

Inviting a Response: The altar call in contemporary mission and ministry in Britain and Ireland

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Abstract

This article charts the use of the 'altar call' or 'appeal' from its beginnings in America in the 18th century, to its place in Britain and the early Salvation Army. It investigates its use in contemporary denominations within Britain and Ireland, and asks whether it remains an effective evangelistic method. It concludes that it still has a place within a process-orientated approach to evangelism and an overall emphasis upon the journey of faith, worship and ministry. A postmodern culture continues to value opportunities for symbolic public response in faith commitment and spiritual growth and development.

Introduction

Salvationists are accustomed to the sight of someone walking forward at the end of a sermon in response to an altar call – also known as an appeal or an invitation. It has been part of Salvation Army worship since the movement's beginnings in 1865. William Booth had used the altar call as a Methodist minister in the 1850s and as a travelling revivalist in the 1860s. Its origins, however, lay on the other side of the Atlantic in the mid-eighteenth century. It was used infrequently to begin with, but by the end of the century it was fairly common among American Baptists, Congregationalists and especially Methodists. Then the camp meetings of the early nineteenth century led to it becoming a standard and commonplace evangelistic practice. These meetings derived from the Presbyterian tradition of holding four or five days of special communion services. They soon developed to include Methodists and Baptists. Thousands of people would camp in wagons and tents to attend the services in the frontier states of Kentucky and Tennessee. Those who were 'anxious' about their spiritual condition were invited to a fenced area near the pulpit (the 'altar') for counselling. The practice soon spread to local church worship and was further popularised by the ministry and writings of Charles Finney who

'established it in the evangelical mind as the essential accompaniment of evangelistic preaching' (Bennett 2000:103).

The development of the altar call in Britain

The altar call was first used in Britain by the American Methodist, Lorenzo Dow, during a visit in 1805-07. He encouraged Hugh Bourne and William Clowes to organise camp meetings in Staffordshire in 1807.¹ Various other visiting American revivalists used the altar call, but again it was the influence of Charles Finney that helped to establish its use more widely in the 1830s and 1840s, particularly within Methodism. Later, as a result of visits by the American evangelist D. L. Moody in 1872-75, 'decisionist evangelism... became a permanent part of the British scene' (Murray 1994:37).

The altar call was never as popular in Britain as it was in America. Although this so-called 'frontier tradition' came to dominate local church worship in America (White 1989:178-185), only a very small proportion of British churches made regular use of it (Kendall 1984:58). For many who did use the altar call it became the primary evangelistic method – that is until the end of the twentieth century when attention turned towards what were regarded as more effective methods, such as seeker services and the Alpha Course (Booker and Ireland 2005:63).

A significant development in the twentieth century was that invitations began to be given for a variety of different purposes. Already, the nineteenth century holiness movement, which included The Salvation Army, had called people forward for sanctification (Bennett 2000:125; Randall 2005:117). In the twentieth century invitations began to be given for healing, to be filled with the Spirit and for general prayer ministry.

A survey of British and Irish denominations

In the late twentieth century, surveys of the use of the altar call were conducted across several denominations in America (1979) and Australia (1996). Having found no evidence of similar surveys being conducted in this country, I conducted a survey of Protestant denominations in Britain and Ireland in 2012. I contacted 30

¹ As a result Bourne and Clowes were expelled by the Methodist Conference and formed the Primitive Methodists.

denominations, including networks and associations of independent churches. (A separate survey of Salvation Army officers was also conducted).

Enquiries were emailed to the national offices of the 26 smaller denominations and the 129 regional offices of the largest denominations: Anglican Dioceses, Methodist Districts, Baptist Associations and United Reformed Church (URC) Synods. From these 155 enquiries, 127 replies were received; 77 from the national/regional offices and a further 50 from local churches. Of the 30 denominations contacted, responses were received from 22 (whether nationally, regionally or locally), which in terms of denominations was a response rate of 73.3%.

The email enquiries were short and simple, asking for an idea of how many churches practise the altar call and how frequently. The respondents in national and regional offices should have been in a position to give an overview of their churches. This was the case in most instances, with responses from several trans-local leaders (e.g. bishops and regional ministers) as well as mission enablers and communications officers. Others who responded may not have had an informed perspective, such as office support staff. For these reasons, the conclusions that emerged are fairly tentative.

The responses

From the survey responses it appears that the following denominations do not use the altar call for any purpose: the Church of Scotland, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of England, the Free Church of Scotland, the Gospel Hall Brethren, the Lutheran Council of Great Britain, the Moravian Church and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland.

