

Message #66 of *Scripture Beneath The Surface*

"Alter Calls"

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Hello! Thanks for being with us. It's been a good week for me. I hope it has for you. Thanks for those who have responded this week with requests for CDs and with questions. I like to get requests for CDs and transcripts, and especially like to receive questions. Questions help me to think about certain viewpoints that I might not have seen before. It's a form of Bible study for me, and I love Bible study. So, if you have any questions, whether about our messages or about some other Bible subject, please feel free to send them. I will certainly respond directly, but I may also use the subject as a weekly message. As for the material we send out, remember that our material is free for the asking, and also, we want you to know that you won't be put on a mailing list. We don't believe in mailing lists. Psalms 37:25 says, "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread." We don't believe ministries should have to beg. We believe that God will supply as he sees fit. So, if you would like any of our messages, we would be happy to send you the CDs and transcripts. You can request any of the messages for yourself, or to give to a friend. Either way is fine with us. And also, please remember that the four CD series of Image of the Beast is also available, free of charge, just for the asking. It is a study which explores the meaning of the beasts of Revelation 13, concerning what the Image of the Beast is, and also what the real Mark of the Beast is. And no, the mark is not a physical mark, and it isn't a computer chip. The bar codes, the computer chips in the forehead, the invisible ink scanners, and all those concepts are just Satan's deceptive techniques to keep Christians looking somewhere else so that they won't see what he is really doing. So, if you're a person who has a significant interest in the meaning of end-time prophecies, then this Image of the Beast study series is for you. There is no charge for this four

CD message series. Just ask for it, and it's yours. Listen at the end of today's program and Kim will give you the address. And, by the way, if you want just the written form of the message, it can be sent to you by e-mail. Please designate either Microsoft Word format or WordPerfect format. Or, we can send it by snail mail just as easily.

Well, let's go on with our message for today. This week's message is one of those situations where I've been asked a question, and feel that the question might be an interesting subject for many people. It concerns church altar calls. This is a ritual which is observed in some, but not all, churches. An altar call takes place when the minister invites people from the congregation to come forward in the sanctuary for the purpose of presenting themselves before the Lord. The purpose might be to confess Jesus Christ, and therefore, in a sense, become a Christian at that time, or it might be for the purpose of expressing repentance, or for the purpose of greater commitment, or for other various reasons. But I guess the subject of altar calls cannot be adequately explained without a short definition of what it means to go to the altar. An altar is a place upon which sacrifices are placed. In one sense or another, anyone who goes to an altar intends to sacrifice. They intend to give something of their own to God. What they intend to give to the Lord might be either personal wealth, in the form of money or property, a portion of their time, or a sacrifice to God of their talents, in the form of applying their talents toward the work of God. Most importantly we must recognize that sacrifices are an offering to God, and as such, correspond symbolically with the altars of the Old Testament.

As far as the altar calls themselves, I have my own opinion about whether these modern day forms of sacrifice are appropriate or not. I've always toyed around with the thought that there are three types of altars that are presented in the church. One type is a standing altar, where the person just stands before the Lord and prays, and most times is actually only asking for something instead of offering something. The second type of altar is where the person kneels before the altar, therefore humbling themselves before God. This type of offering seems to be a little closer to an actual sacrifice. But the third type of altar is where the person climbs up on the altar itself, lies down, and presents themselves as a whole complete offering to God. This whole complete offering to God means that they hold nothing back. They don't just give a portion of what they have, but give themselves fully to God, lock, stock, and barrel, so to speak. No, I don't really think there are actually three types of altars, but I think that is sometimes the way people think of them, and sometimes the way they respond. To me there should only be one type of altar, and that is the type of altar that you lay yourself down on it and give your all to God.

In the church today there are various reasons to go to the front of the sanctuary. The concept of going to the front of the church as a form of going to the altar isn't based on scripture, but rather on someone's idea (probably a good one) of encouraging people to make a public confession of Jesus Christ. I don't suppose it would be out of line to recognize that when there is someone in a congregation that is new to the gospel, and they accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord because of the Word that was being talked about in the assembly, that this person should be invited to be "up front" in order that the people could acknowledge the newcomer as a brother or sister in Christ. This would be in line with encouraging a person to "publicly confess" Jesus.

However, the idea of continued altar calls (*in my opinion*) has gotten out of hand. I *suspect strongly* that ministers are finding altar calls to be a tool for creating a successful church. The reason is this. When a person visits a church, they have a tendency to stay in the background. They probably will sit toward the back of the church where they will be less noticed. In the same sense, even many Christians who regularly attend a church are more prone to stay aloof from the rest of the congregation. I think (*remember, this is just my opinion*) that ministers have found that if they have regular altar calls, that those people who are not quick to mingle with the other members of the congregation will be pressed to come forward when others do, and this will be because they don't want to be singled out by staying in their pew. Now, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to comprehend the fact that the more often a person goes up to the front of the church and comes closer to the other people, the sooner this person will begin to feel more accepted by the other members of the congregation, and also the quicker they will feel more like a part of the overall church structure. I'm convinced that in many cases, altar calls are used for the purpose of getting those people who are generally uncommitted to come into contact with the other people more often, which will tend to make the shy people less shy, and make ALL the people feel more a part of the church body.

