



## Why Pentecostals Should Consider Replacing (Most) Altar Calls With Calls to The Lord's Table. -Part One-

By Craig R. Dumont, Sr.

**P**entecostal pastors place tremendous emphasis upon the preaching of the Word because Scripture itself places a great importance and emphasis upon it. Closely following Pentecost in Acts 4:31 we find that the church had assembled, there was a fresh filling of the Holy Spirit after which “they spoke the word of God with boldness.” This emphasis remains throughout the book of Acts as it’s recorded that “the word of God spread” and was blossoming and in such demand that “they preached the word of God in the synagogues.” Indeed, even “Samaria had received the word of God,” and in Antioch “almost the whole city came together to hear the word of God.” Reading through all of the references to the word of God in a concordance is enough to demonstrate the elevated place that preaching the word had in the quickly expanding church.

New Testament writers often equate the preaching of the word with personal transformation. Paul tells the Thessalonians that the word of God “effectively works in you who believe” and to the Hebrews it is declared that “the word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart.” Pentecostals believe in the promised ongoing power of the Holy Spirit to cause people today and always to not only hear the Word of God clearly, but also provide the power of conviction that moves people to action. Our personal experience with the power of the Holy Spirit is a source of unshakable confidence in seeing life-changing results.

Jesus declared that when the Helper, or The Spirit came He Himself would take up the role of Great Evangelist, for He promised that “when He [The Spirit] has come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment”...and that when “He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth; for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak; and He will tell you things to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you.”

With this focus upon proclaiming the inspired, infallible Scriptures in conjunction with an emphasis on and confidence in the Holy Spirit Who opens ears and hearts while quickening the hearer to receive the word, the Pentecostal pastor is right to expect tangible results from his preaching. A call to action is not only to be expected, but congregational soul-satisfaction and ongoing spiritual health hinges upon some demonstrable way to respond to the Biblical message and receive the means of grace empowering the believer to live a holy or sanctified life.

Typically, for most Pentecostal pastors and churches, that tangible response comes in the Sunday worship service “altar call,” with the pastor inviting non-Christians convicted by the Spirit to convert to Christ, backslidden and lukewarm believers to repent and renew their commitment, or for the needy to come forward for prayers of encouragement, healing or strength in areas covered by the topic of the sermon.

There is no doubt that God has been wonderfully present week-after-week in a setting in which many Christians have experienced God’s grace and been the recipient of countless blessings. However, as beneficial as this has been for many members of our congregations (and I certainly have benefited), it is my observation that our traditional methodology (realistically understood as a liturgical element, whether called that or not) of offering weekly “altar calls” actually mitigates the transformational opportunity for the large majority of our members.

The reason, I believe, is two-fold. First, no matter how dynamic the preacher or how broad the content of the sermon may be, there will be, with notable exceptions, a large segment of our congregation not impacted at a level that generates nor requires a time at the alter for prayer. While the sermon may and should have value to all, the manner in which the Spirit works in peoples minds and hearts will of necessity vary greatly from person to person. Indeed, if we expect or teach our members that a weekly altar-call experience is needed to sustain a successful Christian living experience we have short-changed the very power of the Spirit we say is so needed by the believer to live the victorious, joyful life. When the altar-call is the weekly climax of a worship service and targeted to a subgroup of

What we have so far said of the Sacrament abundantly shows that...it was ordained to be frequently used among all Christians in order that they might frequently return in memory to Christ's Passion, by such remembrance to sustain and strengthen their faith, and urge themselves to sing thanksgiving to God and to proclaim His goodness.... [T]he Lord's Table should have been spread at least once a week for the assembly of Christians, and the promises declared in it should feed us spiritually.... All, like hungry men, should flock to such a bounteous repast. John Calvin in Institutes of the Christian Religion

those in attendance, too many will be left without a sufficient avenue to bring their experience to closure.

Second, altar-calls tend to focus on pastoral appeals for an emotional and intellectual response that only the Holy Spirit can induce with effect. Without minimizing the need for or desirability of compelling, powerful preaching, nor downplaying the reality that mankind has been created by God with emotions that can and should be appealed to, the fact remains that if the altar-call is the climax anticipated for the worship service, by its position it becomes the *defacto* measure of the success of the sermon or the pastor's effectiveness.

Far too often the liturgy of the altar-call (and I'm not anti-liturgy, as it is inescapable and an

important aspect of all areas of life, be they worship services or in "ordinary life") becomes man centered as opposed to God centered. How many responded and what was the intensity of their response? How much time and effort do we allocate to creating the atmosphere through music and appeals in our desire to generate acceptable levels of response? How often is the altar-call invitation broadened from the first appeal simply to get a larger number of congregational members to respond in ways we desire? Altar call *technique* that provides response/satisfaction to the preacher replaces the *work of the Spirit* which provides satisfaction to both the Father and the congregation.

The appeal to emotion or sense of urgency on a weekly basis truncates the promises of God in the life of the believer as the effectiveness of the sermon or even of the Gospel (as applied to those who are believers) is measured by the emotional/intellectual/physical response of the hearers and a highly individualistic and subjective interpretation of God's grace in response. However I believe there is a way for the Pentecostal pastor to achieve his goal of calling his people to a transformed life signified by tangible action by conforming to the Word on a weekly basis that ministers to every person in attendance and works in bringing peace and harmony to yearning souls individually and the church corporately.