A few Anglican respondents said it was not used, while others said it was used by only a small minority of churches and not often. The diversity of traditions within the Anglican Church means that the individual responses may have reflected a particular theological and liturgical perspective. Having said that, a number of those representing an Anglican tradition that does not use the altar call did acknowledge that it was used by others (mainly evangelicals and charismatics) within the wider denomination. The overall impression, though, is that Anglican use of the altar call is extremely limited. Other churches where use of the altar call was revealed to be slight were the Congregational Federation and the URC.

In a number of other denominations the altar call appears to be used by a significant minority of churches. These include Baptists, Methodists (who appear to use it a little less than Baptists) and the Church of the Nazarene, who appear to use it a little more than Baptists, i.e. in just under half their churches² (Bovey 2010:136). All the Baptist respondents said it was used, although the responses were not consistent. Opinions varied from 'rare' and 'seldom' to 'quite common and 'many'. A number said it was common at baptismal services. Interestingly, a 1996 Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) survey revealed that the altar call may play a more significant role than some of the respondents suggested. It showed that 39.3% of BUGB churches invited people forward for prayer ministry, 49.6% offered the laying on of hands for healing and 20% gave an evangelistic appeal in baptismal services (Ellis 1999:24,40). Furthermore, the fact that an invitation for response at a baptismal service is suggested in the BUGB service book confirms that the altar call is firmly rooted in Baptist identity, even if it is not used in the majority of churches (Ellis and Blyth 2005:72).

A number of (mostly smaller) denominations indicated that use of the altar call was widespread and frequent. These were Assemblies of God, Elim Pentecostal Churches (used weekly by '75%-80%' of churches), Free Methodist Church in the UK, Ichthus Christian Fellowship, Light and Life Church Gypsy Church, Newfrontiers UK, Pioneer Network, Seventh-day Adventist Church (around '60%' use it in weekly worship) and the Union of Evangelical Churches. It was clear from the survey of officers that The Salvation Army also comes into this category.

Contrasts between Britain, America and Australia

Taking into account the relevant sizes of the denominations that responded, it seems that only a small minority of Protestant churches in Britain and Ireland use the altar call. Those that do are mainly evangelical and/or charismatic. This contrasts with previous surveys in America and Australia showing that altar calls were 'used widely in local churches in America and Australia, and in a variety of denominations' (Bennett 2000:168). How can these differences be explained? One reason might be that Anglican churches, which don't generally use the altar call, make up a large proportion of the Protestant churches in Britain and Ireland. This large Anglican

² Nazarenes in the UK seem to use the altar call less than do those in America.

factor would reduce the total level of use within the survey compared with America and Australia.

Also, the altar call may not be as acceptable in Britain and Ireland as it is in America and Australia, where outward responses are perhaps regarded as less culturally inappropriate!

A third reason could be the different decades in which the surveys were taken. If the Britain and Ireland survey had been conducted in 1979 (like the American survey) or in 1996 (like the Australian survey), it might have indicated more widespread use of the altar call – but still probably less widespread than in those countries.

Some further findings

A number of respondents mentioned that invitations are given for healing and prayer ministry. In fact, some said these types of invitation are more common than evangelistic appeals. A few noted that, where evangelistic appeals are made, the invitations are usually for non-public forms of response, such as filling in response cards, speaking to someone after the service, or taking a booklet. Some respondents mentioned that creative or symbolic forms of response are often used, for example, lighting a candle, placing a stone in a bowl or writing on a prayer wall.

It was interesting to see how some respondents related the altar call to communion. For example, a Lutheran thought the altar call was unnecessary because Christ is given in communion, whereas some Methodist and New Frontiers respondents indicated that communion is an opportunity for public response to Christ and is therefore akin to an altar call. A few Anglican, Methodist and URC respondents said that people are often invited to receive prayer ministry at a communion service. Those who make positive connections between communion and the altar call are echoing the origins of the practice which developed from the communion season of the Presbyterian churches.

An effective evangelistic method?

A number of survey respondents mentioned that use of the altar call had declined in recent years. The main reason was that relationship-based evangelism courses, such as Alpha, are regarded as more effective in contemporary culture. British society is now regarded as post-Christian and postmodern, which makes people less

responsive to traditional evangelistic methods. In post-Christian Britain, only a small minority of people come from a Christian family or have a connection with the church, so evangelism that relies on people's understanding of the faith is less effective than it once was. In postmodern Britain, people are less inclined to accept absolute truth, giving equal plausibility to all beliefs and regarding only what is relevant, authentic and useful as important.

