

INVITATIONS WITH INTEGRITY

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I am concerned about a dear friend. God has greatly used this proven friend not only in my life but also in the lives of countless others. This seasoned ally has been an incredible blessing and vehicle for multitudes to experience comfort, freedom, forgiveness, and untold joy. Although once a very familiar mainstay in evangelical circles, over time this friend has become the victim of misunderstanding, abuse, neglect, ridicule, scorn, slander and now near abandonment. This familiar friend is at risk of being portrayed at the least as a marginalized relic or at the worst a dangerous charlatan. I am concerned about the current state of the public invitation.

One's integrity is crucial. To have your integrity questioned is far more serious than having one question your competency or skills. There is a serious challenge today concerning the very integrity of the public invitation. I would have to agree with those that would charge that the public invitation sometimes has been abused or mishandled. Most preachers would support a move to insure that invitations are better prepared and extended with more clarity and integrity. This article addresses a more serious issue – the very integrity the public invitation as well as the integrity of those that would extend such, in any form whatsoever is at stake. It is this issue which we need to examine.

I came to know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord in response to a public evangelistic invitation. At the age of sixteen, I attended a Billy Graham movie at a local theatre on a date with my girlfriend. For me it was just another Friday night at the movies. I did not realize we were attending a religious film or I probably would not have attended. That movie exposed me to the awareness that although I was a church member, I did not have a relationship with Christ. I was deeply moved and convicted of my sin and need for forgiveness. I understood that I needed Christ's forgiveness and salvation. Sitting in my seat, watching the final scenes of the film, I purposed that I would commit my life to Christ someday.

At the conclusion of that movie, a man gave an appeal for those who wished to make a commitment to Christ to come to the front of the theater and speak with a counselor. Prior to that night, I was unaware of a need to make such a commitment. I had not gone to the movie that night with any intention of coming to Christ. No Christians had been talking with me about my need for Christ. I had never been exposed to the message of the gospel. I had never been part of hearing a public evangelistic invitation. He quoted a scriptural invitation that night as he paraphrased an Old Testament reference that asked, "How long will you hesitate between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him" (1 Kings 18:21, NASB). As the challenge was given, I realized my need to respond to the invitation and to make a commitment to Christ. I went to the front of the theater and a

trained counselor assisted me in making my commitment to Christ. The gospel was made clear, I freely acknowledged my need for Christ, and God wondrously saved me. From personal experience, I bear witness of the legitimate place of extending public evangelistic invitations.

Tragically, the public invitation is in trouble. No longer is the invitation an almost universal part of evangelical worship. What once was a tool that was implemented for the evangelization of the masses is now a mere shadow of the past. Even churches that continue the practice of extending public invitations, often do so with little precision or purpose. How could the once mighty and respected practice have drifted so far?

Criticisms of the public invitation move along four levels. First, some charge that the public invitation is without scriptural warrant. Second, it is alleged that the public invitation is a modern invention. Third, some contend that the call for a public response adds man's efforts to salvation coming solely by the grace of God. Still others have eliminated the public proclamation of the gospel with a public invitation in favor of an exclusive support of relational evangelism.

In their current form, evangelistic invitations are of relatively recent origin, but the spirit and principle of the public evangelistic invitation is evident in the Bible. There are Old Testament examples. When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, he discovered the people giving themselves over to idolatry and worshipping the golden calf, and he confronted the people by asking "Who is on the Lord's side? Let him come unto me!" (Ex. 32:26, KJV). That was a clear call to his people to make a public declaration and to take a public stand for the Lord. After Moses' death, Joshua was commanded to lead the nation of Israel. The people lapsed into idolatry. Toward the end of Joshua's life he called all the tribes together and said, ". . . choose you this day whom ye will serve; whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the flood, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Josh. 24:15, KJV). That, too, was a call for a public commitment of loyalty to God.

Centuries later idolatry again was the issue. This time Elijah was God's chosen instrument. Standing on Mount Carmel it is recorded: "And Elijah came unto all the people, and said, 'How long halt ye between two opinions? If the Lord be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him'" (1 Kings 18:21, KJV). This was a clear and powerful call to public commitment and identification as a follower of God. In Ezra 10:5, this great scribe called upon his contemporaries to swear publicly that they would carry out the principles of his reform. Nehemiah's book also indicates that the Jewish leaders were required to commit themselves to a covenant of loyalty to the Lord after their revival (Neh. 9:39). Hosea urged the people to return to the Lord and receive his forgiveness (Hos. 14:2). Throughout the Old Testament, one sees a clear picture of the man of God publicly calling people to make a public commitment to the Lord.

