

From Believe to Decide

*How the Gospel Invitation Changed from
the New Testament to Modern Evangelicalism*

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Introduction

A Question Most Christians Never Ask

Imagine attending one of George Whitefield's great outdoor meetings in the 1740s. Thousands have gathered. Some stand for hours listening. Others weep openly as Whitefield pleads with sinners to come to Christ. Many leave convinced that they have found salvation.

Now imagine waiting for the invitation. Surely Whitefield will ask people to walk forward. He doesn't. Surely he will ask them to raise a hand. He doesn't. Surely he will lead them in a sinner's prayer. He doesn't.

In fact, if you attended the evangelistic meetings of Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, or John Wesley, you would never hear many of the invitation phrases familiar to modern Christians:

- Ask Jesus into your heart.
- Make a decision for Christ.
- Commit your life to Christ.
- Invite Christ into your life.
- Give Jesus control of your life.

This raises an important question: **If these expressions are so common today, where did they come from?**

Many Christians assume the gospel invitation has always sounded essentially the same. They imagine that Peter, Paul, Whitefield, Moody, Billy Graham, and modern evangelists all used similar language when calling people to salvation. The historical evidence, however, tells a different story.

The language evangelists use to invite people to salvation has changed significantly over the last three hundred years. Some changes were relatively small, while others were quite dramatic. Certain expressions that are nearly universal in modern evangelicalism were almost unknown in earlier generations. This historical account traces that development.

Our purpose is not to criticize faithful believers of the past. Many of the men discussed in these pages were greatly used by God. Neither is our purpose to argue that every newer phrase is necessarily wrong. Language can change while the truth remains the same. The deeper question is this: **Do the words we use help people understand the gospel, or do they sometimes create confusion about what God requires for salvation?**

That question matters because eternity is at stake. Suppose someone hears the biblical message, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). Later, that same person hears invitations such as "Give your life to Christ," "Surrender everything to Jesus," "Make Christ Lord of your life," or "Pray this prayer." Do these invitations say the same thing?

The answer is important because different invitations can lead people to focus on different things. One person may focus on Christ's finished work. Another may focus on the sincerity of his commitment. Another may wonder whether he prayed the right words. Still another may

question whether he has surrendered enough. In this way, the invitation itself can shape what people think the gospel is.

For that reason, we begin where every discussion of the gospel must begin: the New Testament. Before asking what Whitefield preached, what Finney changed, or why modern evangelicals speak as they do, we must first answer a more foundational question: **How did Jesus and the apostles invite people to be saved?**

That is the focus of our first chapter.

Chapter 1—The Biblical Invitation

Before we examine church history, we need a baseline. If an architect wants to identify later alterations to a building, he must first know what the original structure looked like. In the same way, if we want to understand how gospel invitations changed, we must first understand what the New Testament actually says.

The question is remarkably simple: **When Jesus and the apostles called people to salvation, what did they ask them to do?**

The answer may surprise many modern Christians.

Jesus and the Call to Believe

The Gospel of John was written with a very specific purpose. John tells us:

“These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:31)

Notice John’s emphasis. Life is received through believing. Again and again throughout the Gospel, Jesus presents faith as the response that brings eternal life.

Consider just a few examples:

“Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16)

“He who believes in the Son has everlasting life.” (John 3:36)

“He who hears My word and believes Him who sent Me has everlasting life.” (John 5:24)

“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.” (John 11:25)

The pattern is difficult to miss. Jesus repeatedly places the focus on Himself and on faith in Him. He does not tell people to invite Him into their hearts, commit their lives to Him, or surrender control of every area of life. He tells them to believe.

This does not mean discipleship is unimportant. Jesus certainly called His followers to obedience, sacrifice, and faithful discipleship. Yet careful readers of the Gospels quickly notice that Jesus distinguished between receiving eternal life and the demands of discipleship.

Throughout John’s Gospel, the condition for eternal life remains consistent: **Believe in Christ.**

What Does It Mean to Believe?

Before proceeding, we should define what the New Testament means by *believe*. This is important because many people today understand belief to mean commitment, surrender, obedience, or promising to follow Christ. As a result, readers can bring assumptions to the word that are not necessarily present in the biblical text.

