so much of his fruit was not lasting fruit and he developed a doctrine of perfectionism and then this doctrine of perfectionism was that, "Well, these people were converted but they need an extra work of grace, they need another work of the Spirit whereby they will come to perfection and they will then be faithful and bear that kind of fruit."

Another one is this notion of carnal Christians. We have all these people responding, they did what we told them to do, they moved, they walked, they came down, whatever it is. They were rather hurriedly proclaimed as Christians but they don't live like Christians, most of them don't come to church, they don't act like Christians and we say, "Well, they genuinely came to Christ but they are just carnal Christians." And no such concept is taught in the word of God but we create something to hold up the faulty system we began with.

Redundant baptisms. Some of our most evangelistic churches and I would put this church in that group. There was a time when in this church it was very common by the time you were 21 to be baptized four times and I hate that and I regret that and I have asked my congregation to forgive me. We weren't purposing to preach a shallow gospel or give out an unsound evangelistic call but people would come to one certain evangelistic appeal, the next evangelist would have another appeal and they would respond to that one, the next evangelist would put a different twist on it and they would respond to that one. Every bit of it was they were trying to do something to make sure they were converted. If the next evangelist said, "Well, you did it that way but now you have to do it a little more like this," and they keep coming and keep coming. It's because there is an emphasis where the Bible has no emphasis: on a system.

No church discipline. Brothers and sisters after 150 years of this kind of shallow easy believism, it is very hard to do church discipline because the majority of your people are unconverted and they all need discipline and it's overwhelming. We began church

discipline here 22, 23 years ago. We disciplined two people last Sunday and removed them from membership. But we had a season of time where there was so much discipline, it was overwhelming to us. It was part of the reason God lead us to reexamine what we were defining as conversion and as evangelism and God said, "You don't have a real problem with church discipline. Your problem is on the front end with your evangelism." It is very difficult or impossible to do church discipline when the majority in your church are acting like the unconverted.

Unnecessary church splits. In Baptist life, how many times have you heard it said? The pastor takes a stand on something, he preaches a doctrine that unsettles some people and so they have a church vote on him and on the night of the church vote all of these people come in that they haven't seen in the last three or four years and they vote the guy out and they split the church. I can say this, at Grace Life Church of the Shoals, I've almost lost my job three times and I really believe had we not practiced cleaning up our rolls and biblical church discipline, I would not be here today. They would have gathered that bunch up and I would have been voted out but somehow in the grace of God and by the sheer long-suffering, humble, loving spirits of people, they have put up with me and allowed me to grow and mature along with them.

The last one is lost to the glory of God and that ought to be the driving passion of our lives. None of the rest of this matters so much to me but this: the church is about the glory of God and when these things are wrong, his glory is diminished on the earth. I know he's going to get his glory and I understand the sovereignty of God in that but God is most glorified through his church and so we ought to give our lives for the church and most truly be the church. So when we have this kind of super-emphasis on a system or a method that the Scriptures are totally silent on, we begin to corrupt things that rob him of his glory in the church.

Well, III. What saith the Scriptures? What does the Bible teach about an invitation system? A. Nothing. I can't find it. That is my first point: I just can't find it. There is no common system organized methodology, that is, taught in the Scriptures to help hearers get saved or even to identify those who have become believers. Now, people will say, "Wait a minute, everyone Jesus called he called publicly." Well, that's true but that was during his Incarnate ministry. If our Lord is here in an Incarnate form and he says, "Come follow me," that means something. But it's a gargantuan stretch to say that telling a person to come to where the steps are, where the preacher is preaching, is the equivalent of coming to the Incarnate Christ during his earthly ministry. Those are not the same thing. In Acts we have believers who are called to believer's baptism but there is no particular methodology used to identify them to do that. A sanction system used at the end of a sermon is neither used or commanded in the New Testament.

B. What does Scripture say? It says to make disciples. You know these texts; you know these truths. Matthew 20:18-20, "All authority has been given to me in heaven and in earth. Therefore go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all whatsoever I have commanded you and lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the ages." Dr. H.

