Definitions of the Altar Call and the Sinner’s Prayer

The Following two definitions come from two books By David Malcolm Bennett The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage (pp.xv-xvi) and The Sinner’s Prayer: Its Origins and Dangers (p.2).

The Altar Call

“The systematic use of the altar call is ... A method of evangelism, within which a regular or frequent, planned invitation is given to “unbelievers” to respond to Jesus Christ publicly at the conclusion of a sermon or other gospel presentation, in such ways as calling out a response, raising a hand, standing, or walking to a designated spot in the evangelistic setting. A response to such an invitation would normally be followed by immediate counselling and later by some form of follow up. It often incorporates an appeal to Christians for such issues as rededication and call to mission. It is not a theology, though it does reflect and support particular theologies.”

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The Sinner’s Prayer

“There are three essential elements that must appear in a prayer or its accompanying material before it can be considered a Sinner’s Prayer.

- First, it must be an actual prayer addressed to God or Jesus Christ.
- Secondly, it must have the assumption clearly stated in the prayer or accompanying material that if it is meant or prayed sincerely it will be inevitably and immediately effective.
- Thirdly, it must speak of the sinner inviting, accepting, receiving or taking Christ into the sinner’s life or heart as an act of the human will. In other words, the initiative in Christian conversion appears to be with the one praying, not with God, thus making it seem more dependent on human decision than upon divine activity.

Such prayers may also contain both or one of the following components: a reference to God’s forgiveness; and an expression of repentance.”

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Why Blame Arminius?

By David Malcolm Bennett

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Introduction

The theology behind much of today’s evangelism is often called Arminian. But is it?

After more than 50 years of moving and working in evangelical circles, reading theology and church history, completing three theological degrees and, at times, working in Christian bookshops, it seems to me that the dominant theology of conversion and evangelism in practice today is far removed from the Arminianism of, say, John and Charles Wesley. In this article I will compare the soteriology of the Wesleys, as representatives of genuine Arminianism, with that which underpins much of modern evangelism.

The Conversion Theology of John and Charles Wesley

John and Charles Wesley were, shall we say, less Arminian than many suppose. In fact, their brand of Arminianism seems to be closer to Calvinism than it is to today’s dominant evangelical theology of conversion and evangelism.

First, what did John Wesley believe? Let me make it clear that I will not use his “Free Grace” sermon, preached in 1740, in this summary. It would seem that he later did not regard this sermon as an accurate presentation of his beliefs. A clear indication of this is that his collections Forty-Four Sermons and Fifty-Three Sermons, which were standard doctrinal works for his preachers, did not contain it. (1) Even five years after he had preached that sermon his views seem to have moved closer to Calvinism. In 1745 he held a “conversation” with his brother Charles and some other early Methodists, which he probably dominated. The resulting record of this conversation stated that “the truth of the gospel” (presumably, Wesley’s brand of Arminianism) lies “very near ... to Calvinism”. In fact, it is “within a hair’s breadth” of it and in some respects it comes “to the very edge of Calvinism”. (2)

In 1743, he wrote to George Whitefield hoping that they could heal the rift between them. This break in fellowship had been caused by Wesley’s “Free Grace” sermon, which Whitefield, being a Calvinist, had strongly criticised. In this document Wesley said that there were only “three points in debate” between them: unconditional election, irresistible grace and final perseverance, three of the five points of Calvinism. The other two points, not in debate, being total depravity, which Wesley clearly accepted, and limited atonement, about which the waters are more muddy.

Yet, he still even partially accepted the three points that were “in debate”. For this article we only need to look at two of the three disputed teachings: unconditional election and irresistible grace, plus the one Wesley clearly taught: total depravity. The last of these is the most significant, as the doctrine of total depravity seems alien to today’s common forms of evangelism.
On unconditional election, Wesley stated that he accepted that God had unconditionally elected some “to preach the Gospel”, Paul, for example. And presumably if unconditionally elected to preach, they were also unconditionally elected to be saved. In addition, Wesley believed that God had unconditionally elected certain nations, Israel for example, to receive “peculiar privileges”, and some other nations to hear the Gospel. He also argued that God had elected some people to receive certain advantages, both temporal and spiritual. He even accepted that God had “unconditionally elected some persons to eternal glory”, yet he rejected the idea that “all those who are not thus elected to glory, must perish eternally”. (3) His view, then, was that some of those who would get to heaven had been unconditionally elected, but others who would also be so blessed had not. In other words, some not unconditionally elected to salvation would still receive it.

More generally, Wesley believed that election to salvation was conditional. His view was that God foresaw those who would have faith and thus elected them to be saved, so it was conditional on foreseen faith. He said “This election I as firmly believe, as I believe the Scripture to be of God.” (4)

On irresistible grace, Wesley argued that though grace does not generally “act irresistibly”, at certain times it does. For example, “the grace which brings faith, and thereby salvation into the soul, is irresistible at that moment”. He also said, “in some souls the grace of God is so far irresistible that they cannot but believe and be finally saved.” Yet, at other times it is possible to resist God's grace. But he also said that he “cannot believe, that all those must be damned, in whom it does not work irresistibly.” (5) This, frankly, sounds a little muddled, but what Wesley seems to be saying here is that some people become Christians through grace working irresistibly, yet there are others who become Christians, still through God's grace, even though it is not working irresistibly on them. The key issue here is that he did believe that at times grace did work irresistibly to bring about an individual's salvation.

Crucially, Wesley strongly believed the Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity, which has been defined as: “the belief that humans begin life with all aspects of their nature corrupted by the effects of sin; thus, all their actions will lack totally pure motives. This does not mean, however, that they are absolutely devoid of any good impulses.” (6) In fact, the Calvinistic Westminster Confession had taught that human beings had become “dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.” (7)

Total depravity does not mean, nor ever did, that human beings were incapable of being kind, or honest or generous, rather it means that every human faculty is infected by sin, and that resulting from that human choice is so impaired that one cannot become a Christian without God’s prior gracious, saving activity upon the soul. In other words, no person can believe in Christ primarily of their own volition.

Yet many modern evangelicals have either thrown out this idea, watered it down, or, while theoretically accepting it, ignore its obvious implications. But Wesley taught that each human being since the Fall is “by nature all “earthly, sensual, devilish”; altogether “corrupt and abominable” [and] cannot of himself think one good thought.” (8) And, crucially, he said no one “has a natural power to choose anything that is truly good.” (9) In fact, there exists “no good thing” in anyone “till he finds grace”. (10)

But here Wesley's concept of prevenient or, as he called it, “preventing” grace enters the scene. (11) In his view, God gives this grace to all with the possibility that each can be led towards Him. But more outpouring of grace is needed before one can be saved.

On at least one occasion in a sermon he seems to have equated this preventing grace with conscience, (12) though at other times he seems to have seen it as more than that. For example, in his “Preface” to some of the writings of Robert Barnes (martyred 1540), Wesley demonstrated how he understood it. Wesley wrote, that “the general manner” by which God sets up His kingdom in the hearts of sinners is by first drawing them “by the love of the Father, enlightened by the Son … and convinced of sin by the Holy Ghost; through the preventing grace which is given him freely, cometh weary and heavy laden, and casteth all his sins upon Him that is ‘mighty to save.’ He receiveth from Him true, living faith. Being justified by faith, he hath peace with God … and knows that sin hath no more dominion over him.” (13) This preventing grace draws the sinner towards the Saviour, and the sinner then receives “true, living faith”, and so salvation is seen as an extra measure of grace.

In another sermon Wesley set it out more clearly. He said, “Salvation begins with what is usually termed (and very properly) preventing grace; including the first wish to please God, [p.9] the first dawn of light concerning his will, and the first slight transient conviction of having sinned against Him…. Salvation is carried on by convincing grace, usually in Scripture termed repentance…. Afterwards we experience the proper Christian salvation”. (14) It is clear from these examples that to Wesley, preventing grace as such does not save, but rather it places sinners in a position from which they can be saved through the further outpouring of God's grace.

In fact, as has been seen, to Wesley even saving faith is a gift from God. In the Preface just examined Wesley says that “the sinner receiveth [from God] ‘true, living faith’”. (15) In addition, in his sermon on “Justification by Faith”, he says that the faith that leads
Now, Wesley's concept of prevenient grace could have led him to a decision-based, do-it-when-you-wish understanding of conversion, but it did not, though it may well have led others in that direction. Examples of Wesley's counselling demonstrate the outworking of a theology very different from that which dominates today's evangelism. While Wesley was more than ready to speak to individuals and small groups of enquirers, there is no evidence that he ever felt obliged to lead them to make "a decision for Christ". In fact, he frequently counselled those that required it and after having clearly presented the Gospel he either went to bed or on to the next town, often leaving these people in spiritual anguish. He does not seem to have believed in pushing or even leading people into a "decision". In fact, that concept appears to have been unknown to him. (17)

When we come to John's brother Charles, his theology sounds remarkably similar to his sibling. Take for example what may be his greatest hymn, "And can it be". The fourth verse runs:

Long my imprisoned spirit lay
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray –
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;
My chains fell off, my heart was free,
I rose went forth, and followed Thee. (18)

If one was to present that same message but in different words today, many would say that you were preaching Calvinism. But this "Calvinist" was an Arminian.