In the New Testament, to believe in Christ means to be persuaded that He is who He claims to be and to trust Him alone for the eternal salvation He promises. The object of faith is not one’s own commitment, moral reform, religious activities, or future obedience, but Jesus Christ Himself and His saving work.

The Greek verb *pisteuō* (“believe”) carries the idea of being convinced or persuaded and therefore relying upon someone or something as true and trustworthy. When people believed in Christ in the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts, they were not asked to make a public decision, walk an aisle, pray a prescribed prayer, or promise lifelong commitment as a condition for receiving eternal life. Rather, they were called to place their confidence in Jesus Christ as the One who guarantees eternal life to all who believe in Him.

This does not diminish the importance of discipleship, obedience, or commitment to Christ. The New Testament repeatedly calls believers to follow Christ, grow in holiness, and serve Him faithfully. However, these are the results of salvation, not requirements for obtaining it. The biblical invitation is therefore simple and clear: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:31).

Understanding this distinction is essential for the discussion that follows. If belief is redefined to include discipleship commitments, then the simplicity of the New Testament invitation can easily become obscured.

Throughout this study, the term believe refers to trusting in Jesus Christ for the salvation He promises.

What Does It Mean to “Receive” Christ?

Some readers may immediately think of John 1:12:

“But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name.”

This verse is important because many modern invitations use the language of “receiving Christ.” Notice, however, that John does not treat receiving Christ as something different from believing in Christ. He immediately explains what he means. Those who “received Him” are the very same people who “believe in His name.”

In other words, receiving is not presented as a second step beyond faith. It is another way of describing faith itself.

A simple illustration may help. Suppose someone offers you a gift. You do not receive the gift by working for it, earning it, dedicating your life to it, or proving your commitment to it. You receive it by accepting what is freely offered.

That is John’s point. Christ is God’s gift to mankind, and eternal life is received by faith in Him. The emphasis remains on Christ and His provision, not on the quality, depth, or permanence of the sinner’s commitment. That distinction will become important as we move through church history.

Jesus’ Invitations to Come

Jesus also frequently used the language of coming. Perhaps the most famous example is Matthew 11:28:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.”

To modern ears, the word *come* can almost sound like a physical movement. Yet Jesus was not asking people to walk an aisle. He was inviting them to Himself.

John's Gospel repeatedly links coming and believing. For example:

"He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst" (John 6:35).

Notice how the two expressions function together. Coming to Christ is not a physical act. It is a faith response. It is another way of describing trust in Him.

This explains why the great evangelists of the eighteenth century often urged sinners to "come to Christ." They understood the phrase the same way the New Testament did: as a call to faith, not as a call to perform a public action.

Peter's Gospel Invitation

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached the first recorded sermon after Christ's resurrection. His audience had been convicted by the message. Luke tells us they were "pierced to the heart." Naturally, they asked:

"Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37)

That question has echoed through church history: What must a person do to be saved?

Peter's answer is often summarized in one word: *repent*. Unfortunately, that word has generated endless debate.

For our purposes, notice what Peter did not say. He did not tell them to walk forward, repeat a prayer, or dedicate their lives to Christ. He called them to a change of mind about Jesus. Only a few weeks earlier, many in Jerusalem had rejected Christ. Now Peter was calling them to acknowledge who Jesus truly was: the risen Lord and Messiah.

Repentance and faith were not competing responses. They were two sides of the same coin. People who came to believe Peter's message necessarily changed their minds about Christ. The emphasis remained on the Person of Christ and the truth about Him.

Paul and the Philippian Jailer

Perhaps the clearest evangelistic invitation in the entire New Testament appears in Acts 16. A terrified Philippian jailer rushed into the prison and asked Paul and Silas:

"Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"

If there were ever a place where additional requirements could have been stated, this was it.

Paul's answer was remarkably concise:

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

That is one of the most important evangelistic statements in the Bible.

Notice what Paul did not add.

He did not say:

- Believe and surrender everything.
- Believe and publicly identify yourself.
- Believe and invite Jesus into your heart.
- Believe and pray a prayer.
- Believe and commit your life to Christ.

His answer focused entirely on faith in Christ. That does not mean obedience and discipleship are unimportant. The New Testament says much about both. It simply means Paul did not present them as conditions for obtaining eternal life.