The New Testament records leaders of the early church offering an appeal to persons and urging them to decide publicly for Christ. The apostle Paul announced to the church at Corinth that Christians have been given the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:18-20). This ministry charges the believer with the task of seeking to join together sinful man and holy God. Further, this ministry compels the Christian to urge the hearer to decide for

Christ. The gospel is not to be presented in a casual, perfunctory manner, but with a sense of urgency, appeal, and persuasion (2 Cor. 5:11), even as Paul did when he reasoned and persuaded the people of Ephesus to whom he preached (Acts 19:8), and as Jesus charged his disciples to do (Lk. 14:23). This urging from the human instrument is to be done while relying on the Spirit of God. The evangelist must do his best to urge men and women to come to Christ, but there also must be a dependence upon the Holy Spirit to convict and draw them to Christ (Jn. 16:8).

Jesus made numerous appeals for people to decide publicly for Him. The launching of His ministry included public proclamation of the gospel and a public call to repentance (Mt. 4:17). When he called Andrew and John, his first disciples, He extended a public appeal to follow Him (Mt. 4:19), as He did with the woman of Sychar (Jn. 4:4-42), Philip (Jn. 1:43), Matthew (Lk. 5:27), the rich, young ruler (Lk. 18:18-34), and Zaccheus (Lk. 19:1-10). There are also general appeals that Jesus gave in group settings (Mt. 11:28, 29; Jn. 7:37, 38). The Lord Jesus Christ gave us a personal example in His extension of public invitations to people to follow Him as Lord and Savior.

There are other New Testament examples of preachers who called for a public decision. Aside from Jesus, the most outstanding example is John the Baptist. John came preaching a message of repentance (Lk. 3:23), but the chief characteristic of his ministry was baptizing the people who responded to his message (Jn. 1:28). His ministry, preaching, and appeal were public, and those who responded to his appeal did so publicly.

Other followers of Jesus also extended public invitations. Andrew sought out his brother, Peter, and brought him to Jesus (Jn. 1:42). After he went on to become a powerful spokesman for our Lord, Peter called for an immediate, public commitment to Christ in his sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:39-40), and in his preaching to the household of Cornelius (Acts 10:28-48). Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch and those in his caravan as they traveled along a desert road (Acts 8:26-38). The public proclamation of the gospel was basic to the ministry of the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 15:1-11; 1 Thess. 1:5-11). His preaching and appeals for Christ were often in a public arena, usually in the setting of the Jewish synagogues. This was his practice in Pisidian Antioch (Acts 13:14-48), in Iconium (Acts 14:1-7), in Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4), in Berea (Acts 17:10-12), in Corinth (Acts 18:1-4), and in Ephesus (Acts 19:1-10). Paul and Silas challenged the jailer at Philippi to place his faith in Christ amid the public spectacle of a crowded jail cell (Acts 16:25-31). The Bible concludes with an invitation to come to Christ (Rev. 22:17). Throughout the New Testament we discover ample evidence for the practice of public proclamation of the gospel, with an appeal for a public declaration of faith in Christ.

From an examination of Scripture, one discovers the clear basis for public evangelistic invitations. When the preacher of the gospel makes an appeal for people to decide openly for Christ, he is on solid biblical ground. As the minister of the gospel applies biblical principles of public evangelistic invitations, he can do so with the blessing of heaven.

Critics of the public invitation make the claim that the practice started with Charles G. Finney (1792-1875). Although it is true that Finney's "new measures" popularized the

practice,¹ public evangelistic invitations can be traced back centuries before Finney. R. Alan Streett argues that the assertion that public invitations began with Finney are “historically incorrect,” because “the first-century preachers of the gospel called on sinners to present themselves publicly as candidates for repentance, faith and baptism.”² These public calls for commitment virtually ceased in the church when, through the efforts of the Emperor Constantine and later Theodosius, Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire. With the inception of the state church, all citizens of Rome, whether believers or not, were swept into the church and proclaimed to be Christians. Adults and infants alike were baptized as they became members of the church. As these infants grew, the need for adult baptism diminished, and the practice of the public invitation declined.³

The early Anabaptists helped bring a return to the use of the invitation. They opposed the Roman Catholic Church on several issues, including infant baptism. They were faithful in calling for repentance of sins, faith in Christ, and the outward sign of believer’s baptism.⁴

The Anabaptists were opposed by both Catholics and Protestants. This opposition came due to the fact that while the Reformers proclaimed the message of salvation by grace through faith and believed in the final authority of Scripture, they opposed believer’s baptism, believing it to be an addition to faith and, therefore, unbiblical.

The Separatists John Smyth and Thomas Helwys broke away from the Church of England and began practicing believer’s baptism by 1609. They believed that people must repent and believe on Christ in order to be saved. They invited people to confess Christ publicly through believer’s baptism. John Bunyan, author of *Pilgrim’s Progress*, was a Separatist and later a Baptist. He advocated a call for a public profession of faith in Christ. One Separatist congregation was the Pilgrims on board the Mayflower who came to America in 1620, seeking religious and political liberty.⁵

The eighteenth century saw unusually gifted and anointed preachers who employed a variety of public invitations to come to Christ. Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield would conclude their sermons with an appeal for seekers to meet with them following the service to seek private spiritual guidance. This was the standard invitational model of the eighteenth century. Another of their contemporaries, John Wesley, would also invite seekers to come forward and sit at the “Anxious Seat” where they would receive spiritual counsel. This occurred some fifty years before Finney, whom critics of the invitation often

¹ Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003 rep. ed.), 176.