Yet, like the Calvinist, Charles Wesley too believed that all human beings in their post-fall condition were "imprisoned" and held "fast bound" by sin's chains. This sin and its control over people dwell in humanity's inherited nature. He clearly agreed with his brother's view of total depravity. Indeed, Charles's view may be even stronger than John's. Because of that depravity, no one can just make a "decision" for Christ whenever they choose. It requires the prior intervention of the Holy Spirit. In fact, the modern concept of decisionist conversion is contrary to what the Wesleys taught. Rather, to them, any response that a human being might make to God could only come after God's "eye" had "diffused a quickening ray", a life-giving ray, a spiritual touch from God's Spirit, His saving grace poured out upon the sinner, which made it possible for an individual to believe and repent. (The role of belief and repentance in conversion will be examined at the end of this article.) And what is presented here is something more than preventing grace. But it is this grace that must touch the sinner before he or she can believe, go forth and follow Christ. In addition, in this hymn, this grace almost sounds irresistible, even allowing for poetic license.

It is, thus, hard to equate the teaching of the Wesleys with the evangelism of today. Though this hymn has often been sung with great gusto in evangelistic meetings and services in the modern era, it is in stark contrast with the evangelistic practices that usually accompanied it. For example, compare it with the altar call (or public invitation), a device that John Wesley (and almost certainly his brother Charles) never used, (19) and the so called sinner's prayer (that is, a prayer prayed to God or Christ by an individual to "receive" Jesus into the heart). These practices, with their emphasis on human decision, particularly the latter one, just do not fit with the theology and methods of the Wesleys.

In fact, my research shows that the altar call was only very rarely used before John Wesley's death, and then not by him. (20) With regard to the sinner's prayer to receive Jesus, one American researcher says that the earliest printed form he can find is dated as recently as the 1950s. (21) I have found printed sinner's prayers of that type slightly earlier (1922, 1945 and 1948) (22) and evidence suggests that such sinner's prayers were being used orally before that, probably from the late nineteenth century. (23) But more basic than these practices and their dates of origin is the theological difference between them and the theology of genuine Arminianism, as believed by the Wesleys.

The Theology of Finney and Moody

It is my argument that today's theology of conversion and evangelism is based more upon the theology of Charles Finney and D. L. Moody, than upon that of the Wesleys or Arminius, and so should be called Finneyism or Moodyism.

Finney did, of course, write works of theology and lectured in theology at Oberlin. However, criticisms of his theology on more than one area, but particularly his soteriology, are too numerous to list. (24)

Moody was nobody's idea of a theologian and he certainly never thought of himself as such. However, anyone who preaches Christ has a theology, whether it is a good one or a bad one, a well-formed one or an immature or inconsistent one. Moody's
theology of conversion and evangelism was immature, at times inconsistent, and at some points dangerously deceptive, but make no mistake he had a theology.

Charles G Finney (1792-1875)

First, Finney disagreed with the Wesleys on total depravity. While he did agree that human beings were morally depraved, “wholly disinclined to obey” God’s word and that everybody had an “enmity against God”, (25) his understanding was very different from the Wesleys and the Calvinists. His view was that this depravity was not by nature, but by choice. It was “a voluntary attitude of the mind; that it did and must consist in the committal of the will to the gratification of the desire ... of the lusts of the flesh, as opposed to that which the law of God requires.” It was “altogether voluntary”. Indeed, each human being has the power to make themselves “a new heart and a new spirit” and to do so “now”. (26) In fact, he also said that each individual had “the power and liberty of choice”, including the freedom to be saved. (27) This effectively meant that, to Finney, human beings had the natural power of choice to become Christians. All had the ability to turn to Christ. It was just a matter of being willing to do so. Here we clearly have a decision-based concept of conversion, one that is very different from that held by the Wesleys, but very similar to that behind the most common forms of evangelism today.

Related to that is his idea of how the Spirit works upon sinners. If with the Calvinists grace was irresistible and even with John Wesley was sometimes so, to Finney the working of the Spirit in grace is very, very limited, and certainly was always resistible. To Finney the Spirit's work on the sinner is only in “teaching or persuasion” and “striving” with the soul. (28) That is, the Spirit persuades the sinner to repent and believe. He also awakens sinners to the plan of salvation. (29) But there, according to Finney, the Spirit stops. While the Spirit has a “moral influence” upon sinners, He has no “physical” influence on them. The Holy Spirit persuades individuals to change He does not physically change them. In other words, He does not change the “nature” of those converted. (30)

Finney said that he did not reject the doctrines of election and divine sovereignty, rather he opposed too much emphasis upon them. (31) However, it could be argued that within his theological framework Finney's view of election was not really election, not even in the [p.11] Arminian mould. It is hard to see how God can elect anyone to salvation, when His Spirit is so inactive in an individual's conversion. As Paul Chitwood says, “Salvation, in Finney's mind, is obviously not a preordained event.” (32)

Dwight L. Moody (1837-99)

We now come to D. L. Moody. Though the lives of Finney and Moody overlapped by more than 30 years, there appears to be no evidence that Moody ever met Finney, read any of his books or corresponded with him, (33) so if Finney influenced Moody then it was presumably indirectly. However, there is no doubt that Moody was greatly influenced by Plymouth Brethren teachers and there are two specific identifiable examples of the influence that they had upon his soteriology and preaching.

First, Moody described his beliefs as consisting of the three Rs: “Ruined by the Fall; redeemed by the blood; and regenerated by the Holy Spirit.” (34) These three points also appear on the tombstone of Henry Varley, a Brethren evangelist, whom it is known influenced Moody, and Varley is, thus, probably the source of these concepts. (35) The phrase “regenerated by the Holy Spirit” indicates that Moody, unlike Finney, seems to have envisaged that the Holy Spirit worked a physical change in the subject at conversion. This is confirmed in that he did believe that the work of the Spirit in conversion was “supernatural” and more than just persuasion. (36)

Another Brethren influence was Henry (Harry) Moorhouse. In his early days Moody’s preaching was full of hell-fire, but this changed after hearing Moorhouse preach a series of sermons on “For God so loved the world”. Not that God's judgment entirely disappeared from Moody's preaching, but God's love became its dominant theme. (37) However, Moody argued against the Calvinism of another Plymouth brother, J. N. Darby. And one suspects he might also have argued with the Wesleys about their Arminianism if he had met them.

His statement “Ruined by the Fall” could mean that he believed in the traditional doctrine of total depravity, but his evangelistic practice and some of his sermons suggest that if he did he had greatly modified it, for, to him, people were able to take or receive Christ. “You can if you will”, he proclaimed, and “Every creature can be saved if he will.” (38) Thus, in his view, sin had not disempowered the human will. As David Bebbington says, “Moody enlarged the place of human volition in his system so that a person could will to be saved”. (39)

Moody, like Finney, expected his listeners to make decisions on the spot, as he believed they were able to do. As Moody once said, conversion to Christ “don’t take time; it takes decision.” (40) In keeping with that, in one sermon he advised his listeners “the way to be saved is not to delay, but to come and take, t-a-k-e TAKE.” (41) He is said on one occasion to have stood on a chair in
an enquiry room and challenged the seekers with “Who’ll take Christ now? That’s all you want. With Christ you have eternal life and everything else you need. Without Him you must perish. He offers Himself to you. Who’ll take Him? Now let all inquirers and all who now will take Christ as their own for the first time, kneel down and take Him.” (42) To Moody, Christian conversion could always be taken here and now.

The idea of having the power to accept or receive Christ into the heart or life when one chooses seems to have emerged in the mid-19th Century. For example, it commonly appears in the writings of American Methodist Bishop, William “California” Taylor. (43) As it developed the picture became Christ outside a locked door, as in Holman Hunt’s painting, (44) which only the sinner could open, thus the initiative in conversion is clearly with the sinner. This idea is usually based on John 1:11-12 and, especially, Rev. 3:20: “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (which, in actual fact, is a statement addressed to Christians in a church, not non-Christians).

Moody eagerly adopted this new method of understanding these passages of Scripture and made it popular. In one sermon, Moody used the verse “Behold, I stand at the door and knock...” as an invitation for sinners to receive Christ into their “hearts”. (45) In another, he said, “Many people are keeping the doors of their hearts locked against the Saviour”. (46) In another sermon, he spoke of some Christians not being willing “to receive [Christ] fully,” urged sinners to “admit Christ into their hearts”, and also said, “If we admit Christ into our hearts.” (47) In another address Moody said, “I do not believe there is a man or woman in this room to-night that is willing to confess sin, and turn away from it and confess Christ, but what will get salvation. Salvation will come the moment that they are ready to receive Christ and confess him.” (48) Moody even had a tract printed during his first tour of Britain (1873-75), which had a brief exposition of Rev. 3:20 by him on one side, and on the other the Gospel song “Jesus of Nazareth Passeth By”. (49)

Yet one does also find Rev. 3:20 used in reference to conversion in the works of earlier writers such as John Flavel (d.1691), (50) Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) and Asahel Nettleton (1783-1843), (51) but in their writings the initiative in conversion still remained with God. For example, Flavel regarded Christ’s “voice” in that verse as the “effectual call”. Receiving Christ would be impossible without that. However, in the new way of viewing this text the initiative was definitely with the enquirer. Christ remained powerless outside the door. (This very point has been made many times in modern evangelism.)

