

The Origin of the Altar Call in American Methodism

An Historical Study by Robert E. Coleman

What has come to be commonly referred to as "the altar call," or more formally as "the invitation," is a unique development in the worship of American Protestantism. It is not that the idea of publicly registering one's decision is new, for since the days that the sons of Levi gathered around Moses in response to the cry, "Who is on the Lord's side? let him come unto me,"¹ giving public expression of a decision has been familiar to all worshippers of God.

The different thing about the contemporary invitation does not lie in the principle of the appeal, but in the method of giving it. The insistence upon making a decision here and now, coming forward in a public service, kneeling or standing at the front altar for prayer, going to an "inquiry room," receiving some instruction in the meaning of salvation--these are elements in the contemporary "altar call," though not new in themselves, which nonetheless combine to give the appeal a distinctively different color peculiar to the American evangelical way of worship.

Those who study the history of Christian worship cannot help but be curious about the origin of this phenomenon. It has no clear precedent in the traditional worship of the Reformation, or even in the spiritual exercises of the Protestant revival movements in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Neither the Puritans, the Pietists, nor the Methodists, all of whom figured so prominently in setting the pattern of the spiritual life of early America, had an intrinsic notion of "the altar call" in their public order of worship. These groups transplanted to America a radical sectarian emphasis upon personal salvation which undoubtedly gave to this new method of bringing men to Christ its theological explanation. But the emergency of the modern-day invitational technique was the result of elements indigenous to the American church and society. The untamed and unrestrained influence of the new world, heightened by the surging spirit of freedom, took the

¹Exodus 32:26; cf. Joshua 24:15; II Chronicles 34:30-32; Ezra 10:5. Jesus underscored the same principle of public acceptance in His invitation to the disciples when He said, "Follow Me," and to Zacchaeus, "Come down." Matt. 4:19; 9:9; Luke 19:5; cf. Matt. 10:32,33; Mark 8:38; Luke 9:26; 14:23.

spiritual emphasis of the revival sects and blazed a new and bold course of action in religion as well as in government. When finally "the altar call" became distinguishable as a pattern of worship near the close of the eighteenth century, it was an inevitable expression of an aggressively different kind of church.

Yet the altar call did not come automatically with the landing of revivalists in America. It took time for the traditional routines of worship to adjust to the new circumstances and to evolve a new practice of evangelism. Until almost the beginning of the nineteenth century, the feeling in America continued to reflect the old European conservatism which believed essentially that persons should seek salvation when and where the Spirit moved them apart from any prescribed method of coming forward for prayer and counsel. Accordingly, invitations were given to provoke conviction of sin rather than prescribe a ritual of remedy. Close, personal preaching was common, especially among the revivalists, but the people were left to work out their own salvation. Jonathan Edwards, in the revivals in Northampton and the neighboring villages in 1733, encouraged those disturbed because of their sins to go home and to discuss their problems among themselves in small groups.² The Tennents, famous "Log College" preachers of the First Great Awakening, followed the practice of "counseling with their people" in their homes.³ George Whitefield moved thousands to repentance, but left them where they were to find solace for their souls. Of course, ministers were always willing to be of assistance when asked for help, and in their sermons the most zealous of them exhorted their people to seek salvation without delay. Robert Williams, pioneer Methodist preacher, typified many evangelists of his day when at the conclusion of his sermon at Bushnell's Chapel in Virginia in 1776 he "cried out in usual manner, 'Who wants a Saviour? The first that believes shall be justified.'" Characteristically "in a few minutes the house was ringing with the cries of broken-hearted sinners, and the shouts of happy believers,"⁴ yet equally characteristic of the times, no effort was made to invite seekers forward to a place of refuge and comfort. They

²Jonathan Edwards, *A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God in the Conversion of Many Hundred Souls in Northampton and the Neighboring Towns and Villages* (1736), Sect. I, in *Puritan Sage*, ed. by Vergilius Ferm (New York, 1953), pp. 164-176.

³Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of the American Tradition*. (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 59

⁴Jesse Lee, *A Short History of the Methodists in the United States of America*. (Baltimore, 1810), p. 58.