While God has called His people to live transformed, sanctified lives in true covenant with Him, He has given us access to a Spirit infused transformational meal, a table experience which allows His people a means of grace to enter into deep and satisfying communion with Him. The church has been given the right, the privilege and the responsibility of granting invitation and access to The Lord's Table where we are invited to "taste and see that the Lord is good."

Indeed, it is at the Lord's Table where we most fully and tangibly receive God's grace, life and immersion in the life of the Spirit and the invitation is extended to all believers all the time. In John 6 we are presented with an astounding promise of both *eternal life* and *supernatural satisfaction*!

Then Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world."

Then they said to Him, "Lord, give us this bread always."

And Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.

...I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world."

...Then Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me. This is the bread which came down from heaven—not as your fathers ate the manna, and are dead. He who eats this bread will live forever.”

In Matthew 26 Jesus formally establishes the covenant meal:

And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to the disciples and said, “Take, eat; this is My body.”

Then He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.

With the promise of a great blessing also comes the reality of a curse. Precisely because The Lord’s Table offers spectacular life flowing from communion with Christ, The Holy Spirit Himself works not only in transforming believers from “glory to glory,” but sorts and sanctifies the Church with sanctions levied against those who seek Her harm. One of the amazing benefits of inviting believers to the Lord’s Table every week is that while the pastor is charged with the well-being of his flock, he can only look on the outward appearance. God, however, peers into the spirit and knows the intents of the heart. While still required to faithfully fulfill his obligations to the congregation, the pastor is at rest knowing that even if there are those who seek to destroy the flock and may fool him, they will not fool Christ, who personally takes great care of His Church. Therefore, by offering all the call to respond to the Gospel by partaking at the Lord’s Table the pastor is providing the action opportunity for blessings in two contrasting ways.

First, he brings his congregation to eat the Body of Christ and drink the Blood of Christ as set forth in the bread and wine. This is in direct obedience to Jesus Christ Himself and the results for the believer who eats in faith are spectacular and many. As Chris E. Green points out in *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord’s Supper*, early Pentecostals placed great emphasis upon physical healing that came from partaking, as “Pentecostals of this period apparently regarded the Lord’s Supper as the greatest of the severally divinely-ordained means of healing. They were convinced that if taken in faith the Eucharistic bread and cup somehow mediated the soteriological power of the body of Jesus broken for the healing of the saints and His blood shed for their salvation and sanctification. Although Pentecostal preaching and instruction made much of the Supper’s symbolism, observance of the meal was never merely symbolic or memorialistic.” He further notes the importance they gave to a “shared *experience*” at the Table.

Second, the pastor places before the congregation not only the blessings but the curses. But even this curse brings a blessing to believers because those plotting their demise are removed and they are Divinely protected. No weapon formed against them shall prosper!

Before going further, let’s be clear on this aspect. The curses do not come simply because someone is “unworthy” to eat the bread and drink the wine in and of themselves due to sin. If that were the case, no one would be able to eat! Not only have “all sinned and come short of the glory of God,” but everyone realizes that they are saved by grace and continue in grace and not by works, which is why we come to the Table: We partake due to our reliance on and need of grace! The Lord’s Table is exactly that: A means of grace partaken in fellowship with other grace-needy members of Christ’s bride, The Church. [Again, this universal need for ongoing grace is the very reason I believe the call to

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the Lord's Table should take the place of most, but not all, altar-calls, which are more narrowly tailored and whether intentional or not tend to exclude, as opposed to include, Christians.]

No, the curse comes specifically when there is a willful failure to "discern the Lord's body." In the context that Paul writes about this we find he's referring to a church where there is arguments about status, denial of vital doctrines, the strong looking down on the weak, and some even condoning and boasting about their superior spiritual state due to tolerance of great sin, which has the capacity to destroy the entire church! God's judgment was falling on those who were harming His Church and that judgment was being meted out at the Table through sickness and even death.

Paul speaks to this very issue in 1 Corinthians 11:

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep. For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged. But when we are judged, we are chastened by the Lord, that we may not be condemned with the world.

For the Pentecostal pastor who desires to see his congregation experience "the beauty of holiness," but also to live an authentic life sealed by and in the Spirit, this "call to the Table" provides the apex to the worship service where covenant renewal is provided with a context where everyone can and should participate with full and meaningful life-application. He is also assured of powerful, tangible and identifiable results for the entire congregation, as opposed to settling for individualized and undefined interpretations of God's work.

By partaking at the Lord's Table we are participating in covenant renewal and sealing! We are celebrating the assurance of being "sealed for the day of redemption" even as we affirm the call to a transformed life requiring good words and good works that we are created for. Just as Abraham received circumcision as a "sign and seal" of his faith, so too does God grant us a "seal of the righteousness of the faith" at the Lord's Table! Jesus uses the imagery of communion through eating together to symbolize that seal in Revelation 3:19-20

Therefore be zealous and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, *I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*

The Spirit makes it clear that we are called to live out a transformed life in accordance with the Word. Of course, everyone at all times is fully dependent upon the Spirit because "in [the] flesh dwells no good thing."

Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, *by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.* Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. [Ephesians 4:29-31]

Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and has anointed us is God, *who also has sealed us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.* [2 Corinthians 1:21-22]

In Him you also trusted, after you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, *you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise,* who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory. [Ephesians 1:13-14]

The Pentecostal pastor desiring his flock to walk in the Spirit, rightly calls for some type of action-sign from those who are moved by the sermon. I would submit that along with utilizing the altar-call we would meet more of our objectives with a weekly invitation to our congregation to join us at The Table.



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