As with Finney, election does not fit easily into Moody's system. True, unlike Finney, the Spirit of God did change the individual, but in Moody's theology conversion still appears to have been dependent primarily upon human decision. It could be argued that God elected people to salvation whom He foreknew would “receive” Him, which would be similar to the Arminian belief, though I have found nothing in Moody to indicate that he believed that. In addition, if conversion is based primarily on human decision, then God's grace and the Spirit's work must always be resistible.

It is clear from Moody’s sermons and practice that his theology of evangelism and conversion was significantly different from the Wesleys. Instead of total depravity and inability to choose God, in Moody's view one seems to be able to believe at just about any time. Instead of an emphasis upon the Spirit's working on the soul, the main emphasis is on human response.

**Today's Practical Theology of Evangelism and Conversion.**

The most common forms of evangelism today are that after a sermon or other evangelistic presentation those desiring salvation or wishing to know more are called to the front of the meeting place for counselling. Sometimes, at the end of the sermon or counselling session or both, the one being counselled is led in a sinner's prayer for salvation. In personal evangelism a brief presentation of the Gospel is used, one individual to another, and then, often, a sinner's prayer is recited to “receive” Christ. Both forms assume that if such a prayer is prayed sincerely, then the individual will be automatically converted. Here conversion is viewed primarily as a human decision, and sometimes the impression is even given that it is entirely a human decision.

We now need to look more closely at the theology behind these common forms of evangelism. Here I will concentrate not on the views of recognised theologians, but rather the teachings of those who do most to form and establish the modern theology of evangelism and conversion, that is, evangelists.

**Billy Graham**

The major figure promoting this form of evangelism in the last 60 years has been Billy Graham. We will examine his relevant theology and his practice. Billy Graham taught that it is impossible “to turn to God to repent or even believe without God's help!” Indeed, “When a man calls upon God, he is given true repentance and faith”. However, to receive that help one must first “be willing”. (52) The Wesleys would have agreed with Graham's second statement that God gives “repentance and faith”, (53) but perhaps would have clarified the nature of calling on God. But they may have been a little wary of the first about needing
Prayer appeared in all three editions. It is claimed that this booklet has been “distributed to more than 2.5 billion people”.

Produced for use by Campus Crusade staff. The booklet edition for mass distribution did not appear until 1965. The Sinner’s version was only available in a larger form called “God’s plan for Your Life”, which was a twenty minute presentation by Bright for use by Campus Crusade staff.

Perhaps the second leading advocate of these methods during the modern period has been Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. He is probably best known for his tool for use in personal evangelism, Have you heard of the four Spiritual Laws? This appears to have been one of the first evangelistic booklets to use a sinner’s prayer to receive Christ, which gives the user the impression that conversion is based primarily on human choice.

It can be fairly argued that the impression usually given at Graham crusades is that human decision is the key issue, with God working somehow in the background. The emphasis on human decision is very strong in Graham’s public invitations, the following counselling process and counsellor training. Indeed, one of the Billy Graham organisation’s primary magazines was called Decision. In fact, Graham says, “In order to be converted you must make a choice.”

Bill Bright

Perhaps the second leading advocate of these methods during the modern period has been Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ. He is probably best known for his tool for use in personal evangelism, Have you heard of the four Spiritual Laws? This appears to have been one of the first evangelistic booklets to use a sinner’s prayer to receive Christ, which gives the user the impression that conversion is based primarily on human choice. This booklet developed in three stages. It first appeared in 1952 in a larger form called “God’s plan for Your Life”, which was a twenty minute presentation by Bright for use by Campus Crusade staff. All the staff of that organisation were expected to memorise it. A shorter version appeared in 1956, but that also was only produced for use by Campus Crusade staff. The booklet edition for mass distribution did not appear until 1965. The Sinner’s Prayer appeared in all three editions. It is claimed that this booklet has been “distributed to more than 2.5 billion people.”
Four spiritual laws, which, like most such booklets, can be either given to a seeker or be used in a counselling situation. This booklet begins with a very brief introduction to the Gospel and then states, “You can receive Christ right now by faith through prayer.” It then gives “a suggested prayer” which runs:

“Lord Jesus, I need You. I believe you paid the penalty for my sins on the cross. I open the door of my life and receive You as my Saviour and Lord. Thank You for forgiving my sins and giving me eternal life. Take control of the throne of my life. Make me the kind of person You want me to be.”

This is followed by the assurance that if “this prayer expresses the desire of your heart” and you pray it “right now”, then “Christ will come into your life, as He promised.” (66)

The major component in the prayer seems to be receiving Christ into one's life. Indeed, the sentence “I open the door of my life and receive You as my Saviour and Lord” places the initiative in Christian conversion on the one praying rather than on God. Then, while the first half of the prayer asks for salvation, the second half assumes that it has by then been granted. That assumption is supported by the material that follows. That is, provided the prayer does actually express “the desire of your heart”, then you will automatically and immediately be saved. The same ideas also appear in Bright's book A Man Without Equal. (67)

Is this Arminianism?

It is clear from these examples and an awareness of teaching about today's evangelistic practice that most of modern evangelism is conducted on the understanding that human decision is the key ingredient in conversion to Christ. This is not only very different from Calvinism [p.15] it is also different from traditional Arminianism. The idea of total depravity, believed by both Calvinists and the Wesleys, is missing.

If this new evangelism cannot truly be called “Arminianism” what should it be called? A reasonable label to fasten upon this belief system is “Finneyism” (68) or, perhaps better, “Moodyism”. To call it Arminianism is a mistake and quite misleading. The Wesleys and Arminius would surely have rejected this system.

If it be thought that this is just a matter of names, it needs to be recognised that names help form perceptions. Most of today's evangelicals seem to assume that their evangelistic beliefs and practices have been long-held and are traditional (the same as those of, say, 250-300 years ago), but this is clearly not so. A new name would help highlight the differences and encourage people to question the modern ideas and methods.

Are Faith and Repentance Decisions?

It is clear that believing in Christ and repenting are the biblical stipulations for salvation. These concepts are found in many places in the Gospels, Acts and Paul's letters. But the concept of decision, as such, is very hard to find in the Scriptures. But do belief and repentance require human decision?

It can be fairly argued that there is an element of human decision in any conversion, say, in the process of repenting. But such decisions are subordinate to God's work. They are utterly impossible unless the Holy Spirit is first working in people's lives, convicting them of sin, calling them, drawing them to Himself and ultimately saving them. It is God who saves.

The problem with much of today's evangelism and the theology behind it is that the impression is often given that human decision is the primary factor in conversion, rather than a subordinate one. (This was Finney's position and seemingly Moody's.) That is, receiving Christ by an act of the human will and deciding for Christ are the predominant ideas used in sermons of many evangelistic preachers. However, those ideas are common not only in sermons preached to gain a response, but in books about evangelism, including training manuals, (69) and in Christian testimonies. One of the most common terms used to describe a conversion is “decision” or its cognates. One frequently hears, “Decide for Christ”, “I made my decision ...” or similar. Far too often talk of conversion as a decision makes it sound like our work, rather than God's, and in much of modern evangelism it may indeed be our work.

Peter and Paul in the first century and the Wesleys in the eighteenth all preached for response, and so should we. But they did not appear to have expected their hearers to make a decision as such. The call was to repent and believe and they are different concepts. (70)

Conclusion
Not all who use the modern methods of evangelism, such as the altar call and the sinner’s prayer, would necessarily agree with the theology of Finney and Moody, but their practice is generally in line with what these two men taught. However, it is very different from a Calvinistic or even a traditional Arminian theology. Thus the theology behind much of today’s evangelism is best dubbed “Finneyism,” or even “Moodyism,” but it is a mistake and misleading to call it “Arminianism.”

ENDNOTES

1 For a more detailed argument of these points, see David [Malcolm] Bennett, “How Arminian was John Wesley?” Evangelical Quarterly, 72 (2000), 237-43.
9 Wesley, Some Remarks on ... Aspasio Vindicated, Works, 10:350.
10 Wesley, “Righteousness”, 44 Sermons, 69. [NB: in the Evangelical Action” version of this article n. 8 is missing and ns. 9 & 10 have been confused.]
11 For a detailed study of this concept in Wesley see Herbert Boyd McGonigle, Sufficient Saving Grace: John Wesley's Evangelical Arminianism (SEHT, Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 318-30.
13 Wesley, “Preface,” Works, 14:211-12
17 For more examples of Wesley’s counselling methods see David Bennett, The Altar Call: Its Origins and Present Usage (Lanham: UP of America, 2000), 8-10.
19 Bennett, Altar, 1-11.
20 Bennett, Altar, 29-79.
29 Finney, Revivals, 16-17, 34.
30 Finney, Memoirs, 155, 350 (emphasis in original).
31 Finney, Revivals, 228-31.
32 Chitwood, Sinner's Prayer, 35.
36 Gundry, Love, 84-85, 87, 121-25.
37 Gundry, Love, 45-46; J. C. Pollock, Moody without Sankey (London: Hodder, 1963), 72-74. John Kent has challenged the idea that
Moody's preaching strongly emphasised God's love, at the expense of his judgment. He says that Moody's method was a "system of terror", but more subtle than his predecessors, with a "strong element of fear", see Holding the Fort: Studies in Victorian Revivalism (London: Epworth, 1978), 171-72. Kent, at the very least, overstates his case.