"were left to struggle with their convictions until, like the multitudes on the Day of Pentecost, they were constrained to cry out, 'Brethren, what must we do?' or until, overcome by conflicting emotions, they fell prostrate upon the ground."⁵

The practice of friends gathering around the afflicted persons to pray and offer spiritual counsel which grew out of this situation was a significant development in the evaluation of the modern-day invitation. An eye witness to a "gracious work of God" on the Brunswick circuit in 1775 was much impressed with the way people came to help those "lying helpless on the floor." He observed:

It was truly affecting to see them collecting round the penitent sinners, and praying for them one after another, and sometimes two or three together at the same time, until some of the mourners would get up with streaming eyes, and catching in their arms those that were nearest to them, and calling upon all present to praise God, for what he had done for their souls.⁶

Usually some sympathetic persons would come to those in distress and deal with them where they were while the preaching continued. But, in time, it became customary to take the distressed persons out of the public meeting. Workers specially designated for this service would scurry to the side of those "cut down" with conviction and carry them from the sanctuary to a place where they could be dealt with away from the public distractions.⁷ Satisfaction was seldom obtained without a struggle. Often persons in distress would remain for hours to pray, and not infrequently, the struggle for peace of mind would continue throughout the night.⁸

With the beginning of the Second Great Awakening toward the close of the eighteenth century, the pattern of the modern day invitation began to be clearly visible in the appeal for distressed persons to come together for prayer. What might

⁵Thomas H. Campbell, *Studies in Cumberland Presbyterian History* (Nashville, 1944), p. 47; cf. instances of this phenomenon, e.g. Reuben Ellis, "Letter," Feb. 23, 1790, in W. W. Sweet, *Religion in the American Frontier, 1783-1840*, IV, "The Methodists" (Chicago, 1946), p. 142; Francis Asbury, *The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury* (New York, 1821), II, pp. 476-477; Peter Cartwright, *Autobiography*, ed. by W. P. Strickland (New York, 1856), pp. 30, 31.

⁶Jesse Lee, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

⁷An example of this practice at a Camp Meeting in 1801 is cited by C. C. Cleveland, *The Great Revival in the West, 1797-1805* (Chicago, 1916), pp. 79, 80.

⁸Examples of this prior to 1800 are found in Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia* (Richmond, 1810), pp. 10, 37; Richard Whatcoat, *Journal*, in W. W. Sweet, "The Methodists," *op. cit.*, p. 79; Francis Asbury, *The Journal of the Rev. Francis Asbury*, I (New York, 1821), p. 375.

have been the first public invitation of this type was given at a little Methodist Church in Maryland in 1798. In his *Journal* under the date of October 31 of that year, Jesse Lee wrote:

At Paup's meeting-house, Mr. Asbury preached on Ephesians v. 25, 26, 27. He gave us a good discourse. Then I exhorted, and the power of the Lord was amongst us; many wept, and some cried aloud with deep distress. Then Miles Harper exhorted, and dismissed the assembly. The class was desired to remain. Brother Neal, who was present, began to sing, and in a little while many were afflicted, and a general weeping began. John Easter proclaimed aloud, "I have not a doubt in my soul but what my God will convert a soul today!" The preacher then requested all that were under conviction to come together. Several men and women came, and fell upon their knees; and the preachers, for some time, kept singing, and exhorting the mourners to expect a blessing from the Lord, till the cries of the mourners became truly awful. Then prayer was made in behalf of the mourners, and two or three found peace. My soul did magnify the Lord, and rejoice in God my Saviour."⁹

This idea of urging convicted persons together in a designated place while a minister exhorted and others sang represented a significant development in the order of worship. For purposes of distinction, it can be said to mark the actual beginning of the contemporary "altar call" procedure.

The practice of coming forward voluntarily as an evidence of intention also began to be an accepted pattern about this same time. George Kinard wrote Bishop Asbury on June 20, 1800: "On the sabbath after you left here (Duck Creek, Delaware), about one hundred and nine came forward, and begged to be admitted to our society."¹⁰ John Brodhead reported that "eighty-three came forward and joined the society" after he spoke in the open air to a large congregation at Athens, Connecticut, on May 18, 1801.¹¹ At a love-feast out under the shade of trees near a church in Delaware on May 24, 1801, Reverend William Colbert sang and prayed after the sermon and then "called upon the persons in distress to come forward

⁹Jesse Lee, *Journal*, in Minton Thrift, *Memoir of the Rev. Jesse Lee with Extracts from his Journals* (New York, 1823), p. 243.

