

Re-thinking Alter Calls

The Call to Public Appropriation in a Post-Modern Milieu:

Introduction

A number of decades ago, we called it ‘hitting the sawdust trail,’ a saying that came from the big tent meetings of the American revivalist era. Crowds of people would sit and stand under large tents in fields with sawdust strewn under their feet. When the call to follow Christ was given, those who went forward as a public display of faith were said to have hit the sawdust trail. In more recent decades, the term ‘alter call’ has been used to describe the portion of a service or message where hearers are called on to publicly profess faith in Jesus. The imagery here is of an alter or stage at the front of a traditional church building where we would call ‘sinners to repentance.’ In Pentecostal settings, often times coming forward to have hands laid on those who want to ‘get right with the Lord,’ is the means by which we call those in our midst to publicly follow Jesus and receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Each of these terms comes from an era and faith-tradition that seems antiquated and removed from our post-modern milieu in which we minister today. The smell of cow manure and chicken feed under big tents belongs to a time long gone by in our country. Musty auditoriums with hard wood pews where people come to kneel at the foot of a stage is a stereotype of 1950’s conservatism in the minds of many post-moderns. The hot store-front Pentecostal service with large, over-dressed women jumping up and down and falling on the ground doesn’t seem to fit our idea of cultural sensitivity and connectedness with today’s aloof and un-churched youth. The question has been raised by many as we strive to construct ministry paradigms for the emerging generation, ‘Is there a place for publicly calling students to follow Jesus Christ?’

The public call to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior is an essential component of any effective, Biblically-based, evangelistic ministry. It is the means by which we offer Christ publicly to the university and by doing so, we become God’s mouthpiece in calling the campus to submit and follow him. However, a great deal of re-thinking the ‘alter call’ needs to happen in order to salvage this historic and Biblical practice. We need to ask the question, how do we call post-moderns to declare their faith in Christ publicly? This will be a growing concern for us as a movement as we move toward greater experimentation in the areas of mass evangelism and evangelistic events.

Being a full-time evangelist, I have been challenged through my own experiences as a speaker to think long and hard about the issue of calling for public decisions. I will readily admit my shortcomings in the past and the fact that on more than one occasion, I was the thoughtless speaker who fulfilled the stereotype that we are trying to avoid. As a result, I have tried to re-think everything in the last 4 years of my evangelistic preaching and travels. I’ve tried to re-think how to explain sin and hell, I’ve re-thought how to help students see the relevancy of the cross, I’ve tried to re-think how to captivate the

imagination of post-moderns through Biblical story telling, and I've also tried hard to re-think what I refer to as the call to public appropriation (CPA), or alter calls.

Biblical Precedent for the Call to Public Appropriation (CPA)

The precedent for calling for a public commitment to follow Jesus begins with the ministry of Jesus himself. In Mt. 4:18-20, Jesus begins to call his followers in a very straightforward and public fashion, "Now as Jesus was walking by the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon who was called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And He said to them, 'Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men.' Immediately they left their nets and followed Him." (NASB). In Mt. 19:21-22, Jesus calls the rich young ruler to follow him in a very public and costly way, "Jesus said to him, 'If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.' But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property," (NASB). Jesus didn't seem to concern himself first and foremost with the comfort of those he called when he called them to publicly follow him. He also didn't set the bar low, but put the cost for following him at all or nothing on each occasion he called for a decision.

In the early Church, the precedent continues for a public and unashamed call for total commitment to follow Christ. The first sermon ever preached as the Church was born at Pentecost contains a clear and pressing call to follow Jesus as Savior and Lord, "Peter replied, 'Each of you must turn from your sins and turn to God, and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. Then you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is to you and to your children, and even to the Gentiles—all who have been called by the Lord our God.' Then *Peter continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners*, "Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!" (Acts 2:38-40, NLT. Emphasis added). In Ephesus, Paul was performing miracles as proclaimed Christ. During this missionary journey to the city, unbelieving Jews attempt to use the name of Jesus to perform an exorcism only to be beaten and stripped by the occupying demons. As a result of this event, the scriptures tell us, "This became known to all, both Jews and Greeks, who lived in Ephesus; and fear fell upon them all and the name of the Lord Jesus was being magnified. Many also of those who had believed *kept coming, confessing and disclosing their practices*. And many of those who practiced magic *brought their books together and began burning them in the sight of everyone*; and they counted up the price of them and found it fifty thousand pieces of silver. So the word of the Lord was growing mightily and prevailing, (Acts 19:17-20 NASB. Emphasis added).