His answer was direct, clear, and centered on Christ: Believe, and you will be saved.

Paul's Consistent Message

The Philippian jailer was not an isolated example. Throughout his letters, Paul repeatedly describes salvation in terms of faith.

Consider just a few representative passages:

“Therefore, having been justified by faith...” (Romans 5:1)

“For by grace you have been saved through faith...” (Ephesians 2:8)

“A man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ...” (Galatians 2:16)

Again and again, Paul's focus falls on Christ's finished work and faith in that work. The spotlight remains on what Christ accomplished, not on promises the sinner makes.

Paul certainly calls believers to obedience, holiness, service, sacrifice, and spiritual growth. Entire sections of his letters are devoted to those subjects. Significantly, however, he addresses those instructions to people who are already saved.

The call to discipleship follows the gospel. It does not define the gospel.

What About Lordship?

At this point some readers may object. Doesn't the New Testament say Jesus is Lord?

Absolutely.

The New Testament proclaims Jesus as Lord hundreds of times. The question is not whether Christ is Lord. The question is whether the gospel invitation asks sinners to promise a life of complete surrender as a condition of receiving eternal life.

When Paul told the jailer to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, he was directing faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ, not requiring the jailer to pledge perfect submission to every aspect of Christ's authority before receiving salvation.

The object of faith was a Person. The emphasis was on who Jesus is and what He accomplished.

Once again, the focus was Christ.

The New Testament Pattern

When we step back and look at the New Testament as a whole, a clear pattern emerges. The dominant invitation vocabulary includes expressions such as:

- Believe.
- Trust.
- Have faith.
- Receive.
- Come to Christ.

By contrast, we do not find invitations such as:

- Walk this aisle.
- Raise your hand.
- Make a decision for Christ.
- Ask Jesus into your heart.
- Pray the sinner's prayer.
- Commit your life to Christ.
- Give Jesus control of your life.

Many of those later expressions may have been created with sincere evangelistic intentions. Some may even communicate true ideas when carefully explained. But they are not the language the apostles normally used when telling people how to receive eternal life.

That fact does not automatically make them wrong. It does, however, raise an important historical question. If these expressions are largely absent from the New Testament, when did they appear? Who introduced them? Why did they become so popular? And perhaps most importantly, did they clarify the biblical invitation or obscure it?

To answer those questions, we must leave the world of the apostles and move forward nearly seventeen centuries to the First Great Awakening, where some of the most famous evangelists in Christian history preached to massive crowds without using many of the invitation methods familiar today.

That story begins with a dramatic young preacher named George Whitefield.

Chapter 2—George Whitefield and the Invitation That Changed the World

If Christians could travel back in time and attend only one evangelistic meeting in church history, many would choose to hear George Whitefield.

Whitefield was one of the most influential preachers who ever lived. During the eighteenth century, he preached throughout England, Scotland, Wales, and the American colonies. Historians estimate that he delivered roughly 18,000 sermons and spoke to audiences numbering in the millions. In an age before microphones, radio, television, or the internet, Whitefield became one of the most recognizable figures in the English-speaking world.

Benjamin Franklin, though not a convert to Whitefield's theology, was fascinated by him. Franklin once tested the preacher's remarkable voice and estimated that tens of thousands of listeners could hear him at once.

Whitefield helped ignite what became known as the First Great Awakening. Yet if a modern Christian attended one of Whitefield's meetings, he would likely be surprised by what happened at the end of the sermon, or more precisely, by what did **not** happen.

There was no altar call. There was no anxious bench. There was no invitation hymn. There was no sinner's prayer. There was no request to raise a hand. There was no appeal to walk forward and "make a decision for Christ." And yet thousands responded to the gospel. How could that be?

The Forgotten Evangelistic Question

Most modern Christians have been taught, either directly or indirectly, that an evangelistic meeting is incomplete without some kind of visible response. The assumption is understandable. For more than a century, many churches have concluded gospel messages with an invitation to come forward, raise a hand, fill out a card, repeat a prayer, or indicate a decision in some way. As a result, many believers unconsciously assume that such practices have always existed. They have not.

Whitefield's ministry demonstrates that fact as clearly as any example in church history. He passionately urged people to respond to Christ. He was not reluctant to call for action. He pleaded, begged, warned, exhorted, and sometimes wept as he preached. But his appeals focused on Christ Himself rather than on a particular physical response.