38 Gundry, Love, 123-26, quoting from a Moody sermon on the new birth.


41 Bernard A. Weisberger, They Gathered at the River (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958), 211 (emphasis in original).

42 Weisberger, Gathered, 212.


44 For a brief examination of how Holman Hunt's painting has been interpreted see my Sinner's Prayer, 112-13.


47 D. L. Moody, "Christ All and in All", Rosell, Commending, 100, 105-106.


49 Thomas E. Corts, "D. L. Moody: Payment on Account", in George, Mr Moody, 104, quoting E.J. Goodspeed, A Full History of the Wonderful Career of Moody and Sankey in Great Britain and America (1876), 148.


56 Graham, Peace, 121. See also Billy Graham, World Aflame, 144.

57 Quoted by Stuart Piggin, Billy Graham in Australia, 1959: Was it Revival? CSAC Working Papers, Series 1, No. 4 (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1992), 5. See also Drummond, Evangelist, 53-54.

58 Drummond, Evangelist, 56-57. For John Wesley see his debate with George Whitefield, Works, 1:426-27.

59 Curtis Mitchell, God in the Garden (Garden City: Doubleday, 1957), 133.

60 Graham, Peace, 113.


62 Graham, Peace, 131; see also 132-35.

63 Graham, World, 146.

64 This information is from two e-mails to the author from Laura Sherwood of Campus Crusade for Christ, 4 & 7 Dec. 2009. She states that the Sinner's Prayer was in all three forms.

65 “William R. ‘Bill’ Bright”, viewed 23 Nov. 2009,

66 Bill Bright, Have you heard of the four spiritual laws? (Sydney: Campus Crusade for Christ, 1965), 10.


68 I am aware that “Finneyism” is not a new term. Nor is the distinction between it and Arminianism new, though it is uncommon. I am just supporting its use for this type of thinking instead of Arminianism.


70 For more on a biblical understanding of conversion, see my Altar Call, 201-213, and Sinner's Prayer, 21-25, 28-38.

I have defined the altar call as:
“A method of evangelism, within which a regular or frequent, planned invitation is given to “unbelievers” to respond to Jesus Christ publicly at the conclusion of a sermon or other gospel presentation, in such ways as: calling out a response, raising a hand, standing, or walking to a designated spot in the evangelistic setting. A response to such an invitation would normally be followed by immediate counseling and later by some form of follow up. It often incorporates an appeal to Christians for such issues as rededication and call to mission. It is not a theology, though it does reflect and support particular theologies.”[i]

This practice appears to have begun in the eighteenth century. However there have been claims that it has been used earlier than that. Some of those claims are examined below

John Chrysostom (c.347-407)

John Chrysostom, the Bishop of Constantinople, was a great preacher. Indeed, the name Chrysostom means the “golden-mouthed”. R. Allan Streett, in his book *The Effective Invitation*, says,

“As [John] advanced from exposition to illustration, from scriptural principles to practical appeals, his delivery became more rapid … The people began to hold in their breath … A creeping sensation like that produced by a series of electric waves passed over them. They felt as if drawn forwards toward the pulpit by a sort of magnetic influence. Some of those who were sitting rose from their seats; others were overcome with a kind of faintness … by the time the discourse came to an end the great mass of that spellbound audience could only hold their heads and give vent to their emotions in tears.”

Here Streett is quoting from Thomas Pattinson’s book *The History of Christian Preaching*, which in turn is quoting from a work by “Dr Macgilvray”.[ii] Streett also implies that John Chrysostom used the altar call. Streett says that John “moved his listeners to physical response”,[iii] and this is true for people wept, felt faint, stood up and some appear to have moved forward. However, there is no indication that John urged them to do so. In other words, there is no evidence here that John made an altar call asking people to move forward. Any moving forward appears to have been either their choice or an involuntary action.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153)

R. Allan Streett, in his book *The Effective Invitation*, says, “The fruitful efforts of Bernard of Clairvaux” in the twelfth century “ushered thousands into the Kingdom of God. An evangelist during the Crusades, he issued a public invitation on a regular basis.”[iv] To support this Streett quotes a book by Lloyd M. Perry and John R. Strubhar, which says, “The basic appeal of Bernard of Clairvaux was for people to repent of their sins. Often he would call for a show of hands from those who wished to be restored to fellowship with God or the church”.[v] In other words, Streett is saying that Bernard of Clairvaux used the evangelistic altar call in the twelfth century. In fact, Streett argues that this disproves the suggestion that the altar call began with Charles Finney in the nineteenth century.[vi] Neither Streett nor Perry and Strubhar give any other reference to support their claim, so we do need to take a quick look at Bernard’s life and methods to see if these comments are valid.

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was a highly influential, French, Cistercian Monk. His monastic beliefs were very different from modern evangelicalism,[vii] so if he did use an appeal as described by Perry and Strubhar, one suspects that it would be for different reasons from those connected with the altar call used in evangelical circles today.

In fact, the solution appears to be that Bernard did make appeals that expected such responses as the raising of a hand, though it was for a very different reason. It was not to encourage enquirers to move forward at an evangelistic “crusade”,[viii] but to enlist soldiers for the Crusades.

Edwin Dargan points out the Bernard and others often preached with the specific purpose of enlisting people to fight in the Crusades. As Dargan argues “It was not exactly preaching – in the proper sense of the word – but it was the urging of men to immediate self-sacrificing devotion to what was believed to be a religious cause.”[ix] Thomas Pattison also noted that Bernard insisted that individuals needed to repent before they could enlist as a crusader.[x]

Jonathan Riley-Smith, a major authority on the Crusades, says that when people had been called to assemble

“any papal general letter in which Christians were summoned to crusade would be read in translation. This explains the highly emotional words with which so many of these letters opened… The preacher would then launch into his homily. It was common for this to be quite short and to be based at least partly on the general letter that had just been read. It would conclude with an *invitatio*, in which the preacher would implore his listeners to take the cross. In a handbook for preachers, written in the 1260s, Humbert of Romans provided twenty-nine examples of *invitationes*. Here is one: ‘And so it is clear, most beloved, that those who join the army of the Lord will be blessed by the Lord. They will have the angels as companions and they will receive eternal
rewards when they die.’ Each of the invitationes on Humbert’s list ends with the word cantus. Humbert explained in his introduction that an invitatio should be accompanied by a hymn. He referred to the Veni Sancte Spiritus, the Veni Creator, the Vexilla regis, and the Salve crux sancta, but he added that the preacher could arrange for the singing of any other that he deemed to be suitable. As early as 1100 the archbishop of Milan made use of a popular song, Ulreia, ulreia. So as a preacher bellowed out his passionate appeal a choir would strike up and would presumably continue singing as men came forward to commit themselves publicly. As each recruit made his vow he was presented with a cloth cross. He was supposed to have it attached to his clothes at once and to wear this very visible sign of his commitment until he came home with his vow fulfilled. This aspect of the proceedings needed careful preparation, because otherwise there would have been confusion; at Vézelay in 1146 so great was the enthusiasm that the stock of made-up crosses ran out and Bernard of Clairvaux, with typical theatricality, had to tear his habit into strips to provide additional ones.[xi]

This is certainly strikingly similar to an altar call at a modern evangelistic rally: a crowd is assembled a sermon is preached, at the end of which a choir sings and people are invited to move forward to, supposedly, enlist in Christ’s cause. However, the purpose is totally different. The mediaeval version is to enlist in a literal army to fight a literal battle, a battle in which you would try to kill others and hope that you would not be killed. The modern version is to enlist as a follower of Christ in what one hopes would be a much more peaceful cause.

In other words, Streett’s use of this medieval incident to support the use of the Altar Call today is fatally flawed.

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[ii] R. Allan Streett, The Effective Invitation (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1995), 83-84. Streett is quoting from Thomas Harwood Pattinson, The History of Christian Preaching (Philadelphia: American Baptist, 1903), 71, who is in turn quoting from a Dr Macgilvray. This is Dr Walter MacGilvray, a nineteenth century Scottish academic, who had written a biography about John Chrysostom. So the account is a nineteenth century description.

[iii] Street, Effective, 83.

[iv] Street, Effective, 84.

[v] Lloyd M. Perry and John R. Strubhar, Evangelistic Preaching (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 44.

[vi] Streett, Effective, 84-85. The altar call did, in fact, begin before Finney, but not nearly as early as Streett claims, see Bennett, Altar Call, 29-79.


[viii] The first time an evangelistic campaign was called a “crusade” appears to have been in the early 1950s, when the Billy Graham organisation used it to replace the term “campaign”. “Crusade” seems to have been first adopted by Willis Graham Haymaker (1895-1980), a major helper in Graham’s campaign in Columbia, South Carolina, which began 19 February, 1950. Billy Graham said Haymaker “urged us to drop the word Campaign in favour of Crusade”. See Billy Graham, Just as I am (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), ? page. Information supplied by K.C. James of the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, e-mail, 5 March 2015.