Demarcations of the CPA

A number of very interesting demarcations begin to emerge as we look at the occurrences of public calling in the scriptures.

1. Not all of the calls to appropriate Christ are answered positively. In fact, on numerous occasions, from the rich young ruler to the disobedient Jews in Antioch and Iconium (Acts 14), many refuse the call to repent and follow Christ.
2. Nearly every call to follow Christ is accompanied with some kind of tangible statement of appropriation. Signs of appropriation included baptism, the burning of books, the selling of goods, the utterance of certain creeds, receiving the laying on of hands, certain manifestations of the Holy Spirit, the immediate cessation of careers, and the forfeiture of funds and/or property. I will discuss this in further detail with recommendations for how to apply the idea of tangible appropriation below.
3. The call is always to both receive forgiveness as well as surrender to Christ's Lordship.
4. The call often times came with the explanation that to follow Christ was to become a witness for Christ. When Jesus called his followers, he made it clear that he was calling them both to a certain kind of relationship with him as well as to a certain kind of lifestyle and career as witnesses. We become, in his words, 'fishers of men.' This is a consequence of following Christ and should be included when we call women and men to public decision.
5. The call to follow Christ was accompanied with a declaration of the gospel unless the hearers had already understood the gospel from other contexts.
6. The call to follow Christ was also the entry point into the community of faith and not a call to an individual, detached faith (see more on this point in Jessica Fick's paper on Follow Up).

CPA Today

The importance for us to call post-moderns to publicly declare their faith in Christ is vital. We have experienced a marked increase in unbelievers becoming involved with our chapters across the U.S., and though we have also seen a huge increase in conversions, still relatively few of those who routinely involve themselves with our ministry are making decisions for Christ. In Great LakesEast, 7-8% of non-believing members of our chapters make decisions for Christ throughout the year. Students are increasingly hungry for the relationships and social outlet our fellowships have to offer and we need to capitalize on this reality by calling for a decision to follow Christ publicly at various points throughout the year. Making a public call to follow Christ also does a number of things for our chapters and for our campuses:

1. Larger numbers of students and staff hear the gospel, making the possibility for conversion greater.
2. Our chapters grow as a result of making a bold and culturally tactful stand for the gospel. This attracts many believers as they become aware of our ministry.
3. Jesus becomes the issue in a greater fashion on the campus in general.
4. We model the centrality of the gospel and its call to total submission for those within our midst.
5. As students make decisions for Christ, the power of God is witnessed and God is glorified.

The fear that many have concerning calling for a public commitment to Jesus revolves often times around the stereotypes we have about the act of calling. If the truth be told, the stereotypes are often upheld by the speakers we invite to partner with us during evangelistic meetings and events. A case in point occurred this year at Western Michigan University's Collegiate, Black, and Christian chapter. The staff and students invested a great deal of prayer and fasting, time, money, and effort into throwing a black tie affair for the black community. It was a great success in many regards and was attended beyond their hopes and plans. Hundreds from the black community turned out. The presidents from various student organizations from the campus attended as well. The speaker that was brought in, however, did not communicate what was agreed upon and when it came to the 'alter call' component of the evening, he quickly asked, "Well, is there anyone who would like to give their hearts to Jesus here tonight?" He paused for about 15 seconds before concluding, "Well, I guess we're all saved then here tonight. Let's give a big hand clap to Jesus!"