The issue was never, **"Will you come to the front?"**

The issue was, **"Will you come to Christ?"**

Those two questions are not necessarily the same thing.

"Come to Christ"

One of the most common misconceptions about early revival preaching is that phrases like *come to Christ* referred to physically moving somewhere. For Whitefield, the phrase meant something very different. It was the language of faith.

When Whitefield urged sinners to come to Christ, he was echoing the language of Scripture itself. He was thinking of passages such as: "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy

laden, and I will give you rest.” “He who comes to Me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” Notice how Jesus links coming and believing.

Whitefield understood the connection. To come to Christ was to trust Him. To flee to Christ was to rely upon Him. To receive Christ was to believe His promise. The focus remained on the Savior rather than on the sinner’s performance.

A Preacher Obsessed with Christ

One of the striking features of Whitefield’s preaching is how thoroughly Christ-centered it was.

Modern invitations often concentrate heavily on the sinner:

- Have you made your decision?
- Have you prayed?
- Have you surrendered?
- Have you committed your life?

Whitefield certainly addressed sinners, but his attention repeatedly returned to Christ. He wanted people to see Christ’s love, Christ’s mercy, Christ’s death, Christ’s resurrection, and Christ’s willingness to save. The object of faith mattered more to him than the mechanics of the invitation.

Again and again, he presented Christ as a willing Savior who welcomed sinners. The hearer’s responsibility was not to perform some visible act but to trust the One being proclaimed. That emphasis helps explain why Whitefield’s sermons often sound surprisingly biblical even to modern readers.

Whitefield’s language closely resembles the invitations found in John’s Gospel:

- Believe.
- Trust.
- Come.
- Receive.
- Rest in Christ.

Why Didn’t Whitefield Use an Altar Call?

The simplest answer is that altar calls did not yet exist. The methods many modern Christians regard as normal would not be developed until decades after Whitefield’s death. That fact alone should raise some questions. Here was one of the greatest evangelists in church history. Thousands professed faith through his ministry. Entire communities were transformed. Yet he never felt the need to employ the techniques that many now consider essential.

That does not automatically prove that modern methods are wrong. It does remind us that they are not apostolic necessities, nor are they historical necessities. God used Whitefield mightily without them.

The Great Awakening’s Understanding of Conversion

Whitefield’s approach reflected a particular understanding of conversion. He believed that salvation was ultimately the work of God. The preacher could proclaim Christ. The preacher

could persuade. The preacher could plead. The preacher could pray. But the preacher could not manufacture a conversion. Only God could open blind eyes. Only God could grant life. Only God could create genuine faith.

This conviction affected every aspect of Whitefield's ministry. Because conversion was God's work, Whitefield concentrated on proclaiming the gospel rather than trying to secure responses. His confidence rested in the power of the message, not in the skillfulness of a method.

That perspective would later be challenged by another evangelist whose influence would dramatically reshape American revivalism. But in Whitefield's day, the dominant concern was not how to secure a decision. The concern was how to faithfully proclaim Christ.

An Important Observation

At this point in our study, a pattern is beginning to emerge.

In Chapter 1 we saw that Jesus, Peter, Paul, and John primarily invited people to believe in Christ. Now, as we arrive in the eighteenth century, we find Whitefield using remarkably similar language.

His vocabulary was filled with expressions such as:

- Believe.
- Trust.
- Come to Christ.
- Flee to Christ.
- Receive mercy.
- Rest in Christ.

Notably absent are expressions such as:

- Make a decision for Christ.
- Give your life to Christ.
- Ask Jesus into your heart.
- Surrender control of your life.

The significance of that absence should not be overlooked. Nearly seventeen hundred years separate Whitefield from the apostles. Different cultures. Different continents. Different historical circumstances. Yet the basic invitation remained largely the same.

That continuity is important because it provides a benchmark against which later developments can be measured. For nearly eighteen centuries, the dominant gospel invitation focused on faith in Christ. Then something changed.

The next chapter introduces another giant of the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards. Like Whitefield, Edwards preached with extraordinary urgency. His famous sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* has become a symbol of revival preaching.

