

**Rescuing the Perishing:
A Defense of Giving Invitations**

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Giving his testimony of his conversion while listening to Billy Graham on television, Jim recalled the night he and his wife prayed to receive Christ, and then called the telephone number on the screen. Follow-up by counselors resulted in their public profession of faith in a local Southern Baptist Church. With a mixture of sadness and confidence in his voice, Jim tells me that six weeks ago he lost his wife to cancer.

Jim and his wife are just two of the multitudes who have responded to the invitation to receive Jesus Christ by either walking an aisle, calling a telephone number, or any number of ways through the ministry of Billy Graham. Yet there are those who criticize the approach of Graham and others like him. Author David Engelsma accuses Dr. Graham of doing incalculable damage. He says that people like Jim and Chloe are done a disservice in that they are given false hopes; more than likely they are still unsaved. In his book, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel*, Engelsma writes, "The message of Graham is the doctrine of Pelagius out of hell."¹ He goes on to label the altar call "the most atrocious abomination before God and man."²

¹David Engelsma, *Hyper-Calvinism and the Call of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1994) 63.

²*Ibid.*, 125

Engelsma is convinced “that God eternally hates some men; has immutably decreed their damnation; and has determined to withhold from them Christ, grace, faith, and salvation.”³ He makes “the exact, explicit denial that God loves all men, desires to save all men, and conditionally offers them salvation.”⁴ (Incidentally, Engelsma wrote these words in an attempt to prove that he is not a hyper-Calvinist). His main complaint about giving invitations is that it infers that there is a “well meant offer” of the Gospel to everyone who hears, when in his opinion there clearly is not. Engelsma’s attitude is reminiscent of an old Particular Baptist Hymn:

*We are the Lord’s elected few,
Let all the rest be damned
There’s room enough in hell for you,
We won’t have heaven crammed!*⁵

Not everyone opposed to invitations would embrace Engelsma’s sentiments, but his arguments are repeated with alarming frequency. However, when the biblical, historical and theological issues are examined, it is evident that the practice of giving public invitations is on solid footing. This article will attempt to reply to the most frequently stated charges.

Biblical Arguments

Charge: *Invitations are not found in the Bible, neither in principle nor in practice.*

Reply: *If this charge were true, it is at best an argument from silence; but invitations were often given in the Bible.*

Often the charge is made that nothing like the modern invitation can be found in the Scriptures. This is at best an argument from silence. Neither ushers nor the pews in which they seat people; neither offertories nor the organs on which they are played; nor most of the various

³Ibid., 58.

⁴Ibid.

components of a modern worship service can be found explicitly in the Bible. In fact, some would say that the Sunday morning worship service itself is not in the Scriptures. If the Bible is silent about giving an invitation, then the burden of proof is on those who say that invitations violate Biblical principles. (Actually, this is exactly the line of argument used by those who would forbid the use of hymns or musical instruments in church services.)

However, there is abundant Scriptural justification for the practice of giving public invitations. In both the Old and New Testament 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, he 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!'"

⁵Quoted by Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1988), 233.

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.

In addition to *parakaleo*, we find the word *peitho* used to describe the evangelistic efforts of Paul, Apollos, and others. It is generally translated as “persuade” (Acts 13:43; 17:4; 18:4). Engelsma claims that true preaching is simply proclamation and that it should not be an effort to persuade. He believes that the attempt to persuade men to decide for Christ is to presume upon the work of the Holy Spirit. But *peitho* means “to convince someone to believe something”—the very essence of persuasion. Engelsma’s understanding of preaching is deficient and alien to the New Testament.

Historical Arguments

Charge: *The practice of giving invitations was invented (or at least popularized) by Charles Finney.*

A common attack against invitations is to connect them in some way with Charles Finney. Engelsma calls the altar call “that johnny-come-lately innovation of Finney.”⁶ Albert Dod, a former professor of theology at Princeton claims, “The practice of urging people to come

⁶Engelsma, 63.

forward at the end of preaching services was introduced by Charles Finney. This method is without historical precedent.” Why would this accusation matter? Because although Finney was an influential evangelist of the early nineteenth century, he definitely held aberrant views concerning salvation. In essence Finney taught that a person could be moved to come to Christ without the convicting and converting work of the Holy Spirit. Thus, if the altar call were a method derived from his spurious theology, then this would call into question its validity.