[xi] Jonathan Riley-Smith, (2008-11-10). The Crusades, Christianity, and Islam (Bampton Lectures in America) (pp. 38-39). Columbia University Press. Kindle Edition. Though Humbert’s Handbook was written after Bernard had died, it does appear, as indicated, that the practice of singing as prospective crusaders moved forward was also used in Bernard’s time.
Claude Brousson (1647-98)

Thomas P. Johnston, Associate Professor of Evangelism at Mid-Western Baptist Theological Seminary, has a few other suggestions. In chapter 22 of his book Evangelizology he shows the same flaw as Alan Streett in his work. That is, he tends to confuse a gospel invitation with a gospel invitation requesting a public response. His definition is of an invitation expecting a public response, but he seems to regard any gospel invitation as coming within the scope of that definition, see p. 727 (for the definition) and pp. 736-38 (for some examples). As with Streett, this leads him to see a public invitation (or altar call, if you prefer) where it does not seem to exist.

In these pages Johnston gives three historical accounts of what he seems to regard as examples of public invitations. The first, which is of a Cathar ritual (possibly of the thirteenth century), does not fit his definition or mine. The third is from a tract by Charles Haddon Spurgeon (nineteenth century), which again does not fit either definition. In other words, these two records are not genuine examples of the public invitation.

However, the second does give what appears to be an early public invitation, earlier than any I had found in my research. It occurred in the ministry of Claude Brousson (1647-98), a French Huguenot, who was a lawyer and preacher. In 1689 he delivered a sermon to some Protestants who had returned to Roman Catholicism. The following account was originally written in French and this is a translation by Reuben Saillens.

“When the sermon was over, the preacher asked whether there was any among his hearers wishing to be reconciled to God and His Church, and to re-enter the communion of saints … *Then, any who were so minded came forward and knelt before the preacher,* who began to remonstrate with them and showed them how enormous was the sin they had committed in forsaking Christ. That being done, they were asked to say whether they did repent, and would henceforth live and die in the Reformed faith, in spite of the allurements and threats of the world; whether they heartily renounced the errors of the Church of Rome, the Mass and all thereto appertaining…. (This was done in much detail.) They had to answer Yes to all these questions, each individually. After this, they had to promise not to attend Mass any more, and to take great care not to pollute themselves with Babylon, either by marriage or in other ways; not to allow their children to be trained in it, but, on the contrary, to instruct them in the principles of our religion. Each having duly promised, the minister then proclaimed the remission of their sins, saying, ‘In the name and authority of Jesus Christ, and as a faithful minister of His Word, I declare to you the remission of all your sins, and there is now no condemnation for you, since you are in Jesus Christ.’ Then followed a prayer on their behalf …

“Forty-two of us were admitted in this manner, the rest of the flock having been received back at previous gatherings. The number of the communicants was about two hundred and fifty, men and women.

“Tell our former pastor, M. Modens, that nearly half of his flock are now restored, and by God's grace the rest will soon follow. The churches at Uzès, Nîmes, Sommières, etc., have all received the same blessing and are now restored. Our foes may say and do what they will, the Holy Spirit has had mercy on us and has reconquered our souls.”

This does sound like a public invitation as we have defined it, though it comes closer to a modern act of rededication than conversion. That is, the people concerned were apostates returning to the Reformed faith from Catholicism. The record says, ‘any who were so minded came forward and knelt before the preacher’. However, it does not clearly say that an invitation to move forward was given, though seeing that a large group did so, this seems highly likely. But clearly the translator has omitted something (‘…’) in the second line, and it would be interesting to know what that is.

[1] This translation appears in Reuben Saillens, The Soul of France (London: Morgan and Scott, 1917), 85-87. (The emphasis is mine.) The French original appears to have been in a book by Matthieu Lelièvre, though I have been unable to locate which one. It was not Portraits et Récits Huguenots.


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JANUARY 11, 2016

REINHARD BONNKE AND CHRIST FOR ALL
Bonnke and Christ for all Nations

Reinhard Bonnke was born in Germany in 1940 and was converted as a child. In 1969 he and his wife Anni went as missionaries to Africa, briefly to South Africa first and then Lesotho, where they served for seven years. In 1974 he began the evangelistic organisation known as Christ for all Nations (CfaN). It grew quickly and under that banner he has preached at massive meetings in many African countries. He later also ministered in Asia, South America and in 2013 conducted his first campaign in the USA. Bonnke has also written “a number of books and booklets”, with 179 million in print, translated into over 120 languages and dialects.

This article will concentrate primarily on investigating the accuracy of the official statistics of Bonnke’s campaigns and the methods he uses. It will also take a brief look at his theology, but pay little attention to his healing ministry and other matters. In other words, the main issue here is the effectiveness of his evangelism.

Pentecostalism

We first need to take a quick look at the modern Pentecostal movement. That movement is usually believed to have begun in America on 1 January 1901, the first day of the new century. Its major early figure seems to have been an Afro-American preacher named William J. Seymour. His Azusa Street mission, though small, became very influential. In the first decade of that century that movement began sending out missionaries, including many who had had contact with Azusa Street, to a variety of countries, including numerous nations in Africa. In addition, some members of traditional churches in Africa began to demonstrate charismatic phenomena such as speaking in tongues, which resulted in breakaway Pentecostal movements in that continent.

His Message

Reinhard Bonnke is an evangelical preacher, clearly in the Pentecostal camp. His dynamic preaching and Pentecostal teachings and practice fit well with a common African mind-set and African needs. In fact, Pentecostalism had grown considerably in some parts of that continent before Bonnke arrived on the scene, so the way was well prepared for his type of ministry.

Charismatic gifts such as healing are a major part of CfaN campaigns. However, Bonnke makes it clear that they are not the major part. “I have observed”, he says, “that there is a mass of ministry by videos, tapes, books, etc., all concerned with the sensational and supernatural, and aimed at creating faith for things to happen. Looking through a catalogue of audio tapes available from various international preachers, I noticed that they are generally on one theme: the supernatural outworking of faith. But the early Christians sought nothing of the sort. They longed for holiness and to win the lost – and signs and wonders followed.” Bonnke, therefore, expects “signs and wonders” to follow his evangelism and he does claim that many instances of healing accompany his preaching. However, he admits that not all the sick people who come to his rallies are healed. In fact, he says, “Many go unhealed despite prayer and faith, but healing is not everything. Sickness is not the ultimate evil, nor are cures the ultimate good.”

His primary aim is evangelistic. It is to preach to great crowds with the intention of winning as many as possible to salvation in Jesus Christ. He says, “Christianity ... is a dogmatic religion. The gospel makes hard statements that must be accepted. Christianity is historic; it is fact. The gospel evokes feelings, but it cannot be reduced to feelings. It is the truth, whatever people may feel. People have died at the stake for truth – not for feelings. We must boldly declare the truth and never compromise or dilute it to spare anybody's feelings.” Bonnke is, for example, not afraid to preach about judgment and hell, but he does not seem to overdo it.
Yet he also correctly says, “Christianity is not merely a statement of historical facts or a list of beliefs. Jesus is not just a historical figure. The gospel is a dynamic, life-giving force. It must be accepted by the inner man as well as by the intellect. Unless evangelism touches the heart it is useless, however accurate one's orthodoxy.”[ix] He adds, “People will never arrive at Christian belief by reason, but only by opening their hearts to his voice and to divine illumination. We believe what we believe because it is true, and it moves us and stirs us.”[x]

Here Bonnke is, broadly speaking, correct. No one can become a Christian simply by reason, but reason is one of the processes through which we come to understand the Gospel of Christ. And we cannot believe it if we do not understand it. Yet the Gospel must also, as Bonnke's says, “touch the heart”.

Yet he is not always that orthodox. Bonnke also says, “The secret of evangelism lies in the man [the evangelist], not in some strange mystical operation of God.”[xi] He is quite wrong here, for the “secret of evangelism lies” in the movement of the Holy Spirit, not in any man. A man can preach his heart out, but only God can give the increase. Yet Bonnke is not alone in this kind of thinking, for many evangelists during the last 150 years have over emphasised the role of human beings in evangelism and conversion.[xii]

How the Campaigns are Conducted

Frank Kürschner-Pelkmann describes a Bonnke campaign in Africa this way: “The evangelistic campaign itself takes place on a large piece of ground [sometimes a football stadium] with space for hundreds of thousands of people, who can hear what is being said over very powerful loudspeakers.”[xiii] Towards the end of the service “people are invited to confess Christ as Saviour. Whoever decides to do this is approached and spoken to by one of the many counsellors and is given a brochure with basic information about the Christian faith written by Reinhard Bonnke.”[xiv]

Using Nigeria as an example, all campaigns in that nation “are formally planned. Specific dates, venue and time are chosen with the consent of the local or host organisers.” A “local mobilization team” is selected for each targeted city, which works with CfaN personnel to gain the support of local churches and to promote the campaigns. Each “mobilization team” is given the task of “encouraging the support and cooperation of Christians” from different denominations in the villages and towns in the area surrounding the specific targeted city.[xv]

In fact, CfaN expects the people organising the campaigns to “Recruit local churches, pastors and laymen to take a leadership role in the crusade.” This, they state, is for two main reasons, so that they can “get the word out” that the campaign is going to happen and to acquire “a large pool of local people” to take on the various tasks from “planning” to “follow-up”. The organisers are expected to “Listen to [the] input” of the people on the spot as “They know the need” of the local community.[xvi]

A “Central Working Committee” is also set up for every campaign, which often comprises 26 personnel. A Chairman and two vice-chairmen lead that committee and most of the others lead a group that looks after a specific role in the campaign, such as finance, music and prayer. What is important for our purposes is that a “Counselling Chairman” is on the list. However, there is no mention of a “Follow-up Chairman”,[xvii] though follow-up duties may be covered by those responsible for counselling or by one of the other groups. Bonnke certainly advocates planning for follow-up.[xviii] However, CfaN follow-up has been called “inadequate”,[xix] and, as shall be seen, it does seem to be in need of more attention.