Yet Edwards' invitations reveal the same surprising pattern. People were urged to act immediately. People were urged to flee from coming judgment. People were urged to come to

Christ. But they were not urged to walk an aisle, sign a card, raise a hand, or pray a sinner's prayer.

Before we examine the great turning point that would later come through Charles Finney, we must first understand the revival culture that existed before him. Jonathan Edwards will help us do exactly that.

Chapter 3—Jonathan Edwards and the Urgency of Faith

Few sermons in American history are more famous than *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Even people who know little about church history have heard the title. School textbooks mention it. History books discuss it. Countless articles describe the dramatic scenes that accompanied its preaching. The sermon has become almost legendary.

According to popular accounts, listeners cried out in fear. Some clutched the pews, convinced they might suddenly fall into hell. Others openly wept as Edwards described the danger facing those who stood under God's judgment. Whether every story has been embellished through retelling is difficult to know. What is certain is that the sermon made a profound impact on those who heard it.

Yet something important is often overlooked. Most people know how Edwards described God's judgment. Few people notice how he invited people to salvation. And that is where our story becomes especially interesting.

The Most Famous Invitation Nobody Talks About

When modern Christians think of revival preaching, they often imagine an emotional invitation at the end of the sermon. Perhaps people are called to walk forward. Perhaps they are urged to make a public decision. Perhaps an invitation hymn is sung while counselors wait at the front.

None of those things happened when Edwards preached *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

As the sermon moved toward its conclusion, Edwards did not ask people to come to the front of the meeting house. Instead, he urged them to flee to Christ. His appeal was intensely urgent:

- Now is the day.
- Now is the time.
- Do not delay.

The issue was not whether someone would perform a public action. The issue was whether someone would trust the Savior being proclaimed. That distinction is easy to miss, but it is enormously important.

An Invitation Filled with Urgency

If Whitefield's preaching was often characterized by warmth and passion, Edwards is remembered for his seriousness and careful reasoning. The two men had very different personalities. Whitefield was dramatic and expressive. Edwards was thoughtful and analytical. Yet when it came to the gospel invitation, they sounded remarkably similar.

Both directed people toward Christ. Both emphasized faith. Both spoke of coming to Christ rather than performing a religious act. Both believed that conversion was ultimately God's work. The difference lay primarily in tone. Whitefield often emphasized Christ's willingness to save, while Edwards frequently emphasized the danger of remaining unsaved. But both arrived at the same destination.

The answer to God's judgment was not a technique. The answer was Christ.

“Fly from the Wrath to Come”

One of the most memorable expressions from Edwards’ famous sermon is his call for sinners to “fly from the wrath to come.” That phrase deserves careful consideration.

When Edwards urged people to flee, he was speaking metaphorically. He was not telling them to run physically. He was describing a response of faith. Imagine seeing a house engulfed in flames and running from danger to safety. That is the picture Edwards had in mind. Judgment was coming. Christ was the refuge. The sinner’s responsibility was to flee to Him.

Notice what is absent. Edwards does not say:

- Walk an aisle.
- Raise your hand.
- Make a public commitment.
- Give your life to Christ.
- Pray this prayer.

Instead, he presents Christ as a refuge to be embraced through faith. The language sounds much closer to the New Testament than to many modern invitations.

Why Edwards Matters

At first glance, some readers may wonder why Edwards deserves an entire chapter. After all, didn’t Whitefield already demonstrate the same pattern?

In one sense, yes. But Edwards helps us see something even more important. He proves that the issue is not merely one preacher’s style.

Whitefield and Edwards were very different men. Their personalities differed. Their preaching styles differed. Their congregations differed. Yet both used invitation language centered on faith in Christ. This suggests that what we have seen so far was not unique to one individual. It reflected the broader understanding of conversion found throughout the Great Awakening. The dominant concern was not obtaining an outward response. The dominant concern was bringing people to trust Christ.

The Theology Behind Edwards’ Invitation

Like Whitefield, Edwards believed conversion was a supernatural work of God. This conviction shaped the way he preached.

He certainly sought a response from his listeners. In fact, few preachers ever pressed their hearers more forcefully. But Edwards did not believe a preacher could engineer a conversion through the right techniques. He believed God alone could change a human heart.

As a result, Edwards emphasized proclamation rather than manipulation. His responsibility was to faithfully deliver God’s truth. The Holy Spirit’s responsibility was to open blind eyes.