¹⁰George Kinard, Letter in *Extracts of Letters*, p. 3, quoted in Wade C. Barclay, *History of Methodist Missions, Part I, Early American Methodism, 1769-1844*, II (New York, 1950), p. 323.

¹¹*Ibid.*

and look to the Lord to convert their souls." In response to his invitation, "numbers came forward, and repaired to the meeting-house" where he "spent some time with them in prayer" before he left them. Here was an early instance of the principle of the inquiry room being used. Again on April 18, 1802, at a crowded meeting-house Mr. Colbert said "a great number of mourners came to us in prayer when the invitation was given."¹² Similarly, Methodist circuit rider Henry Smith recorded in his diary on Sunday, May 29, 1803:

After I had spoken to the class I opened a door to receive members into the society. None seemed disposed to join. I then proposed for those who were mourning to know the love of God if they would come forward and kneel down. Eight or ten came.¹³

Here the invitation clearly asked persons in earnest about their salvation to demonstrate their desire by coming to the front of the sanctuary in full view of the congregation.

The plan of inviting seekers to a "mourners bench" or "anxious seat" seems to have developed in connection with this appeal to come forward. It derived its name from the bench which would be placed in front of the congregation or the front seats of the church which would be vacated to serve as a crude altar where penitent sinners might come to make their supplications to God. Henry Boehm, venerated pioneer Methodist preacher, witnessed the use of this technique in the early part of the year 1800 during a great revival at Cecil Circuit, Maryland, where William P. Chandler "was the preacher in charge." Commenting upon the effectiveness of this new method of gathering souls, he said:

It was a great advantage because, with the seekers scattered all through the congregation, it was difficult to give them suitable attention. By bringing them together they were accessible to those who desired to instruct and encourage them. In the early part of the revival I saw twelve men kneel at the mourner's bench, and they were all quickly converted.¹⁴

As revival procedure became more standardized, the method of directing people to the mourner's bench also became more systematic. At a camp meeting on the Baltimore circuit in 1806 an "official guard" was appointed "to bring forward mourners and admit them" into an enclosure well supplied with

¹²William Colbert, *Journal*, quoted in John Atkinson, *Centennial History of American Methodism* (New York, 1884), footnote, p. 468.

¹³Henry Smith, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 469.

¹⁴Henry Boehm, statement made orally to John Atkinson, and recorded in *Ibid.*, p. 469.

benches, "where active persons were ready to receive them and help them on to Jesus."¹⁵ These eye witness reports refute the commonly accepted belief that the mourner's bench was devised during the winter of 1807 in a crowded New York City Chapel "to enable saints to deal with seekers more conveniently,"¹⁶ although the evidence supporting this opinion shows how the idea of the mourner's bench was spreading. The same could be said for the theory that this custom originated later in the backwoods camp meetings of America.¹⁷ The idea that "the anxious seat" was a "new méasure" of Charles G. Finney, asserted in the 1820's and 1830's by such prominent men as Asahel Nettleton and Lyman Beecher, if not Finney himself,¹⁸ while having no basis in fact, nevertheless shows how the method was being adopted in the church, especially in the revivalistic wing.

Instead of the "mourner's bench," sometimes distressed persons would be invited to come to the communion rail for prayer from which was derived the association of "the altar call."¹⁹ This was particularly applicable to those churches which had an altar constructed at the front of the sanctuary where communicants could receive the sacrament of the Lord's Supper. One of the first persons to extend such an invitation was Reverend Richard Sneath at the old St. George's Methodist Church in Philadelphia on January 25, 1801. In a letter to Dr. Coke, Mr. Sneath recounted this experience:

After Mr. Cooper had done preaching, I invited all the mourners to come to the communion table, that we might pray particularly for them. This I found to be useful, as it removed that shame which often hinders fousls from coming to Chrif, and excited them to the exercife of faith. About thirty professed to be

¹⁵Henry Smith, November 11, 1806, quoted in W. W. Sweet, *Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1763-1840* (New York, 1952), p. 151.

¹⁶Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York, 1957), p. 46; citing the earlier research of Frank Granville Beardsley, *A History of American Revivals* (New York, 1904), pp. 194-195.