pointed out and didn't he do a wonderful job helping us in his message? That Baptists gave their lives, were martyred by the thousands in their rejection of the state's infant baptism to only baptize disciples. Brothers and sisters, we have learned here that every pastor ought to have to stay in one place for 30 years and live with their fruit. What a lot of us do is we make a mess and leave it for somebody else. God wouldn't let me leave, I wanted to. He has made me face my fruit and by grace allowed me to fix some things and correct some things and reform some things. This has been 30 years of reformation here and it hasn't been easy. But making disciples and baptizing only disciples which means receiving in the membership only disciples, must, must require more than walking 30 or 40 feet and three minutes of counseling. Now, don't misunderstand me, if God does it, he may do it. I believe Jonathon Edwards was right. In an unusual movement of the Spirit, you may know it with confidence quickly if someone is genuinely converted, but Edwards' advice after being a leader of the Great Awakening was most of the time you need much more time than that. I just want to say as I've said to the parents of our people here, your child's soul is too valuable and the glory of God is too important for me to run them through five minutes and dunk them in water. It may take three months, it may take three hours, it may take three minutes, it may take one meeting, I don't know but we need to know how to use our Bibles and lovingly counsel with the person always with humility, but lovingly counsel with the person based on biblical truth, ask them whether or not the evidences of the new birth are there and therefore we are seeing disciples being made by the all powerful Spirit of God and baptizing them into full membership into our churches.

Well, quickly look at 2 Timothy 4 and we'll look at verse 3-5. It won't be an exposition by any stretch but I want to look at something here. Paul is, of course, exhorting Timothy in the ministry and in 2 Timothy 4:3 he says, "The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine." That time has come, "but wanting to have their ears tickled they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires." One man said he who despises sound teaching leaves sound teachers. Have you ever had a person go, "Why don't they want to hear our pastor? Was have they got against our pastor? He teaches the truth." He who rejects sound doctrine, rejects those who teach sound doctrine.

Here is what he says in verse 5, this is what I want you to look at, "But you be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry." I didn't look up the Greek on word "work" but I trust that the New American Standard translators knew what they were saying. Do the work of an evangelist. I remember as a young preacher, you've got to understand, I didn't grow up in church, I didn't know how Baptists or Methodists or anyone did their ministries but I learned about evangelists and I would watch so many evangelists and I would hear their sermons and I would see with expertise how they got people to respond and I would see these people just moments after they came to the front and pronounced as new converts and I thought, "What work is in that?" It just didn't seem like very hard work. The Apostle to Timothy, "Do the work of an evangelist." But brothers, it's challenging and there are times of trembling and there are times of sleeplessness when you really are troubled over the souls of your flock, wanting to make sure they all make it to glory. There is some work in that: prayer work and studying the Bible and taking time to counsel them from the word and looking for God to

do the work that only he can do. The work of an evangelist. I believe we have lost the work ethic in the saving of men's souls.

Well, C. Biblical invitations. First of all, when we think about what kind of invitation is given in the Bible, I want to say that the word "invitation" I think is far too narrow. To me an invitation is what I get in the mail when somebody is getting married. It's just more than that. In 2 Corinthians 5:20, Paul talks about begging men to come to Christ. The Lord Jesus commanded men to repent and believe. The Ethiopian eunuch was persuaded and reasoned with and encouraged about coming to faith in Christ. So it is all of the above: we beg, we command, we plead, we pray for, we encourage, we reason with men to come. It's just not an invitation. You've heard the phrase, it's almost troubling when you hear it, "Well, never leave until you give them a chance to get saved." Are you the gatekeeper of the kingdom of God? You open the gate? You have to give them a chance? No, you preach the gospel and command and urge and beg and reason and plead but you don't do anything beyond that to help them get saved. You are not a priest. There is only one priest and we are his ambassadors.

Jesus wept over men's souls and that is something we hope God would stir more deeply in our hearts this conference together. In John 4, we have the woman at the well. The woman comes to Jesus, you know the story, Jesus confronts her about all of her immoralities and then he says, "Drink of this water." Have you ever given that invitation? "Drink of this water," that is what he said. There was no system or method after that. Mark 1:15, "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel," that was it. There is nothing recorded about what you do next. Acts 2:38, Peter said to them, "Repent and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins and you'll receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." I guess that was Peter's invitation. Acts 10:43-44, "Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message." No system, no structured thing to do at the end. You know, but our flesh loves to do something. That's why Roman Catholicism is so popular. It melds with the fallen lust of men, "Give me something I can do." I like what Spurgeon said: an old stag would rather go and die alone, and you have to die to be saved and live. Most people need to die alone. God don't give them anything to prop them up, let them deal with the Lord. Jesus in John 3, "Do not be amazed that I said to you that you must be born again." Now, what about that for an invitation? He didn't tell him how to get born again, Jesus said, "The Spirit does it and it's a mystery." Didn't tell him to do anything. That was his invitation. Mark 8:34, he summoned the crowd and with his disciples and said to them, "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross and follow me." That's a pretty stout invitation isn't it? But no real system, no real organized, "Come down here and stay at this place," or anything of that nature. What we are seeing in all of these texts is a call for a total new lifestyle, not a mere one-time move to the front of a building.

Now, let me give you some final considerations and I am rushing but I want you to have a little break and get to the break-out sessions. A lot of practical things in there that might be helpful for you. A. The final considerations, remember the gospel is the invitation.