How often have each of us had this very experience happen in our chapters and/or churches? Most of us have been burned enough to be initially hesitant when it comes to inviting our lost friends to an 'evangelistic gathering' because trust has been broken in the past when speakers or organizers failed to meet our expectations. As difficult and challenging as this issue is, however, the answer is not to give up on evangelistic preaching, speaking, events and gatherings, and certainly not to give up on making Christ available to those we seek to reach. On the contrary, the level of spiritual interest on college campuses today necessitates that we quickly and thoughtfully begin to address how to proclaim Christ publicly and call for decisions in a way that connects with post-modern students.

CPA that Connects

The tangible nature of the Biblical examples of calling people to respond is what I've tried to capitalize on in my speaking. I believe that post-moderns are high visual learners due to the environment in which they've grown up in. Because of this, many speakers have tried to create opportunities to respond publicly to the gospel which include a visual, participatory component. Examples of this have included leading listeners through a visualization process in which they encounter the resurrected Jesus, calling on listeners to 'act out' a receiving process in their seats, and choosing a literal, physical 'red pill or blue pill,' playing off the Matrix. Most recently, I have been inviting students and churchgoers to walk through a physical door-prop. Let me take a moment to describe this last example in a bit more detail.

The Door

For an evangelistic message I developed called "The Life You've Been Dreaming Of," (www.tellthestory.net/listen.html), I mounted a 30X80 inch door onto casters and installed a doorknob with a keyhole. The sermon illustration was a powerful one which the Lord had used on numerous campuses this past fall to help many students understand and respond to the gospel. The door in the message functions as a point of contact for

faith. In every gospel presentation there has to be a point in time where we give people an opportunity to respond to the work of Christ on the cross and the power of His resurrection. We must do this in a way that makes the relevancy of Christ and the necessity of their response undeniable. The door is a visible, tangible, and powerful metaphor. The way in which I used it was to preach the gospel using the door as the symbol of what keeps us from the life we've been created for and the life deep down we all dream of. The door is sin. The door is brokenness. The door is separation from God. The door is a molested childhood. The door is our grandest mistakes. The door is the barrier between this so-called life and the fantastical life of the Kingdom.

The gospel is what saves lost students, not a door-prop. I believe, however, that preaching the gospel with the power and authority of Christ Himself and with all the creativity and imagination we can muster creates a spiritual environment that is conducive to faith. The ambiguity of a physical illustration that gradually emerges in the message and connects in a powerful and relevant fashion before one's audience can create the "ah-ha" moment that recaptures the freshness of the gospel. At the end of my message, before inviting students to publicly appropriate the gospel, I would take key from my pocket and hold it up. I would say something like, "This evening, God has given us a magic key. The key is Jesus Christ. With this key, we have the power and authority to open this door. In just a moment, I am going to open this door and when I do, the very gates of Heaven will be opened here this evening."

This CPA is stirring, imaginative, participatory, and most of all connects well with post-moderns. It isn't a gimmick but a real point of contact to allow them to loose their faith much like coming and kneeling at an alter are walking down a straw strewn aisle was for generations gone by. As InterVarsity staff, we must preach the gospel in such a way that the living Christ emerges from our message to meet students at the point of need. The gospel and the gospel alone does that. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, students are set free and brought into the life they've been dreaming of. Using a "point of contact for faith," or a physical object that students can incorporate into their public appropriation helps to make their decision and commitment feel immediate, tangible, and powerful. This is in line with some of the reasons why we baptize or partake in communion. These can be seen as points of contact for the believer. When we preach Christ, I have found it extremely helpful for there to be such a point of contact for the new and emerging faith of those responding inwardly to Christ through repentance.