Reply: *This is an example of guilt by association. It is also historically incorrect*

The Separate Baptists of the Sandy Creek tradition were giving invitations thirty years before Finney was even born. An eyewitness described the manner in which the “ranting Anabaptists” would conduct services during the great revivals in the Carolinas in the 1760’s:

At the close of the sermon, the minister would come down from the pulpit and while singing a suitable hymn would go around among the brethren shaking hands. The hymn being sung, he would then extend an invitation to such persons as felt themselves poor guilty sinners, and were anxiously inquiring the way of salvation, to come forward and kneel near the stand, or if they preferred, they could kneel at their seats, proffering to unite with them in prayer for their conversion.⁷

Many may have learned how to give invitations from Finney, but not Baptists.

The fact that Separate Baptists gave altar calls is important for several reasons. Many of the Separate Baptists were converts of George Whitefield during the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century. (Whitefield, an Anglican, is supposed to have lamented, “All my chickens have become ducks.”) They inherited Whitefield’s moderate Calvinism and aggressive attitude toward evangelism.

⁷William L.Lumpkin, *Baptist Foundations in the South* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman, 1961), 56.

Prior to this time only the Particular Baptists (or Regular Baptists, as they came to be known) and a handful of General Baptists existed in the American Colonies.⁸ Although the Particular Baptists had arrived in the colonies nearly one hundred years earlier, they never enjoyed the success of the Separate Baptists. The Separate Baptists spread through the Southern colonies like wildfire and soon vastly outnumbered their Particular counterparts. In 1740, there were less than one thousand Baptists spread among a meager sixty churches throughout all of America. They made up less than one percent of the population. Then came the great revivals of the Separate Baptists. Just sixty years later, Baptists were the largest denomination on the continent with over one thousand churches. From smallest to largest in sixty years! It is no exaggeration to say that over ninety percent of all Southern Baptist Churches can trace their roots back to the Sandy Creek Revival of the Separate Baptists.

Both Particular and Separate Baptists were Calvinistic, but Separate Baptists never interpreted the doctrines of sovereignty, predestination, and election in such a way as to smother evangelism. The Separates knew that salvation was entirely a work of God but they also realized that He uses the Church to do His work. They sang enthusiastically, preached fervently, and called men to Christ with blunt clarity. The Particular Baptists were jealous of the growth of the Separate Baptists, but were hindered by a theology that seemed to produce only inertia. Before we do away with the invitation we should ask ourselves if the Particular Baptists are the best model to follow.

⁸Ibid., 40-65.

Charge: *Historically, the results of invitations are dismal and produce many false converts.*

Opponents of the invitation point to the often-disappointing results of many evangelistic meetings. The invitation is said to be a distraction that short-circuits the very process that it is meant to facilitate.

Reply: *This is by far the most serious accusation. Some of the critic's points are valid.*

For many churches, the problem is not that an invitation is being given, but that murky preaching precedes it. From many pulpits there is a lack of clarity about the desperate sinfulness of man, the necessity of repentance and faith, and the propitiatory work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Many who are saved later in life have testified of going forward earlier and wrongly identifying salvation with the handshake of the preacher. Yet it is not the practice of the invitation that is at fault. Rather it is the anemic theology of the one giving it. It is not helpful when biblical words like repentance and faith are replaced with phrases like “getting connected with God.” When salvation is replaced with therapy, the result will be false converts whether an altar call is given or not. The answer is not to withdraw from calling for a decision and giving the hearer an opportunity to respond, but to preach sound doctrine. Let's not throw the methodological baby out with the theological bathwater.

Without a doubt, the evangelistic methods employed by some are scandalous. When Christ is preached in the power of the Holy Spirit, manipulative methods are not necessary. Those who use such techniques are revealing their lack of confidence in the power of the Gospel. I suspect that some of my friends who are opposed to giving invitations are reacting against these deceptive and unethical practices. But correcting this problem is like driving on ice; when sliding one way one must never over-steer in the other direction. If Southern Baptists stop giving invitations, it will be a devastating over-correction.

Theological Arguments

Speaking of ice, the public invitation is an example of what could be called an “iceberg issue.” Concern for the invitation is only the tip of a large set of unseen theological assumptions. What we believe about how God saves a lost sinner eventually determines how we go about doing evangelism. Some reject giving invitations because they do not believe that God desires the salvation of all or that salvation is even available for the non-elect.