Now, the question is, "Is this wrong?" I think it is. No, not because we shouldn't encourage everyone to feel comfortable with one another. Unity is an important factor in the church. In fact, there isn't enough of it now. And altar calls can increase unity. However, I think that to do evil in order to accomplish good, is improper, and the reason for this is that although the results SEEM to be good, the motives are not pure. Yes, it may seem like splitting hairs, but then, if we don't look closely at the doctrine we accept in the church, how will we know that it is really truth and not just an assumption of truth? So, the question to consider is whether or not the altar calls are an evil thing which are being used to produce good. Or, is evil being done by having an excessive amount of altar calls?"

The answer lies in whether or not the minister's purpose is pure or impure. When I observe a minister presenting an altar call in a church, I look to see if I can discern his intent. If his intent is pure, then I don't have too much trouble accepting it. However, if the intent of the minister is NOT pure, then I am really unhappy about it. So, how can you tell if the minister's purpose is pure or not? It is definitely going to be by the Holy Spirit who gives discernment. In the past I have seen some things in a church where they had altar calls excessively. No, I don't mean that the invitation to come forward and make a public confession of Jesus Christ is wrong, but when the altar calls seem to be geared to getting as many people to the front of the church as possible, I get a little bit annoyed. If for example, the altar calls start out with one type of invitation and then continue with another type of invitation, and then continue with still another type of invitation, until most of the people are coerced into going forward to the front of the church, then I think I can safely say that the intent of the minister was not to reach out to the people for THEIR benefit, but rather to get as many people down front as possible. Also, one technique to encourage unity is to get as many people down to the front of the church as possible, and then instruct them to all hold hands and pray. The holding of hands is supposed to encourage unity in

the congregation. Even though the overall intent seems to be good, it is still a false intent, for the invitation is not meant to search hearts, but to bring people into close proximity with others. If the true intent is different than what is presented outwardly, we have a lie in progress. Lies don't come from God. To give an invitation is alright, but when the motive is only to get as many down front as possible, the minister has not revealed his true motive, and therefore deception is at work. No, he may be sincere, but yet he is also deceived, and has substituted the technique of manipulation in order to bring about the desired results instead of relying on the Holy Spirit to do the work in the hearts of the people.

The real problem in this area is the motive of the pastor. Is his motive to get as much help to the people as possible, or has he fallen into the rut of using manipulation techniques in order to get everyone more involved in the church? Is the shepherd's purpose really focused on fulfilling the needs of the sheep, or on fulfilling the needs of a pastor who is trying to grow a church?

Justification for one's actions can always be overlooked by professing that the actions are geared for the good of the people overall. But I would rather a minister be very honest, and let God take care of building up the body of the church to a sufficient number. Besides, if the number gets bigger without God doing it, then the pastor must introduce further man made devices in order to control the crowd and keep the church financially secure. It CAN be an ever increasing spiral, and we can actually see this happening in many churches and ministries.

Now, I realize I may seem negative (*it's not the first time this has ever happened*), but I firmly believe that God always gives us free choice in how we will serve him. I truly believe that if we want to hang back toward the rear section of the sanctuary, and if we want to be a bit timid, God will let us. I don't think God pushes us to be a part of a church body, or pushes us to make confessions or greater commitments. In giving altar calls, there is a tendency to press people to make decisions. This is not all bad. But we must never forget that people can only please God by faith, and that any gifts that people give to God must be gifts that are not coerced by the minister, but which are given by a willing heart. It is only in answering the call of God that God can truly be glorified. But altar calls can all too often be a form of pressure to enter into the church by answering the call of the minister instead of answering the call of God.

There are many factors which affect how churches are run. One most important fact is that ministers tend to be leaders. Because of this they also tend to be pushy. They also tend to lean toward the might and power of human abilities for building the flock. The might and power of man is not based on the will of God but on the will of the person using the might and power. Scripture tells us that it is not by might and power that we are to conquer, but by the power of God through the Word and the Holy Spirit. But because we Christians want to see success so badly, we are sometimes deceived into carrying over our executive administrative duties into the sanctuary instead of keeping them in the church boardroom.

I guess one dead giveaway which reveals what I call, "the altar call syndrome," is when the altar call always brings most of the people to the front of the church instead of just the few who might

be under conviction. And one other form of altar call that smells a little fishy is when those who have come forward are encouraged to partner up with someone they don't know very well and pray for each other. Yes, there is encouragement here to be considerate of visitors, and to reach out to others, and it does promote church unity, but why doesn't the minister just encourage the people toward unity, and then let the Holy Spirit and the word of God bring the conviction and the desired results? I don't want to encourage gluttony in the church, but I think that some forms of church fellowship dinners can be a useful tool for this instead of an altar call. At least the honesty is there that says quite plainly that people like to eat, and it gives people a short block of time where they might be caught cross table from someone they don't know too well.