¹⁷View held by Paul Samuel Sanders, *An Appraisal of John Wesley's Sacramentalism in the Evolution of Early American Methodism* (Unpublished Th. D. Thesis, Union Theological Seminary, 1954), p. 389. Dr. Sanders refers to the description by Captain Marrayat of a Methodist Camp Meeting in 1812 to illustrate his point, in Halford F. Luccock and Paul Hutchinson, *The Story of Methodism* (New York, 1946), p. 253 f.

¹⁸Charles G. Finney, *Memoirs* (New York, 1876), p. 288 f; see W. W. Sweet, *Revivalism in America* (New York, 1945), pp. 135, 136; cf. incorrect interpretation of this reference by P. S. Sanders, who thought that Sweet credited the origin of the mourner's bench to Finney, Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

¹⁹A plausible theory suggested by Dr. Sanders although his chronology of origin is inadequate. Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 357

converted, and twenty-fix joined the society.²⁰

The "altar call" soon became a common observance in the church, and among the Methodists, at least, it became virtually a universal practice.

It is not difficult to see why the appeal to come to the altar gained such popular favor. The Holy Sacrament had always been reverently regarded by most Americans and this feeling was nowhere more localized than at the altar. Thus, for those who already held the altar sacred, the invitation for sinners to come there for solace had almost a sacramental appeal.²¹ Surely it presented an ideal setting for evangelism. Instances of sacramental occasions being turned into revivals are numerous in American history. A routine example of this was reported by Bishop Whatcoat in his Journal for November 8, 1789. He wrote that "the power of God came down" mightily during the administration of the Sacrament at a Quarterly Conference, causing an interruption in the communion service, and later after Bishop Asbury preached, people "began to praise the Lord and call upon His Name." He expressed the hope that many would date their conversion from that meeting.²² Interestingly enough, the first camp meetings in the west grew out of revivals which burst out at services of the church where the Lord's Supper was administered. The most famous of them all, the Cane Ridge meeting in Kentucky, which attracted perhaps 25,000 persons to Bourbon County in 1801, began as an annual Presbyterian Communion service, and ended with Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians united in worship, and the latter two in Communion.²³ In these camp meetings, the table where the "elements" were served, and even the rail or fence which separated it from other furnishings of the ground, was to the backwoodsmen of the frontier truly a place where penitent souls might come to find forgiveness and help in time of need.

All of the basic ingredients in the modern-day "altar call" are seen in these evangelistic techniques developed in the great revivals of the early nineteenth century. In the past one hundred and fifty years the appeal has become somewhat more

²⁰Richard Sneath, Letter to Dr. Coke, Oct. 5, 1802, printed in *The Methodist Magazine*, 1803, XXVI, p. 373. Note that the "s" is here written as "f."

²¹Dr. Sanders in his extensive study of sacramentalism in the evolution of early American Methodism concluded that "the early Methodists saw the same psychological value of a penitent seeker coming to the 'altar' for help that Wesley saw in a 'seeker making the motion of rising, moving forward, kneeling down, and taking hold of and eating bread and wine,'" Sanders, *op. cit.*, p. 359.

²²Richard Whatcoat, *Journal*, in W. W. Sweet, "The Methodists," *op. cit.*, pp. 84, 85.

²³See P. S. Sanders, *op. cit.*, pp. 352, 353; Thomas Campbell, *op. cit.*, pp. 45, 46; cf. C. C. Cleveland, *op. cit.*, 62 ff., 76 ff.

polished and a few more promotional ideas such as lifting the hand or signing a card, but the essential pattern of giving the public invitation remains unaltered. Not only has "the altar call" now become virtually an indispensable procedure of the professional evangelist, but "The Invitation to Christian Discipleship" has become an accepted order of worship in practically all Protestant churches, particularly non-liturgical communions. It is true that in the last half-century within the growing liturgical movement of America there has been a definite refinement of this concept, and among some of the more sophisticated divines, a gradual elimination of it. Ultimately from this movement perhaps a new and even more indigenous invitation will emerge. But, like it or no, until there can be found an evangelistic method more suited to the temperament and aspirations of the American people, "the altar call" of the distinctively revivalistic origin and flavor is likely to remain a vital part of evangelical worship.