Charge: *There is no “well meant offer” of the Gospel to all.*

Hyper-Calvinists such as David Engelsma reject the view that the Gospel is genuinely offered to everyone that hears it. They do not believe that God loves all people and desires their salvation. Engelsma claims that Paul

did not believe, nor did he ever preach, that God loved all men, was gracious to all men, and desired the salvation of all men, that is he did not believe, teach, or give the well-meant offer of the Gospel. . . . Paul did not regard the preaching of the gospel as an *offer* of salvation to everyone, directed to everyone in a universal love of God and providing everyone with a chance to be saved.⁹

Engelsma gives a list of statements that he says no true preacher would ever say: “God loves all of you, and Christ died for all of you . . . God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life . . . God is gracious to all of you and sincerely desires your salvation.” His blunt assessment of such declarations is: “This message is false.”¹⁰ With such a conception of the love of God, it is not difficult to see why Engelsma sees no need for invitations.

⁹Engelsma, 70.

¹⁰Ibid., 88.

Reply: *Southern Baptists recognize that God's offer of salvation to all is real.*

In contrast to Engelsma, the *Baptist Faith and Message* teaches that the Gospel is a genuine offer.¹¹ It also teaches that this grace is consistent with man's genuine and meaningful response. A genuine offer necessitates a call for a decision. A call for a decision is by its very nature an invitation.

Charge: *Repentance and faith are the results of being born again, not the conditions for salvation.*

In order to understand the objections of those like Engelsma, one must realize that they see salvation as a process. First, the elect is regenerated, and then afterwards his repentance and faith reveal this new life. Faith is not the condition to salvation, it is the result of it. In such a system, giving an invitation is superfluous. In many ways, the debate about the invitation is really a disagreement about the order of salvation.

Reply: *Conversion is not a process, and that regeneration is simultaneous with conversion (John 1:12).*

Faith is not the means to deserve salvation, but it is the means to obtain it (John 3:36; Acts 16:31). Faith is not the condition for God to give salvation, but it is the condition to receive it. Therefore exercising faith is not meriting salvation. When a free gift is given, the merit belongs to the giver of the gift, not the recipient (Rom.4:16; Eph. 2:8-9).

Charge: *Pleading with men to come to Christ is disgraceful and even idolatrous.*

According to Engelsma, preachers are called to proclaim the Gospel, not to persuade men to receive it. He describes anyone who tries to persuade the hearer as an "offer-man."

¹¹*Baptist Faith and Message*, Section IV.

An ‘offer-man,’ if he is consistent, must beg sinners, and the disgraceful practice abounds today. It is revolting to anyone who has caught a glimpse of the majesty of God, the excellent glory of the risen Jesus, and the sovereignty of grace to hear the ‘offer-men’ begging recalcitrant sinners please to accept Jesus and come to the front. They conjure up the spectacle of the Baal prophets ranting and raving in their ‘altar call’ for their powerless god to send the fire.¹²

Engelsma thus likens those who urge men to come to Christ to the prophets of Baal. He says giving invitations is tantamount to idolatry because in his opinion it focuses on the sinner rather than the sovereign work of grace.

Reply: *Besides being offensive, his characterization is patently false.*

We would agree that salvation is completely a work of God, but we also believe that He uses intermediate means to accomplish His work. It is God who calls men to salvation, but He uses the Gospel preacher to issue the summons. As noted earlier, the word “persuade” is often used in the Bible to describe evangelistic efforts. This is not a denial of the essential work of the Holy Spirit in drawing people to Christ. No one can argue someone to Jesus, but God does use our earnest solicitations to accomplish His will.

Engelsma says that urging men to be saved denigrates the glory of God. But surely Engelsma does not care more about God’s glory than does the Lord Himself. In Hosea, the Lord presents Himself as pleading with idolatrous Israel as a husband would plead with a wayward wife. The Father in the Parable of the Prodigal Son was willing to run to the younger son and go out to plead with the older son. Does Engelsma think Jesus was mimicking the prophets of Baal when he wept over Jerusalem and exclaimed, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing!” There is nothing disgraceful in Paul’s appeal when he states, “Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s

¹²Ibid., 87.

behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). There is a place for earnest, brokenhearted preaching. The invitation is a natural expression of the sincere, godly desire for people to come to Christ.