² R. Alan Streett, *The Effective Invitation* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1984), 81

³ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

cite as the inventor of the modern altar call for the invitation.⁶ Noted historian Leon McBeth, citing Steve O’Kelly, observes that Separate Baptists in the southern United States are known to have extended invitations for people to come to the front of the service with the singing of a hymn to make immediate commitments to Christ as early as 1758.⁷ In 1799, at a Methodist camp meeting in Red River, Kentucky, an altar was erected in front of the pulpit where seekers might come for prayer and instruction. So popular were these altars that they became a permanent fixture in many Methodist churches.⁸

The nineteenth century saw the ministry of Charles G. Finney popularize the modern pattern of coming to the front of the service at the time of invitation to commit to Christ.⁹ Charles Haddon Spurgeon employed a type of invitation similar to the eighteenth century model, due in part to the physical limitations of the Metropolitan Tabernacle.¹⁰ Although Finney certainly is credited with the paradigm with which we are now familiar, the spirit and practice of public invitations is well documented in church history.

What about the charge that calling for a response in a public invitation is adding human means to the grace of God? In extending a public invitation, the preacher should make every effort to separate the need for an inner decision to the call for an external expression. A person is justified solely by the grace of God and apart from human effort (Rom. 4:1-5). The Apostle Paul argued to the Romans that we are right with God based on the inward condition of our heart (Rom. 4:29). And yet, the one who has a genuine inner relationship of the heart will validate it in an external expression. After Peter’s sermon at Pentecost, when the people asked, “What shall we do?” Peter said to them, “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins . . .” (Acts 2:37-38, NASB). In the tenth chapter of his letter to the Romans, Paul describes the relationship between inner decision and external expression: “That if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Rom. 10:9-10, NIV). Outward expression is to be evidence of inner grace. To claim inner grace without external expression is to cheapen the gospel of grace. The concept of cheap grace or “easy believism” is often made by those that are of the Reformed tradition. Truly, one is saved not by walking an aisle, raising a hand or praying a prayer. One is saved by committing oneself to Him as Savior and Lord.

⁶ Ibid., 92.

⁷ H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage, Four Centuries of Baptist Witness* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 231.

⁸ Henry B. McLendon, “The Mourner’s Bench” (ThD dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1902), 10.

⁹ David L. Larsen, *The Evangelism Mandate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1992), 64.

¹⁰ Streett, 97.

However, to question the integrity of the public invitation as a means of external expression is to eliminate a legitimate and biblical means of external expression.

Others have abandoned the practice of extending a public invitation in favor of relational evangelism. The preference for relational witness has become an exclusive preference: relational evangelism as the only means of proper witness. Adherents of this position do not merely prefer relational evangelism, they see it as the only legitimate way to evangelize. They do more than merely minimize the legitimacy of the public invitation; they question its very integrity. This view would disparage those that would extend the public invitation as well as those who would practice direct conversational evangelism with a casual acquaintance or a stranger. Although personal relationships can be a valid, perhaps even the preferred means of presenting the gospel, should it be the exclusive approach? It was not the exclusive approach of Jesus Christ, who witnessed to individuals after a brief introduction (John 3:1-21; 4:1-26), as well as to the masses (John 7:37-38).

I am passionate about the public invitation. God used it the night I came to faith in Christ. I am also passionate in my desire to see it implemented with clarity and integrity. It is shameful to extend the invitation in an attempt to manipulate or coerce. I resent coercion and manipulation in any context, particularly in the setting of a public invitation. At the other extreme is the practice of extending the invitation in a passionless and perfunctory manner. To extend an invitation in a casual, unprepared, and careless manner is another type of abusing the invitation. An invitation to Christ should be done with urgency, passion, and even persuasion. Paul told the Corinthians, “Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences . . . Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:11, 5:20, NASB).

The church needs a revitalized view and practice of the public evangelistic invitation. We do not need to implement a practice that is dishonoring to God. Nor do we need our implementation or methodology to dishonor the Lord. It is my contention that we need to recognize that the public evangelistic invitation is a tool of great integrity, biblically and historically. Further, when it is implemented properly, its integrity is maintained through the character and methodology of the minister.

May the critics refine our methods and our motives. May God revitalize our passion and our practice. May we stand to proclaim the gospel as God’s gracious gift of redemption and salvation, and may God entreat people through us, as we beg the multitudes to be reconciled to God.