That perspective had a profound influence on the invitation itself. Since conversion was God’s work, there was little interest in creating external mechanisms for measuring decisions. The focus remained on whether people had believed.

The Missing Vocabulary

By the end of our study of Whitefield and Edwards, a remarkable pattern has emerged. Consider some of the most common invitation language we have encountered so far:

- Believe in Christ.
- Trust Christ.
- Come to Christ.
- Flee to Christ.
- Receive mercy.
- Rest in Christ.

Now compare those expressions with many phrases commonly heard in modern evangelicalism:

- Make a decision for Christ.
- Accept Jesus into your heart.
- Commit your life to Christ.
- Surrender everything to Jesus.
- Make Christ Lord of your life.

The difference is striking.

It is not because the earlier evangelists lacked urgency. Edwards may have preached with more urgency than almost anyone in church history. Nor is it because they failed to seek conversions. Thousands professed faith under their ministries. Neither did they avoid calling for a response. Their sermons were filled with calls to respond.

The difference lies in the nature of the response being emphasized. The Great Awakening focused overwhelmingly on faith in Christ. Later generations would increasingly emphasize decisions, commitments, and public acts. That transition had not yet occurred.

A Bridge to the Next Chapter

Before moving forward in history, we must examine one more major figure from the Great Awakening era.

Like Whitefield and Edwards, John Wesley preached to enormous crowds. Like them, he saw thousands profess faith in Christ. Unlike Edwards, however, Wesley's theology differed significantly on many issues. Historians have debated those differences for centuries.

Yet one fact is often overlooked. When Wesley described how a person receives salvation, his language sounded surprisingly familiar. Again and again, he spoke of trust, reliance, and faith in Christ. That observation is important because it means something extraordinary. For all their disagreements, Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley shared a common vocabulary when it came to the gospel invitation.

The New Testament emphasized faith. The leaders of the Great Awakening emphasized faith. For nearly eighteen centuries, the center of the invitation remained remarkably stable.

The great shift that changed evangelical invitation language still lay in the future. Its architect would be a former lawyer from New York named Charles Finney. And once Finney arrived on the scene, the history of the gospel invitation would never be the same.

Chapter 4—Charles Finney: The Great Turning Point

If George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards represent the old way of gospel invitations, Charles Finney represents something new. In many ways, the story of the modern gospel invitation begins with him.

By the time we reach Finney in the early nineteenth century, we are no longer merely studying another famous evangelist. We are encountering a man who would fundamentally reshape the way many Christians thought about revival, conversion, and evangelistic methods. It is difficult to overstate his influence. Many of the invitation practices that later generations would consider normal can be traced directly or indirectly to him. If Whitefield and Edwards marked the culmination of one era, Finney marked the beginning of another.

A Lawyer Becomes an Evangelist

Charles Grandison Finney was not trained as a theologian. He was trained as a lawyer. That fact matters because lawyers are taught to persuade. They are trained to present evidence, make arguments, and bring people to a verdict. Many historians have observed that Finney often approached evangelism in a similar way. Like a lawyer before a jury, he sought to bring people to a decision.

This was not necessarily wrong in itself. Every preacher wants people to respond to God's truth. The question was whether the response should be understood primarily as an act of faith or as an act of the human will. As we shall see, Finney increasingly emphasized the latter.

A Different View of Revival

Before Finney, most revival leaders believed revival was fundamentally a work of God. Certainly, Christians prayed for revival, and certainly, preachers preached for revival. But they believed revival ultimately depended upon God's sovereign activity.

Finney thought differently. One of his most famous statements was that revival is not a miracle. Instead, he argued that revival is the natural result of properly using the right means. In simple terms, Finney believed that if certain methods were employed correctly, revival could be expected. To him, revival was not primarily something God sovereignly sent. It was something that could be produced.

That belief would have enormous implications for evangelistic invitations. If revival can be produced through proper methods, then finding effective methods becomes extremely important. And that is exactly what Finney set out to do.

The Birth of the Anxious Bench

The most significant innovation associated with Finney was something called the anxious bench.

At first glance, it does not seem revolutionary. Those under conviction would be invited to leave their seats and come to a designated place near the front where they could receive prayer and counsel. To modern readers, this sounds fairly harmless. After all, churches regularly invite people to come forward during invitations.

