

SECTION 26

The Invitation

HOW TO GIVE THE INVITATION

(Soul-Winning From the Pulpit)

INTRODUCTION:

The public invitation is something of a modern invention at least in its present form. Because it is open to abuse and manipulation, it has come under attack in recent days. A strong criticism of it was voiced by Jim Elliff in *Viewpoint* (January-March 1999). His perspective is representative of those who decry the use of the public invitation today. He gets to the point when he writes, "There is no biblical precedent or command regarding a public altar call... there is nothing sacrosanct about getting people to occupy a certain piece of geography at the front of a building" (p. 11). He also voices strong objection to having people pray the "sinners prayer" stating that it is not found in the Bible and only "in the back of booklets" (p. 12). "Inviting Christ into one's life it is said "hangs on nothing biblical" (Ibid.).

While there are certainly abuses in some invitational systems and practices, and while there is some truth to Jim Elliff's assertions, this is not the whole story, and one should be hesitant to denounce completely anything simply because it may have been mishandled by some.

If anyone is seeking justification for inviting people publicly to respond to the gospel, he or she need only look to Acts 2 and the story of Pentecost. Here the gospel was proclaimed and people were exhorted to respond. In that particular context the invitation was to prove one's commitment to Christ by coming forward and being baptized. The Scriptures record about 3,000 were saved that day (Acts 2:41). Clearly there was a public invitation and public response.

It is recognized that the public invitation or "altar call" (a term I do not like or use) was first introduced by Charles Finney in the 1820s and popularized by D. L. Moody. Scripture neither endorses nor condemns its practice.

The issue it seems to me is that the gospel be presented clearly and the invitation extended with integrity. The exact nature of the invitation is a biblical, contextual, any personal matter. The invitation need not be extended exactly the same way by everybody. However, to preach the gospel of Christ who draws all men to Himself and then not "implore" people to be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:20) is, in my judgment, unconscionable.

With these introductory remarks we can provide an overview of the invitation in outline form:

I. WHY IS THE INVITATION UNDER ATTACK TODAY?

- A. Many believe it is a modern and unbiblical practice.
- B. The invitation has been misused.
 - 1. It has been used in an emotional, high pressure and manipulative fashion.
 - 2. It confuses people concerning: “What must I do to be saved?”
 - 3. It provides false assurance and opens the door for an unregenerate membership.
- C. Some believe the invitation misleads people and appeals to the emotions, even the flesh.
 - 1. It puts on us the responsibility that actually belongs to the Holy Spirit.
 - 2. It encourages people to think that salvation is doing something for God instead of looking to the Cross and trusting Christ alone.

The results have been problematic with many eventually falling away.

II. HOW DOES AN INVITATION STAND UP UNDER BIBLICAL ANALYSIS?

- A. There is abundant scriptural evidence to justify the invitation. Professor Ken Keathley of MWBTS noted in the Summer 1999 edition of *Heartland*, “In both Old and New Testaments there are numerous examples of the hearers of God’s message being challenged to make an open and public decision:
 - When Moses confronted the congregation for their idolatry he commanded, “Whoever is on the Lord’s side - come to me!” (Ex. 32:26)
 - In his final days of leading Israel, Moses concluded his sermon by calling on the congregation to choose: ‘I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life...’ (Deut. 32:19)
 - Joshua called on Israel to publicly decide between the Lord and idols when he said, ‘Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve...’ (Josh. 24:15)
 - After the people publicly declared their allegiance to God, Joshua warned against making a rash decision, but nonetheless accepted their profession of faith (vs. 19-25).

- Likewise, Elijah challenged the people of Israel by asking, ‘How long will you falter between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him.’ (1 Ki. 18:21). The very nature of the prophetic message demands a clear and public decision.
- From John the Baptist to John the Revelator, the New Testament also provides justification for giving public invitations:
- Our Lord confronted the disciples with a clear call to follow Him. To all He says, ‘Come to Me, all you who labor’ (Matt. 11:28).
- The Canon closes with the offer: “And the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ and let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely.” (Rev. 22:17) Repeatedly in the New Testament the invitation is given for all ‘to come.’