From the moment you begin preaching the gospel until you finish, you're inviting, imploring, commanding, encouraging, reasoning, begging men to put their faith in Jesus Christ. As a matter of fact, if you're not giving an invitation, you're not preaching the gospel but you are giving the invitation the whole time you are preaching the gospel. In reality the Spirit gives the invitation. John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him and I will raise him up on the last day." John 16:8, "And he," speaking of the Spirit, "when he comes will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and the judgment to come."

Now, the Spirit is the agent of the Godhead that convicts and draws men to Jesus Christ and he is not confined to three verses at the end of a sermon. He is omnipresent. The Spirit of God can work on a man during the sermon, at the sermon or a long time after the sermon. As a matter of fact, as we have begun to wrestle with some of these things and change our methods somewhat here, I have gotten a lot of criticism. I bet you don't believe that do you? "Well, Noblit doesn't give an invitation anymore," they'll say. I give the longest invitations. I start inviting men to Christ the moment I begin to preach. I invite them to Christ at the end of the sermon and the Spirit of God takes the word that I preach because it is not my word it's the word of God and he keeps working on them, inviting them to Christ, over the next days, weeks, months and years. How many times in my ministry have I had somebody come up and say, "Brother Jeff, four months ago when that sermon was preached, God dealt with my heart and I have been wrestling and I have come to see my sin and Christ is so wonderful to me. I know he has forgiven me." We see that over and over and over. God doesn't necessarily save men during the preaching of the word but he does save men through the preaching of the word.

I preached on the doctrine of justification one Sunday morning and Butch T. was his name, Butch was just a regular redneck guy like me, just an ordinary guy. Got out in his pick-up truck, doctrine of justification now, pretty weighty stuff and he said he couldn't leave the parking lot. He wept for thirty minutes and he came back in and said, "God saved me." You don't know, give huge invitations because until listen, if they have heard the preaching of the word, there is always hope they will get saved up until their final breath. Don't make them think if they don't do something in three minutes at the end of a service that they are going to hell. I don't have any authority to say that. Don't you love the Spirit of God?

B. Don't throw everything out. We talked about this a little bit earlier how we come out of systems whereby we see these churches packed with people who don't love God and the preaching of the word and they're a trouble to the pastor and if you try to reform the church with sound doctrine, they're against it and you think, "I see what that has done and I'm going to reject all of that. I am going to react against all of that and I know this weak invitation system caused a lot of that," and you're right but sometimes you go way too far and you get in the ditch on the other side. Brothers, don't throw everything out. Now, listen to this, Scripturally you do not need to completely abandon everything about the modern invitation system. Did you hear that? Now, if you do I'm not upset with you but I'm saying Scripturally you are not required to throw everything out. An appeal at the close of the service while a song is being sung is not unscriptural. It may not be essential

but it in itself is not unscriptural. Obviously what you say during the appeal may make it unscriptural. If I am preaching on the family and I say, "Well, families come to the front and let's kneel and pray for our homes together." There is nothing wrong with that. Lloyd Jones used to tell people that at the end of the sermon, they could call him on Tuesday if they wanted prayer and counsel about their souls. Spurgeon had what he called bird dogs. He'd have trained men in his church who would look for people who were seemingly under conviction and troubled about their soul and they would go to those people and say, "Can I pray with you? Can I talk with you about what the Lord may be doing in your life?"

Let me tell you what we do here at Grace Life Church and I am not saying it's the best, it may not be what I'm doing next year but here is what we do: at the end of the service, I will say this, "Now we're going to have a closing invitation song and we would love to counsel with you. If you want prayer or counsel, we will be here. We have trained counselors here, pastors down front, I'm here. You can come while we sing. You can come after we close the song or any time you want to, somebody will be available to talk to you." Now that's what we're comfortable with but never, never, never, ever, ever, do we ever say, "If you want to come to Jesus, come." We just say, "If you want prayer or counsel." Just a thought. You may have a better one. You may disagree but that is where we are today.

One thing that just came to my mind quickly about not throwing everything out was the feast meal that the early church incorporated with the Lord's Supper and I understand that if you study Jewish and Gentile life, their religions all had feast meals. So, it was just thoroughly in the culture that you had big meals together as a part of your religious observance. So the only church cleaned that up and sanctified it and made themselves a love feast. Isn't that a good example of you don't throw it all out and you just make it right? And maybe in your closing appeal, you need to just clean it up, change it up but don't feel like you have to throw everything out.

