



Making Your Invitation Effective

By: Sam Farina

On July 3, 1996, I watched my father breathe his last breath on earth. Cancer was listed as the cause of death, but an altar invitation extended in May 1956, was the beginning of his eternal life.

“I felt something the moment I sat down. I can’t remember the message spoken, but I remember when the invitation was given. I found myself standing at the front, tears streaming down my face. I was genuinely converted that day and never was the same.”

These words spoken to me often when I was a boy describe my father’s conversion. Dad was not the only one in our family who was converted. Over a 6-week period, the altar invitation went out nightly, and my mother, uncles, aunts, and cousins were converted.

According to Gerald Strober in his book *A Day in Billy’s Life*,¹ more people said they wanted eternal life than anything else. The evangelical pastor and evangelist are in a unique position to show the unregenerated how this can be obtained and provide them with an immediate opportunity to receive it.

Critics of the public invitation claim that its usage can only be traced back to the ministry of Charles Finney (1792–1875). Such an accusation is historically incorrect. God’s invitation to Adam was, “Where art thou?” (Genesis 3:9). Only those who obeyed Moses’ command and stepped forward publicly received atonement for their sins (Exodus 32:26,30). And the first-century evangelists called on sinners to present themselves publicly as candidates for repentance, faith, and baptism. Evidence that apostolic evangelists called for public decisions for Christ was their ability to number their converts (Acts 2:41).

Stephen Olford, mentor to Billy Graham, said, “In evangelistic work, more confusion exists over the matter of the invitation than any other matter.” And speaking about the public invitation, W.A. Criswell said, “For a man to preach just for the sake of preaching is a travesty on the truth of God. We ought to preach with a purpose and plead for a response.”

What are the keys to effective altar invitations?

1. Identify with human need. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). When God came to reach humanity, He became a man. We cannot become removed from people, or else we won’t be able to reach them. How can we speak of God hanging on a cross, bleeding to death for sinners, without it causing tears in our own eyes? It must motivate us to plead as God would with sinners for their conversion.

2. Call for a decision. Intellectual assent is not enough; only decision brings conversion (2 Corinthians 5:20). Preaching causes people to consider Jesus. His voice calling them stirs up emotions, but they must open their hearts’ doors willfully (Revelation 3:20).

John R.W. Stott’s exhortation to the 20th-century church is an important one: “We must never make the proclamation without then issuing an appeal.... It is not enough to teach the gospel; we must urge men to embrace it.”

In his 1911 Yale Lectures on Preaching, John Henry Jowett concluded, “In all our preaching, we must preach for verdicts. We must present our case, we must seek a verdict, and we must ask for immediate execution of the verdict.”

All evangelistic sermons recorded in the Book of Acts include proclamation and invitation. And Jesus’ first discourse began with the proclamation, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand.” Next came the invitation: “Repent ye, and believe the gospel” (Mark 1:14,15). Every listener was called upon to respond in this twofold manner.

3. Call for confession of Jesus as Lord. Any sinner who has truly understood the gospel will stand forward to confess Christ. When Christ ministered to people—the woman with the issue of blood, Zacchaeus, the man with the withered hand—He called for public confessions.

Many times when Billy Graham speaks he explains, “At the close of my message, I’m going to ask you to step from your seat and come to Jesus.” Throughout his sermons, he builds the bridge between the message, a person’s decision, and a public confession of Christ.

4. Make clear what people need to do. Trim your message to leave time to ask for a volitional commitment. Then pray with people, allowing the confession to crystallize in their hearts and thank God for what He has done for them. Be sure to explain that conversion does not take place because they come forward, pray with you, or sign a commitment card. Conversion takes place when people decide to trust in Jesus only for their salvation.

According to R. Allen Streett in his book *The Effective Invitation*,

“The Old Testament concept of repentance (Hebrew, *shub*) has to do with turning back or making an about-face (1 Kings 8:47; Ezekiel 14:6, 18:30). The New Testament word *metanoeo* emphasizes an inward decision or change of mind. When these two concepts are combined, a complete picture of biblical repentance emerges. You must call people to repent, believe, and follow Christ openly and unashamedly. These three points should be included in every gospel invitation.”

Two basic fears literally wipe out most invitations: (1) fear of people, and (2) fear of failure. While most ministers agree on the necessity of evangelizing a lost world, many are hesitant to offer altar invitations in their own congregations. Paul urged Timothy to, “do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry” (2 Timothy 4:5). Lewis A. Drummond said, “the clear implication of this passage is that a pastor cannot fulfill his ministry unless he fulfills his role as an evangelist.”

5. Have counselors trained and ready with follow-up literature to disciple new converts. Only when a new convert is led to a certainty of conversion, daily devotions, water baptism, church fellowship, consecrated living, systematic giving, dedicated serving, and the covenant of membership is God’s full plan of discipleship fulfilled.

6. See the necessity for the invitation long before it is given. God persistently stirs those who hear our message (2 Corinthians 6:1,2). This truth alone should cause us to offer an altar invitation every time we preach. The picture of God on His knees pleading with sinners needs to fill our minds. It’s a picture of God’s grace.

Always remember: “Now is the day of salvation” (verse 2). The realization that people have no guarantee of tomorrow and that there does come a time when they cannot come to Jesus should drive all fear from our hearts when it comes to extending a public altar invitation. Jesus said, “How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate” (Matthew 23:37,38).

I encourage you to wait when giving the altar invitation. Don’t be in a hurry. In that crucial moment of decision, the most important thing you can do is wait, coax, plead, impel, and encourage the lost to be saved.

Robert Coleman said, “A sermon that does not convey this urgency lacks evangelistic relevance. Through the human instrumentality of the invitation, the servant of the Word, in reliance upon the Holy Spirit, should do everything possible to move the hearer to take the right course of action.” C.E. Autrey, in his book *Basic Evangelism*, said, “It is not enough to instruct the lost and warn them of impending doom; they must be persuaded.”

James H. Jauncy, a professional psychologist, defines persuasiveness as the ability to “express enthusiastically a belief, which we hold ourselves strongly.” And Andrew Blackwood defines a persuasive person as “a soul on fire.”

7. Don't give offense. There is no need to mislead people (2 Corinthians 6:3,4). Many are reluctant to offer an altar invitation because they have heard invitations that were misleading and unbiblical. We should be all the more motivated to give the true, biblical call to salvation.

8. Pray. Pray until you can say with the apostle Paul, “I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart. For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Romans 9:1-3).

As you commune with Christ through prayer, the concern the Lord has for the souls of people will become your concern. After reaching this point, much of the battle will be won. As Charles Spurgeon said, “A burning heart will soon find for itself a flaming tongue.”

Endnote

1. Gerald Strober, *A Day in Billy's Life* (Grand Rapids: Old Tappan: Spire, 1967), 187.

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