But, I guess one question to consider is what to do if you're in a church which is using you as a tool for church building by pressing you together with the other members of the congregation. If this is your situation, you can do one of two things. You can either go along with it and pray for your church and pastor, or you can not go along with it. Altar calls, because they are based on an "invitation," are not a Biblical requirement, and therefore are not an order from God to participate. However, if this makes you feel funny, by singling you out as one of the few who are being obstinate and remaining in their pew, then I suggest you leave and find another church to attend. Yeah, I know, just one more church, and one more church. It seems to be a never ending cycle. But when will ministers stop trying to build the church and let God do it? In Acts 2:47 we see quite plainly that it is the Lord who adds to the church, and not the pastor. To invite is good. To press that invitation is bad, because the purpose is to take away the real intent of the person and substitute the wishes of the pastor. If the intent of the pastor is pure, then there is little damage that can come from altar calls. But if the intent of the pastor is to use altar calls as a way of building up the church, then his motives are wrong, and therefore his motives are not in line with God's purpose but with his own purpose.

I suspect that one of the greatest reasons altar calls are given is for the purpose of giving people an opportunity to publicly accept Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We see this in evangelistic meetings, as when Billy Graham gives an altar call, but we also see the altar call given as a means to encourage people to greater commitment in their service to God. However, we also see the altar call used as a tool to promote church growth and church unity by making people get out of their seats and join the other members of the congregation.

I guess that at the bottom line there is no real solution to this dilemma, and it will most likely increase rather than decrease. Most church pastors have accepted today's current church trend to become church CEO's rather than shepherds. What I mean by church CEO's is that many ministers have forgotten that it is the Holy Spirit of God, through the Word of God, that the power comes. They have forgotten that it is God that we look to for our success. When ministers are called to ministry, it is not the ministers responsibility to be successful, but only to be obedient. Many ministers have adopted business techniques for building churches rather than allowing God to do the work. Yes, a church pastor can certainly use good organization skills, but these should be left in the boardroom, and used for the physical and financial oversight. But spiritual oversight should be by the Word of God and by his Holy Spirit, not by techniques and

church programs. Programs can be good, but they can easily replace God if the shepherd and the chief sheep of the flock are not careful. There is enormous pressure in today's current church organizations put on pastors to produce sheep. In denomination boardrooms, statistics of church growth, membership numbers, and volume of financial gain are the order of the day. But God is not successful through the parameters of the world's business techniques. God has his own ways. Isaiah 55:8-9 says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the LORD. 9 For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Also, I want to refer back to Zechariah 4:6, which says, "Then he answered and spoke unto me, saying, This is the word of the LORD unto Zerubbabel, saying, Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the LORD of hosts."

No, it's not by might or power that we are successful. It's not by techniques of manipulation. We know that sheep need to be fed. We also know that sheep need shepherds. We also know that shepherds are responsible for the sheep. However, we also know that sheep are the ones who determine when they will drink and when they will eat. Shepherds are responsible for guiding the sheep into green pastures so that the sheep can find proper food. But it is not the shepherds which make the sheep eat what they are supposed to eat. It is the sheep who eat when they're hungry, and they drink when they're thirsty. The old saying, "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," is also appropriate for sheep. A shepherd must not try to make sheep eat. Yes, they can lead them into pastures which are lush and green, and they can lead them beside still waters. But in the end, it is the sheep which must eat and drink according to their own desire.

So, what should you do if your church is relying on altar calls to do the work of the church? Maybe nothing. Maybe just pray. It's not unusual to find instances of church structure which are not in line with the Bible. And most of the time, being part of a church is more important than whether or not they are doing everything right. However, when you finally become so dissatisfied with the church that it begins to hinder your growth, and you feel the church is leading people more in the path of the shepherd than in the path of God, then maybe it is time to move on. Not every situation can be fixed. It is usually the individual person who can be fixed. If you can handle the church with God's help, then that may work for you. But one of the greatest errors in today's church is in accepting everything that the minister does as being God-given. Ministers should not be above the Law of God, anymore than politicians should be above the laws of our country. Many times ministers are treated as gods, rather than being treated with honor. In the end, it is God who should be followed, not the minister. No, I don't suppose any ministers who are listening will appreciate what I'm saying. But Christians should only follow ministers as God leads them to do so, not as the ministers think they should. God doesn't need another CEO, he needs shepherds who will truly love the sheep, and will look out for them, rather than trying to manipulate them. There is a thin line between man's own might and power and God's power. It is truly a wise minister who can discern the difference, and who will have the patience to let God do it his own way.