Ezekiel Ajani made some disturbing claims in 2010. He said, “At no point in time has CFAN ever given a summary of her expenses on any of the crusades held in Nigeria.” Ajani also criticised the “unwillingness of CFAN's team to discuss financial matters.” Some local organisers also appear to be reluctant to talk about financial issues.[xx] However, Frank Kürschner-Pelkmann, who is otherwise critical of Bonnke, says that the evangelist's “integrity in money matters has saved him from the problems that have confronted” some TV preachers. He also describes Bonnke "as a person of integrity with a simple life-style."[xxi]

Bonnke, in fact, is not in charge of finances in the campaigns. He advocates that evangelists “not be … directly involved” in financial matters and that “a committee, with no one person having sole oversight” should be responsible for that aspect. He also insists that a budget be drawn up prior to each crusade, to cover all eventualities.[xxii]

The Questions

Bonnke says “For years in Africa we had seen an average of fifty to one hundred and fifty thousand people responding to the call of salvation at each crusade. But in the year 2000 alone we preached face-to-face to some eleven million people and of these five million, eight hundred thousand responded to Christ, completed a decision card and received our follow-up literature.”[xxiii] That is, he is claiming that over fifty percent of those at these later crusades “responded to Christ".
Jeremy Burton of Empowered21 says that “Through [Bonnke’s] ministry, Christ for All Nations, over 73 million people have made registered decisions to follow Jesus Christ.” It claims “Over Seventy Four million souls Saved”. It continues “over seventy four million responded to the call of salvation by filling out decision cards and were ushered into the church follow-up program.” It is said that 55 million of these were in Africa.

At least three questions need to be asked about these “Seventy Four million” and Bonnke's campaigns generally? First, were all these decisions for “salvation”? (This is implied in the above quotations.) Secondly, did many of these people make more than one decision? Thirdly, does CfaN sometimes equate making a decision at a campaign meeting, any kind of decision, with a conversion experience?

The Answers

To answer these questions we will look primarily at Bonnke’s mission in one major African country. Ezekiel Ajani, a Nigerian Baptist pastor and lecturer, claimed in 2010 “In no other country, has Bonnke maintained such an intensity of evangelistic campaigns as in Nigeria.” That appears to be correct, so our main focus will be on Nigeria.

Bonnke conducted a number of campaigns in Nigeria in the 1980s, but none of these appear to have had a major impact. He next held a campaign in the northern Kano State of Nigeria in 1991. As northern Nigeria is mainly Muslim it created much opposition and eventually a riot, which is said to have resulted in the deaths of over 300 people. This inevitably received a lot of media coverage. It caused him to be banned in that part of the country, but it gave him a high profile and made him popular in the south.

He had, in fact, made visits to Nigeria every year from 1985 to 1991. However, he led no further missions in that land until 1999, but he then conducted campaigns in 16 Nigerian cities in the years 1999 to 2003. These were much larger affairs than the earlier ones.

A CfaN video claims that a vast number of “Registered Decision Cards” were filled in during campaigns in ten cities in Nigeria late in the twentieth century and the beginning of the next. Each of these campaigns seems to have been of five days duration. In the following chart the first set of figures is of the number of claimed “Decisions”. The second is the population of the relevant city, according to the Nigerian census of November 1991. The third is the population of the state in which the specific city resides, according to the census of March 2006.

It needs to be borne in mind that there was a fairly considerable increase in the Nigerian population in the last ten years of the twentieth century, so the city figures would be somewhat higher when Bonnke conducted his series of campaigns. It was considered wise to include the population figures of the relevant states, even though they are not for the same date, as anecdotal evidence indicates that many travelled from outside the cities to attend the campaigns. However, it must also be borne in mind that many in each state would have been unable or even unwilling to travel a considerable distance to attend a campaign.

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<td>Yola</td>
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<td>Ibadan</td>
<td>2,650,190</td>
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<td>Calabar</td>
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As can be seen from these figures, in some instances the number of decisions is far higher than that specific city's population. For example, Akure probably had between 250,000 and 300,000 people at the time of the campaign, but it is claimed that there were 1,859,503 decisions. In other words, in Akure, the capital of Ondo state, there were at least six times as many "decisions" as there were people in that city. While it is highly likely that people from other parts of Ondo attended that city's CfaN campaign, it also highly likely that some people in Akure did not bother to attend or were unable to do so for health or other reasons. (I am aware that these campaigns are also healing meetings, so some sick people would have been taken along.) It also needs to be borne in mind that there were thousands of counsellors and other helpers at these meetings who were presumably already converted, though some of these may also have made other types of decisions.

I think (and this is a "guesstimate") that it is unlikely that more than 500,000 different people attended the CfaN meetings in Akure, and it was probably much less.[xxxii] In addition, it is only to be expected that some who attended did not make any kind of positive spiritual decision. This means, therefore, that many people made two or more "decisions". In fact, the evidence seems to suggest that many made a decision each night. And you can only be saved once!

The Bonnke mission in Ibadan was held over five days in November 2001 in the grounds of an old airport. The total attendance was a claimed "Almost four million", with 1,300,000 in attendance on the final night. According to CfaN, this was supported by "thousands of churches", and was assisted by more than "11,000 church leaders and pastors" and made use of 150,000 counsellors. Soon after that the CfaN website stated that "Decision cards" were filled in "by people turning to Christ. The total [of] decision cards completed was 2,650,190" in this campaign.[xxxiii] This gives the impression that all these decisions were made "by people turning to Christ"; in other words, CfaN appears to be claiming 2,650,190 converts in five days in Ibadan in 2001. This seems to be a case of regarding all decisions as conversions, while the majority of those decisions were probably for other reasons, and the likelihood is that many people made more than one decision.

In addition, Ajani questions the attendance figures for this Ibadan campaign. He says that CfaN claimed that 700,000 attended on the first night. The location was so packed on that evening that people had difficulty moving, so Bonnke kept the meeting short. Yet CfaN claimed that on the final night the attendance was "1.3 million" at the same venue.[xxxiv] Even allowing for some alterations to the old airport site, this sounds unlikely.

CfaN also claimed on its website that early in 2003 "nearly 2 million people received salvation in [Ado Ekiti] whose population is estimated at 4 to 500,000, in a state [Ekiti] with a population of under 2 million."[xxxv] Consider those statistics before you proceed!

In other words, the website is saying that about the same number "received salvation" in Ado Ekiti as lived in Ekiti state. Frankly, that sounds like nonsense. While the population of that state appears to have been a little over two million, rather than "under", as CfaN stated, and some from other states may have attended the Ado Ekiti meetings, the claim still must be regarded as false.

It is also probable that the phrase “received salvation” refers to “Registered Decision Cards.” If that is correct, it would seem that once more we have many people making multiple decisions, yet each decision is being reported as “received salvation”. I repeat, you can only be saved once.

Ezekiel Ajani also questions the attendance figures at the campaign in Ogbomos(h)o in November 2002. (He is a lecturer at the Baptist Theological Seminary in Ogbomos[h]o, and he had firsthand experience of this campaign.) CfaN claims that there were 750,000 in attendance on the final night.[xxxvi] According to the Nigerian census of 1991, the population of Ogbomos(h)o was 433,030 (1991). It is in Oyo state, which has a population of 5,580,894 (2006).[xxxvii] (Ajani gives an Ogbomos(h)o population of 362,436 for 1991 and an estimated 492,043 for 2003.)[xxxviii]
Invitations, Counselling and “Decisions”

According to Ajani, after one sermon Bonnke's invitation was for those who want to “say 'yes to Jesus'” to raise their hand. This is a highly questionable invitation in a European/American situation, but, as Ajani points out, in Africa saying “yes to Jesus” might only mean “I do not hate Jesus” or “I do not deny Jesus existence”.

Suggested responses to invitations can be found on the “Harvest Joy” video, though parts of one of them are hard to understand. The unclear one is a prayer that Bonnke recites, which people are expected to repeat after him. It runs, in part, “I have heard you knocking ... I respond to it ... This moment I open my heart's door for you.” Another is simply getting people in the crowd to respond with “I surrender all to Jesus.”

Bonnke does use the altar call. That is, he invites those wishing to make a “decision” to move forward for counselling. He and his helpers also use the sinner’s prayer, though so far the precise wording and any variations used have not been discovered, except the partial prayer quoted in the previous paragraph. Probably different forms of it are utilised.