All this means that conversion is more likely to involve a process of learning and experiencing, rather than an instantaneous decision. Furthermore, this process is most effective in the context of personal relationships in which the authenticity and relevance of Christianity is witnessed. Not surprisingly, nurture courses which allow for all of this, such as Alpha, Good News Down the Street, and Emmaus, have proved to be highly effective. A 2003 survey showed that 46% of non-churchgoers who attended such courses came to faith and that 91% of these were still attending church six months later (Brierley 2003:18).³

Despite the preference for process evangelism, there are reasons to believe that the altar call still has a place, whether in mass crusades or local church evangelism. For example, a survey for *Finding Faith Today* revealed that 31% of people come to faith in a sudden experience (Finney 1992:24). This suggests that opportunities for such decisions need to be given. Although this survey is more than twenty years old, it is likely that a significant minority of people still experience sudden conversions.

Also, there is no reason why the journey to faith should not culminate in a decision made at an evangelistic service. Attfield suggests that in crusade evangelism the preaching in a stadium may be the final step for those who have already begun the process towards commitment (Attfield 2001:19).

Another important point is that, although most people's journey to faith is gradual, there are usually key moments in the process. Atkins suggests that conversion is not *either* a crisis *or* a process, but a process with 'points of crisis' (Atkins 2006:66). An evangelistic service could be the setting for such points of crisis. It could raise a person's interest in spiritual matters or encourage them to take part in a process evangelism course. This could happen because the person themselves has responded to an altar call or has witnessed someone else responding.

³Emmaus was the most effective: 50% of non-churchgoers made faith-commitment, with 100% of them still attending church after six months.

My survey results confirmed what *Finding Faith Today* discovered – namely that witnessing a baptism service was a significant evangelistic event for some people and that in some cases communion was a helpful opportunity for response (Booker and Ireland 2005:70). An altar call in connection with baptism and communion is therefore highly appropriate in some church traditions.

For all these reasons, the altar call can still be appropriate as part of a relationship-based, process-orientated approach to evangelism.

The altar call in the life of the Christian and the church

The survey indicated that an altar call is often given for various non-evangelistic reasons such as re-commitment or renewal, the in-filling of the Holy Spirit, healing and general prayer ministry. While these are all personal experiences, and can often remain as private experiences, the Christian life is ideally lived in community, so it is natural that they will often be shared experiences. This being so, a public response may be helpful at times.

The Salvation Army Officer survey indicated a number of ways in which responding to the altar call is beneficial. For example, it allows other people to pray for the person, even if they do not know the reason for the response.

Also, the outward sign of the inward spiritual experience helps to confirm and seal the person's experience and to mark it as a special moment.

Furthermore, making a public response makes the person feel more accountable to those who witness it. Accountability is an important factor in Christian discipleship. Responding in front of others reminds the person that there is a responsibility to others, as well as to God, as a result of the experience.

Finally, public response can be an encouragement, an example or a challenge to others. The congregation sees that God is at work in the person's life – and God can use their response to speak to others about their own spiritual experience and commitment.

Some recommendations for churches

On the basis of what has been said above, there are some recommendations for churches that do, as well as churches that do not, use the altar call.

Churches that use the altar call as their main means of helping people to come to faith in Christ should also ensure that there are opportunities for non-Christians and new Christians to build relationships with others in the church and to take part in pre-conversion and post-conversion nurture groups. This will make evangelism in the local church, as well as in large crusades, more appropriate for the contemporary culture.

Churches which focus solely on process evangelism should recognise that there are points of crisis within the process of conversion. They therefore ought to provide opportunities for response during and/or at the end of process evangelism courses. These opportunities could be private, but as we have seen, public response can be helpful for the individual and the congregation.

Public response in worship can be meaningful for individuals and congregations and can contribute to spiritual growth. Therefore, churches that do not already give such opportunities might consider doing so. The prospect may seem daunting for congregations not familiar with it, but a way to introduce it might be to offer prayer ministry in conjunction with communion, as is already the practice in some churches. If people are used to walking forward for communion, they may be prepared to receive prayer ministry at the same time. Once they experience the benefits of this, they may be prepared to respond on other occasions.

The value of symbolic responses in worship could be considered, both by churches that do use the altar call and those that do not. Postmodern people like 'seeing and doing'. Offering opportunities to step forward and light a candle, write on a prayer wall, pick up a card and so on, could make worship and response more meaningful. For churches that do not already invite public response, such symbolic forms of response may be a 'user-friendly' way to begin.

Although the altar call is mainly a feature of evangelical and charismatic worship, it need not remain so. Its form can reflect the culture, tradition and context of each individual church or denomination. Whatever form the altar call takes, it can encourage people to make faith commitments and to develop healthy spiritual lives. If it were more widely used, it could contribute significantly to the life of the church in Britain and Ireland.

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