Certain words used in Scripture to describe evangelistic preaching provide a strong warrant for public invitations:

- After Peter preached his powerful sermon on the Day of Pentecost, the Bible says that he then “exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation.’” (Acts 2:40) The word translated exhort is *parakaleo*, which could be translated invite, for it is a call for the hearer to come and take his stand with the speaker. Peter gives us a clear example of one whom at the end of his message invited the listeners to make a public decision.” -(pgs.4-5)

B. When given with clarity and integrity, with the focus on the work of Christ, an invitation of a public nature can be given.

III. WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD INVITATION?

DR. TIM BEOUGHER IDENTIFIES 5:

1. Bible-Centered
2. Christ-Centered
3. Cross-Centered
4. Clear
5. Balanced

DR. LARRY MOYERS OF EVANTELL MINISTRIES IN DALLAS ALSO IDENTIFIES 5:

1. Must be warm and personal (like talking to a friend)
2. Must be direct
3. Make the issue what the NT makes it: trusting Christ alone.
4. Must be clear in its details
5. Must be positive and expect results

“On one occasion, a young student of Spurgeon came to the great preacher complaining that he wasn’t seeing conversions through his preaching. Spurgeon inquired, ‘Surely you don’t expect conversions every time you preach, do you?’ The young man replied, ‘Well, I suppose not.’ Spurgeon then said, ‘That’s precisely why you are not having them.’”

-(Roy J. Fish, *Giving a Good Invitation*, p.221)

IV. WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES OF AN INVITATION?

- A. It reminds people that the gospel demands a personal response.
- B. It helps clarify in their minds what they are doing.
- C. It allows you to talk to them about their decision and spiritual growth.
- D. It allows you to answer questions they may have.

V. WHAT ARE DIFFERENT WAYS OF GIVING AN INVITATION?

A. Altar call (or walk the aisle/come forward invitation)

1. ITS ADVANTAGES

- a. It is the easiest way to get with someone one-on-one
- b. It encourages those who want people to know what they have done
- c. Public celebration
- d. Personal confirmation of the one responding

2. ITS DISADVANTAGES

- a. It can be misunderstood, even if properly given
- b. Some will find it difficult to respond in this manner
- c. It fits the mentality of the 1950's more than the new millennium
- d. It is open to manipulation, even coercion.

B. "Come to the side room" invitations

1. ITS ADVANTAGES

- a. Less pressure and less open to abuse
- b. Helps those who are shy
- c. Provides private one-on-one time

2. ITS DISADVANTAGES

- a. The church misses the immediate celebration of the salvation
- b. Not all churches have proper facilities

C. “Raise your hand if you’ve trusted Christ”

D. Invite people to “Trust Christ now” and come forward afterwards for information on how to grow.

E. Commitment card

1. ITS ADVANTAGES
 - a. Great for follow-up
 - b. Most non-threatening of all
 - c. Gives record of all who attended
 - d. Can be used in a wide variety of settings
2. ITS DISADVANTAGES
 - a. open to misunderstanding or lack of full understanding
 - b. pragmatics of getting the card (this is not insurmountable)

CONCLUSION:

- When there is conviction, the mind is changed.
- When there is contrition, the emotions are moved.
- When there is confession, the will acknowledges responsibility.

The public invitation provides an outlet for the outward expression of the inward work of the Holy Spirit of God.

Steven Olford says an invitation is for the purpose of decision, confession, and instruction.

Jerry Vines says regardless of the sermon’s content, the preacher can turn the invitation to an evangelistic appeal. With such a great Saviour and such a great salvation, we can, and we must, appeal to men to be reconciled to God. How we do it may vary. That we do it is a must. Let a heart broken over lost souls be your compass; let it be your guide.

“To love to preach is one thing; to love those to whom you preach is quite another.”

-D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching and Preachers*, 92)

THE INVITATION

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1. Pray (in your preparation as you think about how to give the invitation).
 2. Be clear in what you want your people to do.
 3. Clearly, concisely and accurately share the gospel.
 4. With conviction, and expectation, but not coercion or manipulation, invite and challenge your people to respond.
 5. Keep it 3-4 minutes maximum as to the explanation.
 6. Pray.
 7. Transition smoothly and worshipfully into the actual invitation, allowing it to continue as you feel led of the Holy Spirit (one verse is too short and ten verses is usually [not always] too long).