It is also fair to ask how can this vast number of enquirers be effectively counselled, particularly in the highly-charged atmosphere of a Bonnke meeting? Enquirers at CfaN meetings are given a booklet Now that You are Saved. (Editions of this are published in a variety of languages.) This, as its title suggests, assumes that the enquirer is already saved. The primary aims of this booklet are to encourage “the converts” to connect with a church and to help them have assurance of salvation. It certainly has a strong emphasis on attending church. But is it adequate and is it used well?

At the rear of the booklet is a “Decision Card” headed “Convert's copy”, which the decision maker is expected to fill in, keep and show to the pastor of the church they are already connected with or begin to attend. It would seem that a second copy of this card is handed to a counsellor. This card has a section “First time decision for Christ”, followed by two boxes to tick marked “Yes” and “No”. In other words, the producers of this card realise that not all decisions made by enquirers are to do with conversion. (One wonders that when the answer is “No”, whether it might be a second, third, fourth or even a hundredth decision.) Further down it asks “What is his/her need?” followed by two suggestions, each with a following box to tick. The two suggestions are “Backslid but has been restored today” and “Has major spiritual problems and needs help”. Again this makes it clear that the writers of the booklet are well aware that not everybody who goes forward at a CfaN campaign is converted at that time, if ever.

Bonnke says, “In our ministry we train counselors for our major gospel campaigns. Training is fine, but it is always hoped that they will be compassionate people with a listening ear. There must be methods, but methods must be humanized.” Bonnke says, “In our gospel meetings we want people to be born into a warm environment of love. Far more is needed than a signature on a dotted line. I like it when I see converts kneeling for an hour with someone praying with them, their arms around their shoulders, while the atmosphere of the stadium or church envelops them in worship and praise.”

Beginning six weeks after the Bonnke campaign in Ogbomos(h)o in 2002, Pastor Ajani conducted a survey, in the form of oral interviews, of six major local churches. This survey came up with some significant results. Two of these churches, All Souls Anglican and the Redeemed Christian Church of God, stated that they did not receive any decision slips from CfaN after the campaign.

Ebenezer Baptist Church received 200 slips. But 180 of those were for “rededications” and “only 20 were new converts”, ten percent of the whole. At the time of the interview only five of that 20 had been located, two-and-a-half percent of the whole. However, about 150 people were added to Ebenezer at around that time, though most of these had had previous contact with that church. Glad Tidings Baptist received 125 slips, 30 were for “new converts, 65 were rededications and 30 other decisions.” In this instance nearly 25 percent of the decisions were recorded as “converts”, but this church was also unable to find the majority of those people.

This instance nearly 25 percent of the decisions were recorded as “converts”, but this church was also unable to find the majority
of those converts that had been referred to them. Locating new converts appears to have been a common problem after this campaign. There is space on the decision cards for the person's address, plus home and business phone numbers, but these at times were, presumably, either not filled in or not filled in correctly.

New Era Baptist received approximately 300 slips, but only about 20 were “new converts”, which is less than seven percent; the others were for “rededication”. New Era also said that it grew by at least 20 after the campaign. Emmanuel Gospel Church had “three new converts” indirectly referred to them, but that church did not seem to have been impacted to any significant degree by this campaign.

When we consider Ajani’s findings, three major factors emerge. First, the vast majority of those making “decisions” were not “new converts”, so when CfaN gives the impression that “a decision equals a conversion”, which they often do, they are giving a false testimony. Secondly, the contact between a CfaN campaign and the local churches does not seem to work well, at least not consistently, though at what point(s) it breaks down is not clear. Thirdly, leading from that, some “new converts” probably never join a church.

Three other issues need to be considered emerging from this survey concerning the concepts conversion, rededication and decision. Firstly, often people are considered as having been converted at evangelistic campaigns, when in fact they have not been. False conversions at such meetings abound. Perhaps individuals have been persuaded to say a sinner’s prayer and told that they will be saved through that, but their hearts can be as far away from God as ever. Secondly, leading from that it is highly probable that some who had previously considered themselves converted had not been. Their “rededication” thus could be their conversion.

Thirdly, we also need to reconsider our use of that word “decision”. It is often used in a way that equates it with conversion. Thus if there have been 100 decisions, it is often assumed that there have been 100 conversions. Bonnke himself seems to do that. He said that in Blantyre in Malawi “we saw 150,000 people turn to Christ – in one week!” in a pre-2008 campaign. Bonnke seems to mean 150,000 conversions, but this probably refers to 150,000 “Registered Decision Cards” rather than conversions. Yet there are different types of decisions registered at evangelistic campaigns, including at CfaN meetings. These can relate to salvation, rededication, holiness, baptism of the Spirit and many other things. Genuine conversions may only be a small percentage of people counselled at such meetings.

In addition, is a Christian conversion really a human decision? Is a Christian conversion primarily a human decision or primarily the work of God’s Holy Spirit in the life of an individual? The New Testament really does need to be re-examined to discover what Christian conversion really is. And what we say must be true to Scripture and honest.

A Different Perspective

Frank Kürschner-Pelkmann, a German writer, has given a fairly detailed analysis of Bonnke’s theology, which was published by Evangelisches Missionswerk in 2002 or thereabouts. Kürschner-Pelkmann is writing from a theologically liberal/ecumenical position and he is strongly critical, and I do not agree with many of his criticisms, but he makes some points of value. In addition, amidst the criticisms he praises Bonnke at times, in that he speaks of Bonnke’s “integrity in money matters [which] has saved him from the problems that have confronted” some TV preachers. Kürschner-Pelkmann is happy, then, to admit that Bonnke is a well-meaning man who handles money matters honestly.

In his introduction to that study, Lothar Engel said that he and his associates “agreed to differ” with their African contacts in “our assessment of Bonnke’s effectiveness”. This strongly suggests that the members of Evangelisches Missionswerk also have major doubts about the “effectiveness” of Bonnke’s work.

Kürschner-Pelkmann suggests that some African churches support CfaN campaigns not because they agree with him, but in the hope of increasing their membership and even protecting it. In that can be heard an echo of the support that Billy Graham received from a host of churches of very different stripes. Kürschner-Pelkmann adds that some churches support CfaN missions “because they are afraid that otherwise the Pentecostal churches will gain even more members”, presumably at the expense of non-Pentecostal churches. He also says that “decision cards’ are passed on to those churches officially supporting the campaign”, and it would seem not to those who do not support it. This would mean that some people would be encouraged to move from one church to another, and the receiving church would not necessarily be any more true to the Gospel than the one that the “convert” had left.

While Bonnke’s missions are mainly in Africa and some non-traditionally Christian countries he has conducted campaigns in...
Europe, though some, at least, have not been a success. “Individual trials” in Europe “such as on the ‘Heiligengeistfeld’ in Hamburg in 1989 were not very encouraging; it was not possible to mobilize the masses in countries like Germany. Meanwhile in several countries, including Germany, a brochure with the title *From Minus to Plus* had been sent to every household. Anyone who filled out a card received the brochure *Now that you are saved* and upon request was put in touch with one of the congregations or churches that had registered with the campaign.”[vi]

We have seen that CfaN does engage local churches in its mission, at least in Africa. However, it may not always do this adequately or fairly in other places. This seems to have been the case in a Bonnke campaign in Munich in 2001. According to Rudi Forstmeier,

Bonnke ... planned the event, decided what was to take place and made the arrangements without speaking to the congregations in the close vicinity of Munich at all. The hall was booked, and the date and the programme had been fixed before the charismatic congregations and circles in Munich were informed about it. There was no great enthusiasm as a result – they felt that they had been ignored and presented with a fait accompli. But they did not want to distance themselves completely.[lvii]

It needs to be noted here that Forstmeier claims that “charismatic congregations and circles” were not invited to be involved in the early preparations for this campaign. If that is true, Bonnke seems to have initially ignored those who might most favour him. This is, of course, just one instance and in a non-African country.

**Summary**

Whilst Bonnke's doctrinal comments do not always seem consistent, he does recognise the need of the power of God in evangelism and conversion. But have 74 million really been converted through Bonnke's ministry? It is clear that many of the claims of conversions made by CfaN are grossly exaggerated, because they tend to equate “a decision” with “a conversion” and, as we have seen, many people make multiple decisions and in most cases those decisions have nothing to do with a conversion experience. The true number of conversions through CfaN is impossible to know, but in this writer’s judgment it is probably less than ten million, perhaps much less. But if ten million, or even five million, have been genuinely converted through this ministry, then thank God for it. But matters are not as wonderful as CfaN report.

We also must ask, why are some evangelists and evangelistic organisations so careless with their use of statistics? It is dishonouring to God.

What does all this say about Christianity in Africa? Christianity in that continent is clearly not dependent upon Bonnke and CfaN. It has had a rich and powerful history for many years and it is still in many ways a light to the world and a hope for it.

Let me close on a lighter note. Bonnke says in one book, "I have mentioned authority." He then adds “Thumping and shouting do not create authority.”[lviii] Have you seen Bonnke in action?

**Endnotes**


[xxvii] Ajani, “crusades in Nigeria”, 110, 112. Ezekiel Ajani was in Kano State at that time, see, fn.16.