Guidelines for CPA

Calling for a public response to the gospel is a challenge and needs to be thought through not only by the speaker or staff but also by those student leaders who are supporting or sponsoring the event. A great deal of communication needs to go into who will do the call, what will be said during the call, how the students are expected to respond, and what will be done with those who do so. A CPA for post-moderns should be:

1. Clear: The gospel content itself is the most important aspect of the message or event that needs to be explained and then tied to the CPA. If a student is going to appropriate Christ, they have to be clear on what that means. We must help

- students connect the gospel content with their response. When it comes to making the actual instruction for the response, be as clear and concise as possible. Don't allow the CPA to be ambiguous as this will confuse people at a critical moment. This ambiguity will detract from their decision process and can cause unnecessary anxiety in some who would publicly profess Christ. In my door example, I explain that to stand up, walk down to the front of the room and literally walk through the door is a visual statement of trust in the fact that Jesus has opened the door and that one is receiving the benefits made available to us by that fact. I explain that the act of walking through the door is a picture of the decision in our heart to follow the way of Jesus and to enter into a new kind of life with him and others who follow him too.
2. Creative: I have to admit, lugging around a heavy wood door on wheels was a bit of a problem throughout the school year, particularly when I attempted to have schools in other states reproduce the door. However, walking through the door was not just a prop in a message, it was a powerful, creative, and tangible metaphor that students could relate to and respond with. Whatever the CPA mechanism is, it needs to relate as a point of contact for faith and assist in the understanding of our hearers. Other creative ways to posture the CPA, like creative re-telling of the Bible stories or unexpected exercises, will help students connect along the way and be in a position to respond appropriately to the CPA when it comes.
 3. Compelling: Our CPA needs to be accompanied with good reason. We need to help our hearers see why they need Christ and why they need to respond right now. We don't just give them information to think about, we call on them to make a decision publicly for Christ. This needs to be understandable, convincing, and immediately relevant. Thinking back on Acts 2, it says that Peter, *"...continued preaching for a long time, strongly urging all his listeners, 'Save yourselves from this generation that has gone astray!'"* Pressing for a decision is a part of good gospel communication and essential during the CPA. It helps our hearers understand and believe that we are serious about what we are asking them to do.
 4. Comprehensive: I have come to believe that due to the ambiguity of the spiritual state of many in and outside our chapters, our CPA needs to be inclusive. We need to call people to respond to Christ not only as 'first time decision makers,' but also for a variety of things. My focus is always on first time decisions, but many who have grown up in the Church would consider themselves to have already made a decision of some sort at some point in the past. This does not necessarily mean that it was an informed decision, an authentic decision, or the right decision. I frequently find regular InterVarsity students who have never heard or responded to the gospel and their decision to do so when I make my CPA is no less significant than those made by self-identified 'heathens.' We can debate what to call these kinds of decisions (re-commitments, Lordship decisions...) but the fact of the matter is that God alone conducts the spiritual transaction of salvation and much of what happens in the heart is shrouded in mystery for some time before it becomes clear to the decision maker let alone those who witness the decision. For more on this issue, see Dave Biskie's work

- on Conversion and Decisions. Another category we need to begin addressing in our CPA is for healing prayer for those who bring increasing baggage into our chapters and into the Kingdom. Jesus spent time feeding, teaching and healing those who were coming to him and we need to make the CPA a time for people to personally appropriate the healing, nourishing nature of the body and blood of Jesus. This can look like a second call or be incorporated clearly and creatively into the primary call, but this will be important as our society continues to produce increasingly crippled young people.
5. Continued: The old-timers called this ‘tarrying for souls.’ We need to offer Christ and make room for those who are considering him to do business with God. Leaving the CPA open for a time, or continuing it, is one of the most difficult aspects of evangelism. Continuing a CPA is not manipulation, but rather allowing the situation to be controlled by the Holy Spirit and not our fears, apprehensions, or agenda. In individual conversations, this practice is equally necessary. We may say something like, “Are you ready to ask Jesus to be your Leader?” or “Can we pray right now for your decision to follow Christ?” After questions like this, we need to wait. Seconds may seem like minutes, minutes can seem like hours. What might in actuality be a two-minute period of time feels like an eternity but it is of the utmost necessity. When speaking, I press and wait back and forth usually for 5 minutes or more. This may not seem like a long time to wait, but believe me, as you are waiting it seems like an eternity. Occasionally, when we continue the CPA for a decision we should begin to exhort or encourage a decision, but at some time we need to fold our hands together, pray silently and wait. After all, once the invitation is given, a person’s eternity is stretched out before them. They are being asked to make a decision to give their entire lives to Christ and forsake all. Sometimes that means a life-long pursuit of religious good works, a family heritage, an imprisoning sin, or even one’s physical life. We must respect the sanctity of the moment of decision, step back and allow the person to do business with the Holy Spirit. Waiting is not manipulation, but is respect for both the person and the work of the Holy Spirit.