I just want to challenge you. Some of you are so pure and so separatist and try to be so rigid that Calvin, Luther nor Spurgeon could join your church. Now, I've got to be very careful because I will get on a hobby horse here but boy, I'm troubled about these excessive things: an excessiveness concerning home schooling and I love home schooling, we have a lot of home schooling but folks get way out here on a limb about, "Well, that's the only way to do it," or at least they say, "Well, you can do it other ways but our way is superior." This family integrated movement has much good in it but the folks who say that's the only way to do it, give me some chapter and verses on that. If your family can't hold together with you being separated one or two hours a week, you've got problems anyway. Now there are good principles in it but coming up with all of these rigid rules that the Bible is silent on, what I'm saying is, "Don't be so rigid and excessive where the Bible is silent." Not every thing about the invitation system has to be thrown out. Just make sure you are biblically accurate.

Well, C. this adds to it and builds on it .C. We must be diligent to avoid any notion of work salvation or sacramentalism in any appeal we give. I believe that is an absolute. We

must avoid any notion that in any way what we are asking people to do at the end helps them, causes them to find Christ. If not, what we are actually doing in some cases is we've just got Roman Catholic sacraments in Baptist clothing. Coming down to the priest at the front and producing through that work effort something of the grace that saves. It's an abomination. I was listening to the sermon and this would be one of the very most prominent men in southern Baptist life. He preached a great sermon challenging the people that their conversion was bogus. He talked to them about that, "You prayed these prayers, you walked to the front, you've marked cards and you're not saved. You just did a bunch of stuff at the end of a service and," he said, "you are not converted." He did a great job of pointing out what is going on and then he ended the service by saying, "Now, if you want to get saved, bow your heads and stand up." And he kept on, "Stand up! Come on, stand up if you want to get saved. Stand up," and I thought, "You're just doing what you told them they based their salvation on and it was bogus and you are doing the same thing." It's like it's engrained in us and we can't get over it. To this day I have not had one person in any position of leadership anywhere in the Southern Baptist Convention or anywhere else say, "What you are teaching is wrong." Here is what they'll say, "Well, you're right but we can't do it." Look, I don't want to be right. God is right and the Bible is right. It is not about me being right but here is the point, brothers and sisters: if it's displeasing to God, we've got to do it right.

D. We must not teach that one who does not give an immediate appeal is somehow unevangelistic or less evangelistic. We must not teach or imply that if a brother does not give a closing appeal he is not very evangelistic. Biblically, you do not have one thimble full of Scripture to stand on with that conclusion. It's just not there.

E. Shepherd the brethren to sound practice. Take time. Be patient. To quote my dear brother, Brother David Miller, "Those of us who believe in grace ought to have some." There are some good brothers out there who like me are doing it wrong. Have a shepherding, compassionate spirit to edify and I have not always had that. I love the example of Apollos and Aquilla and Priscilla in Acts 18. I just want to pick out the one verse so I don't have to read all of it. "This man had been instructed in the way of the Lord he had been fervent in spirit and he was speaking and teaching accurate things concerning Jesus being acquainted only with the baptism of John. He began to speak out boldly in the synagogue but when Priscilla and Aquilla heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately." Notice that not everything needs to be fixed with a sledge hammer. There are good brothers that you need to be compassionate and long-suffering with and be edifying and bring them along. Be careful how firm you build your fences and push people out.

F. You cannot eliminate all the tares from the wheat. I don't think you can work any harder than we have for 20 years to try to get it right. We have worked hard and man we still have people we have to discipline. We still have false professors that sneak in. Some of you think, "If I can ever get my church to embrace the doctrines of grace and if I can ever get them willing to reform our methodologies to line up with our theology, then it's smooth sailing." Some of you think that once your church embraces the doctrines of grace, they lose their sin nature. Brothers, I'm telling you there are some hellish flesh

monsters in the reform movement. They got all five points just right and they are full of wickedness and flesh and power and control and division and fractiousness and ego. It's there. All that we can do to reform the church and we will always be reformed and always reforming, you're still going to have tares among the wheat. One of the reasons you have this is that it humbles you. "Well, I got all my new systems in place and it still isn't just right." It's not going to be just right until the day of glorification. Remember there is regeneration and justification and sanctification and glorification. The flesh can conform to any program and jump through any hoop you put out there. Now, don't be discouraged. We have got to do our best and I can say this emphatically that since we have changed and spent quality time with an open Bible prayerfully with people, we have seen a great, great improvement in the number of our baptismal candidates staying faithful to Christ as the years roll by. Yes, we can all do better but don't think you are going to eliminate all of the tares from the wheat.

Well, G. and we're done: let the spiritual maturity of your church be the proof of your doctrine. We can yell and scream and stomp and write books and be articulate and win arguments but in the final analysis, Paul said to the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians 3:2, "You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men." If you want to help the other brothers and the other sisters who may have a weak and faulty system, prove the reality of your methods by the spirituality of your flock.

Let's pray together.