[xxxi] The city figures are from the census of 26 Nov. 1991 and the state figures are from the census of 21 Mar. 2006, see “Nigeria: Provinces and Cities”, <www.citypopulation.de/Nigeria-Cities.html> accessed 22 Dec. 2015. I have been unable to obtain city figures for 2006.
I have been unable to track down attendance figures for Bonnke’s meetings at Akure. However, in 2010 associate CfaN evangelist Daniel Kolenda conducted a five-day campaign in Akure. The total attendance was estimated at 645,000, with 185,000 the highest on any one day. See <www.bonnke.net/cfan/en/events/afrika-20102011.akure> accessed 30 Nov. 2015.


According to Ajani, “crusades in Nigeria”, 121-22. (Ogbomos[h]o is sometimes spelt with the “h” and sometimes without it.)


Reinhard Bonnke, Now that You are Saved (13th ed. Frankfurt am Main: CfaN, 2001), 3-6, 13-14.

Bonnke, Saved, 31.

Bonnke, Time, Kindle, loc. 2077-2078.

Bonnke, Time, Kindle, loc. 2055-2057.


For problems with the use of the sinner’s prayer, see David Malcolm Bennett, The Sinner’s Prayer: Its Origins and Dangers (Brisbane: Even Before Publ. 2011), 13-38.

Bonnke, Time, Kindle, loc. 1148.


Kürschner-Pelkmann, Bonnke’s Theology, 7, 26. See also page 28.

Lothar Engel in Kürschner-Pelkmann, Bonnke’s Theology, 1.

Kürschner-Pelkmann, Bonnke’s Theology, 5.
Additional thoughts on the Sinner’s Prayer and the Altar Call.


By David Malcolm Bennett

It is proposed to place a few additional thoughts about the Altar Call and the Sinner’s Prayer on this website. More will be added from time to time.

Added December 2015

Earlier uses of Printed Sinner’s Prayers in Britain.

In my book on the sinner’s prayer I said that “there seems no evidence that printed Sinner’s Prayer were used” in Britain “before the Billy Graham crusades” of the mid-1950s. That is the type of prayer used in such booklets as “Four Spiritual Laws” and “Steps to Peace with God.”[1] My near namesake David Robert Bennett, also known as Dave Bennett, has found an earlier use in Britain and that from a British source.[2] In 1950 John Stott published a booklet called “Becoming a Christian”, which had a longer-than-usual sinner’s prayer in the closing pages. The prayer refers to the person praying opening “the door” and inviting the “Lord Jesus” to “Come in”. An additional note makes it clear that anyone who has “humbly and sincerely echoed this prayer” has “received the Lord Jesus Christ”. [3] This is a sinner’s prayer as I defined it.

David R. Bennett has also noted that Maurice Wood also published two booklets not later than 1955 that each contains a sinner’s prayer. They are “How can I Find God?” and “How can I Accept Christ?” While Bennett concedes that there might have been some American influence on Wood,[4] there does not appear, at that stage, to have been any direct American influence on Stott. Indeed, the primary influence on both men was an Englishman, a Church of England clergyman named E.J.H. Nash (1898-1982).

Nash, nicknamed “Bash”, worked for Scripture Union from 1932 to 1965, specialising in a remarkable camp-ministry for boys from 30 public schools, most or all of which had a Church of England background. Public schools in the British system are, perhaps oddly, private schools. They cater mainly for Britain’s elite. Amongst the many that Nash influenced were Stott, Wood, David Shepherd and Michael Green, who all became Anglican evangelicals, two of them Bishops and one a major scholar.[5]

Nash wrote a booklet called “Life at its Best”, which, though it does not contain a sinner’s prayer, uses Revelation 3:20 and the famous Holman Hunt painting of Jesus standing outside a closed door to convey the idea of a sinner opening the door of their heart to Christ.[6] Stott used that idea of Jesus standing outside the door in his prayer in “Becoming a Christian.”[7] While this
This leaves us with the question, “What were the influences on Nash?” In his work with the public school boys Nash often lent them books by the American evangelist R.A. Torrey. Torrey, it seems, had been one of the major influences upon Nash. D.L. Moody appears to have been another.[8] Moody, the evangelist, and Torrey, the first head of the Moody Bible Institute, were quite likely early users of the sinner’s prayer, though neither seem to have produced it in printed form. They certainly had a sinner’s prayer theology and methods that fitted in with it.[9] It would seem probable, then, that Torrey and Moody influenced Nash in the direction of the sinner’s prayer. After that Nash influenced a host of future Anglican clergy in the same direction.

David R. Bennett also suggests that belonging to a liturgical church such as the Church of England may have made it easier for people such as Stott and Wood to accept the use of a set, printed sinner’s prayer. Bennett says, “It seems only a small step” from using liturgy “to supplying a suggested prayer for those responding to the Christian Gospel”. [10] This makes sense and it sound likely. It is certainly striking that the earliest British examples of this appear to be from Anglican clergy. In my book on the altar call, I suggested that the practice in some denominations of moving forward in church to take the Lord’s Supper may have made it easier for some to accept the idea of moving forward after an altar call. [11] In some settings, then, each of these innovations could have developed from regular church practice.


[3] John R. W. Stott, “Becoming a Christian” (Leicester: IVP, 1950, reset 1972), 16-19. David R. Bennett has seen an original copy of this booklet (1950) and this prayer was in it, so it is not something that has been added to later editions. However, the pronouns “Thee”, “Thou”, “Thy” and “Thine” have been changed to “you” and “your” in the more recent editions.

[4] David R. Bennett, “An evaluation”, 51-52. The original dates for Wood's two booklets are unknown, but the material in them appeared in some articles in Crusade magazine in the second half of 1955.


[6] David R. Bennett, “An evaluation”, 49-51. Nash did include a prayer in this book, but both David R. Bennett and David M. Bennett agree that it is not a sinner's prayer as such.


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Did Spurgeon use the Sinner's Prayer?

Thomas P. Johnston cites Spurgeon's tract Salvation and Safety (aka Ark of Safety) as including a sinner's prayer.[1] This tract does, indeed, include a prayer, which runs “Lord I trust Thee; I have nothing else to trust to; sink or swim, my Saviour, I trust thee.”

I did examine this tract and its prayer when researching my book on the sinner’s prayer. I concluded, that though Spurgeon “advocated non-Christians praying for salvation”, this prayer in its context was not a sinner's prayer as I had defined it. [2] I can understand Johnston regarding this as a sinner's prayer, but it does not contain the common assumption that modern sinner’s prayers have. That is, that if one prays the prayer sincerely, one will certainly and immediately become a Christian. Spurgeon’s prayer does not make that assumption. My definition includes those elements of certainty and immediacy.

Also immediately after the prayer Spurgeon says, “And as surely, sinner, as thou canst put thy trust in Christ, thou art safe.” Trust/faith is the crucial issue in this tract, and reciting a prayer, even sincerely, does not necessarily demonstrate faith. It can be just a form, a ritual, or it may be “prayed” under persuasion. In addition, on page 2 of the tract Spurgeon says, “My works, my prayers, my tears can not save me ... If you make ordinances the basis of your soul's salvation, they are lighter than a shadow.” [3] (emphasis in the original.)

Further Research on the Altar Call

Morgan Edwards

Morgan Edwards (1722-95) was a Welsh/American Baptist, who was a co-founder of Brown University in Rhode Island, USA. He wrote a book called *Customs of the Primitive Churches* (Philadelphia: 1768). I read the section “admission into the church”, pp. 66-71, which presented the method used to accept converts into some Baptist churches in America in the mid-eighteenth century. I found no reference to the Altar Call.

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Has the sinner’s prayer always been used?

Has the sinner’s prayer always been used? Given how popular it is today, it seems like it has always been around. In fact, some people seem to suggest it’s been used since the beginning of Christianity.

In this video author David Malcolm Bennett gives a quick overview of the findings of his research into the origins of the sinner's prayer:

If you say the sinner’s prayer, are you saved?

In this video author David Malcolm Bennett answers a question that a lot of Christians and non-Christians have asked – “Am I saved if I say the sinner's prayer?”

His answer? Not necessarily, even if you say it sincerely. Watch this video to see David elaborate further:
The sinner's prayer book

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Does the sinner’s prayer match up with biblical practices and teaching? In what sense is the Sinner’s Prayer dangerous? Can you... In “The Sinner’s Prayer: Its Origins and Dangers“ David Malcolm Bennett uncovers some surprising material on some of the world's most famous evangelists in his quest to uncover the origin of “the sinner's prayer”. Does the sinner's prayer match up with biblical practices and teaching? In what sense is the Sinner's Prayer dangerous? Can you be saved without saying the sinner's prayer? What part did Charles Finney, D. L. Moody, William Booth and Billy Graham play in its development? Buy “The Sinner's Prayer: Its Origins and Dangers“: Brief Reviews of The Sinner's Prayer. The Sinner's Prayer (also called the Consecration Prayer and Salvation Prayer) is an evangelical Christian term referring to any prayer of repentance, prayed by individuals who feel convicted of the presence of sin in their lives and have the desire to form or renew a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is a popular phenomenon in evangelical circles. It is not intended as liturgical like a creed or a confiteor, but rather, is intended to be an act of...