Charge: *Occupying a certain piece of geography does not save people.*

Reply: *This is a straw man.*

Critics will sometimes imply that the hearers are given the impression that they will be saved by the fact that they have come “to the front.” No Gospel preacher worth his salt even hints that a person is saved by the act of going forward. Gospel preachers make clear that salvation is not in any public act or repeating any prayer. Salvation is Jesus Christ. We publicly invite people to come to Him. No method of giving an invitation is sacrosanct and sensitivity to the particular situation in which the minister finds himself is in order. What must be upheld is the principle of calling the hearers to a decision and expecting the Spirit of God to do His work.

Charge: *Free choice is an illusion.*

Reply: *However one understands the work of the Holy Spirit Who enables a lost sinner to choose, at least all agree that God commands man to do so.*

Engelsma states that true preaching “to the unconverted will never tell the audience that their salvation depends upon their free will, decision for Christ, acceptance of the offered salvation, opening their heart to let Jesus come in, and the like.”¹³ The examples of the preaching of Moses, Joshua, and Elijah, just to name a few, make this clear. From Augustine to

¹³Ibid., 88.

J.I. Packer, many of those who held to a strict view of predestination also recognized the danger of “defend[ing] God’s grace as to deny man’s free will.”¹⁴

The *Baptist Faith and Message* understands that this balance must be kept when it states: “Election is the gracious purpose of God, according to which He regenerates, sanctifies, and glorifies sinners. It is consistent with the free agency of man, and comprehends all the means in connection with the end.”¹⁵ God’s sovereignty must never be stressed in such a way that it (intentionally or unintentionally) denigrates human agency.

The mysterious coincidental work of God and human choice is seen throughout the Scriptures (Acts 2:23 and Acts 13:48-14:1 are just a few examples). The doctrine of election is not given for us to speculate about the order of the divine decrees, but to assure us that God’s great plan of salvation will be accomplished. Instead of discouraging the practice of intentional evangelistic methods such as soulwinning and giving invitations, it should make us just that much bolder. When Christ appeared to Paul in Corinth, what did Jesus say to encourage him to continue his missionary work? “Do not be afraid . . . for I have many people in this city” (Acts 18:9-10). We should preach with anticipation, eager to see our Lord’s “many people” respond during the invitation.

Make no mistake: to oppose giving invitations is to oppose confrontational evangelism in general. When one or two are urged to come to Christ it is called soul-winning, but when the same appeal is made to one or two hundred it is called an altar call. In principle both are the same thing. Giving an invitation is simply calling upon the congregation to do what God commands all to do: clearly, definitely, and publicly *choose*.

¹⁴See J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1961). Packer, a high Calvinist, gives his definition of evangelism: “The message begins with information and ends with an invitation.” *Ibid.*, 92.

Conclusion

The backwardness concerning evangelism of those who espouse Englesma's position should inform us as to whether we want to embrace this brand of theology. Any view that intentionally or unintentionally impedes confrontational evangelism must be rejected.

We would do well to compare and contrast the track record of the Regular Baptists and the Separate Baptists. The blunt, unvarnished truth is that if Baptists had continued to employ the reticent and reserved methods of the Regular Baptists, most of us would still be waiting to hear the Gospel. The exuberant and intentional evangelistic style practiced by the Separate Baptists transformed Baptist life. Operating within the tempered Calvinism of their spiritual mentor, George Whitefield, it is the Separate Baptist of the Sandy Creek tradition who made the invitation the capstone of Baptist preaching.

A word of personal testimony is due here. I must confess that this issue affects me deeply. In October 1975, in a revival at Tabernacle Baptist Church in Piedmont, Missouri, I was converted under the stern preaching of Evangelist Clifford Rice. "Stern" is the only word that can accurately describe his preaching. The second night that I heard him, I responded when he gave the invitation. I still remember him smiling as he led me to Christ. He has my eternal gratitude.

I owe my listeners the same opportunity. The need of the hearers is desperate; the power of the Gospel is effective. So without apology I will continue to invite men to Christ. How can a preacher do otherwise?

¹⁵*Baptist Faith and Message*, Section V.