Executing the CPA and Further Recommendations to Hearers

In whatever fashion we are asking our hearers to respond to Christ, we need to lead them to verbalize their faith. This is the normative way in which we are to appropriate the gospel. In Romans 10:8-10 it says, “For salvation that comes from trusting Christ—which is what we preach—is already within easy reach of each of us; in fact, it is as near as our own hearts and mouths. For if you tell others with your own mouth that Jesus Christ is your Lord and believe in your own heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is by believing in his heart that a man becomes right with God; and with his mouth he tells others of his faith, confirming his salvation.” (TLB).

Verbalizing our faith publicly is a tradition that dates back to the first century church in the form of articulating creeds as a part of a public service. This can be done at the point of the CPA. Many refer to this as a ‘sinner’s prayer.’ Perhaps a more appropriate phrase for today would be a ‘communal faith statement,’ if you are using a creed like statement to lead others in or a ‘spiritual faith statement,’ if you are leading them in a more

individualized prayer. The important thing is to help new believers articulate their faith statement back to God as a way of witnessing their decision and allowing them to personally appropriate the gospel for themselves.

One final recommendation has to do with inviting those who have not made overt decisions to follow Christ to continue on with the community. This call to journey or to process faith issues communally is increasingly important in our post-modern situation. Students are attracted to the spiritual journey idea as demonstrated by the wild success nationally of G.I.G.s. The idea that one can belong before they fully believe and appropriate Christ may be new and surprising but it is one that needs to be clearly stated and what better time to do so then as a part of or just after the CPA. Lon Allison, Director of the Billy Graham Center, recently conducted a large-scale outreach through a Chicago-based church. During his CPA, Lon invited his audience to faith in Jesus but also gave a clear and compelling invitation to people to join the community and share in the journey of faith. The church had programs much like G.I.G.'s in place for people who indicated a desire to do this.

Many students are already in a place to make a first time decision for Christ. In fact, as I conduct conversational outings around the region and in various places outside our region, I have found that 8 out of every 10 students we approach as strangers are very interested and open to have long conversations on the spot about Jesus. Out of the 8 who are open to talk, on average 2 of those 8 make a first time decision for Christ! Following up with such decisions is of the utmost importance as we seek to integrate them into the community. For a thorough and thought-provoking consideration of how to best do follow up in conjunction with events and conversational evangelism, see Jessica Fick's paper on Follow Up. For many students, however, making a decision for Christ is not their next step. Their next step is to commit to the journey of discovery in the context of community. In evangelistic events, we can incorporate that step easily into our response cards and verbal CPA.

Conclusion

In the Parable of Lost Things in Luke 15, an important observation is routinely missed in exegeting the passage. In verse 4, the shepherd looks for the lost sheep *until he finds it*. In verse 8, the woman looks for the coin *until she finds it*. The father does not give up hope or looking down the road in anticipation until his son, who was as good as dead, returns alive, safe and sound! My point is that we must re-think our methods and be as creative as we can in our search for the lost. We must search until we find the them! We must try and strive with all we have until we find a way to find them. We cannot go back to the past and merely reproduce the methods of the glory days gone by. We cannot give up on public proclamation or calling for public appropriation of Christ. We must re-think the alter call and continue to offer Christ to our post-modern students in a way that captivates their imaginations about the Kingdom of God and invites them in a winsome and powerful way into the community.