

What is an altar call?

The altar call began in the mid to late 1700s as a way for pastors to talk to and counsel those in the service who were considering becoming a Christian. At the end of the sermon, the pastor would ask if any in the congregation wanted to accept Jesus into their heart as Lord and Savior. After raising their hand in affirmation, often they would come down to the front and recite the sinners' prayer upon which they would be counted as a born-again believer.

In Romans 10:9, Paul does command, "Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Additionally, 1 John 1:9 states that "if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Does the Bible explicitly state, however, that the altar call is the proper avenue of confession? No, it does not. This does not make it unbiblical. It simply means that this particular medium of confession is not essential to receiving the grace of Christ.

Theology of Conversion

Because we do see invitations to receive God's gift of grace and commands to turn from our sin proclaimed by the Apostles, we know that conversion, as seen as a singular event in a person's life, is biblical. (Read the Apostle Paul's conversion account in Acts 9 for one example; consider John 3 for another.) The altar call, then, appears to create an opportunity for this conversion experience to occur.

While it is absolutely possible that a person who responds to an altar call becomes saved through the power of God, people often confuse "an external act with an inward spiritual change." That is to say, some assume that because they raised their hand, walked to the front, and recited a prayer, they have been saved. The Bible clearly rejects this thinking; no outward act can save you (Ephesians 2:8-9, Galatians 3:1-2, Romans 4:2, Romans 11:6). This does not mean that preachers who give an altar call intend for their audience to perceive it this way, but history has shown us that many people have, for whatever reason, believed that this process assures them of salvation. (For more information about how one can be assured of their salvation read 1 John and listen to our sermon series entitled "So You Would Know.")

Additionally, one giving an altar call tends to work under the assumption that he can persuade the human will into trusting God and repenting of sins. This, however, downplays and even ignores the biblical view of conversion. Jesus commands his disciples (the Twelve and us today) to preach his message of grace on a daily basis (1 Peter 3:15), but we must remember that our persuading does not change a person's heart. The Holy Spirit moves a person's heart to accept Jesus as Lord and Savior (John 16:8). We believe, then, that the Spirit can move through a preacher to speak to an individual, but we want to make sure that we do not take the work of the Spirit into our own hands, becoming the musician rather than being the instrument. Additionally, we do not want confuse people into thinking that conversion only occurs within the context of a

church service.

The altar call has a tendency to rely upon emotional manipulation to coerce members of the audience to take part in a ritual act that in and of itself does nothing. Certainly we implement the use of emotion to speak to people's heart but not at the cost of using reason to speak to the mind nor at the cost of usurping the work of the Spirit.

Will The Parks Church ever have an altar call?

Maybe. If it can be done in a non-manipulative way, which certainly it can, there is no reason why we could not. We do have a strong commitment to see non-believers become believers, but we find Christian author Jonathan Leeman's thoughts on the matter to be more biblically and theologically compelling:

- Invite people throughout your sermon to "repent and be baptized" like Peter did in Jerusalem (Acts 2:38). But when you do, don't just stand there waiting with emotionally charged music playing, staring them down until they relent. Rather, make several suggestions about how and where to discuss the matter further.
- Ask people what they believe when they present themselves for baptism, just like Jesus made sure the disciples knew who he was (Matt. 16:13-17; also, 1 John 4:1-3).
- Make sure they understand what following Jesus entails (Matt. 16:24f; John 6:53-60).
- Explain that the fruit of their lives and persevering to the end will indicate whether or not they really believe (Matt. 7:24f; 10:22).
- You might even explain that Jesus has commanded your church to remove them from its fellowship if their life moving forward does not match their profession (Matt. 18:15-17).

You can read his full article on this topic here

(<http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/11/17/you-asked-should-churches-perform-altar-calls/>).