But that is precisely the point. Before Finney, such practices were virtually unknown. For Whitefield and Edwards, coming to Christ was a metaphor for faith. For Finney, coming forward became part of the invitation itself. The physical response was no longer merely evidence of an inward decision. Increasingly, it became the means by which that decision was expressed and reinforced.

A subtle but important shift had occurred. The focus was beginning to move from:

“Will you trust Christ?”

to:

“Will you do something right now that demonstrates your decision?”

The difference may seem small. But historically, it was enormous.

A New Vocabulary Emerges

Along with new methods came new language.

As we have seen, earlier evangelists overwhelmingly emphasized:

- Believe
- Trust
- Come to Christ
- Flee to Christ
- Receive mercy

Finney still used some of those expressions. But new themes increasingly appeared in his preaching. People were urged to:

- Decide
- Choose
- Determine
- Yield
- Consecrate themselves
- Give their hearts to God

For the first time in our study, the language of decision begins moving toward the center of the invitation.

This does not mean Finney abandoned faith altogether. He did not. But faith was increasingly discussed through the lens of willing, choosing, deciding, and yielding. The center of gravity was shifting.

The Critical Difference

To understand why Finney became so controversial, we must dig a little deeper.

The issue was not simply whether people should make decisions. Everyone agrees that people make decisions. Even faith involves a personal response. The controversy was over what role that decision plays in conversion.

Whitefield and Edwards viewed faith primarily as trust in Christ. Finney increasingly treated conversion as an act of the will. According to his understanding, sinners possessed the natural ability to change their course if properly persuaded. Consequently, much of his ministry focused on creating circumstances that would encourage immediate decisions. His methods were designed to bring people to a point of choice.

To supporters, this was practical evangelism. To critics, it risked replacing faith with a humanly engineered response. That debate has never completely disappeared.

The Beginning of Decisionism

Many historians use the word *decisionism* to describe a tendency to measure conversion primarily by a visible decision. The term itself can be loaded, but the concern is straightforward: What happens when the focus shifts from believing in Christ to making a decision?

The two may occur together. In fact, they often do. But they are not identical. A person can trust Christ without walking forward. A person can walk forward without trusting Christ. A person can pray a prayer without believing. A person can believe without praying a prayer.

Once visible responses become central, people may begin looking to the response itself for assurance. That danger worried some of Finney's contemporaries. They feared that people would confuse the outward action with the inward reality.

Early Critics See Trouble Ahead

Not everyone embraced Finney's innovations. One of the most perceptive critics was John Williamson Nevin. Nevin argued that the anxious bench risked creating a false issue. Instead of asking, "Have you trusted Christ?" people could begin asking, "Did I go forward?"

The concern was not merely theoretical. Whenever a physical response becomes attached to an invitation, there is a temptation to treat that response as spiritually significant in itself.

The issue is not whether walking forward is wrong. The issue is whether it subtly becomes part of what people think saves them. Nevin believed that danger was real. History would suggest that his concern was not unfounded.

Why Finney Matters So Much

At this point, some readers may wonder whether we are being unfair to Finney. After all, God undoubtedly used his ministry to influence many people. That is true.

The purpose of this chapter is not to judge the eternal condition of everyone affected by Finney's preaching. The purpose is to understand a historical transition. And on that point, the evidence is difficult to ignore.

Before Finney, the dominant invitation language centered on faith in Christ. After Finney, invitations increasingly emphasized decisions, public responses, and acts of commitment. The change did not happen overnight, nor did Finney create every later development. But he introduced the crucial shift.

The old revivalists had asked: "*Will you believe?*"

Finney increasingly asked: "*Will you decide?*"

That change in emphasis would echo through the next two centuries of evangelical history.

A Fork in the Road

As we reach the midpoint of our story, it is becoming clear that Finney stands at a fork in the road.

Looking backward, we see Jesus, Peter, Paul, John, Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley emphasizing faith in Christ.

Looking forward, we will encounter:

- inquiry rooms,
- decisions for Christ,
- altar calls,
- walking the sawdust trail,
- public invitations,
- sinner's prayers,
- commitments of life,
- and promises of surrender.

Finney did not invent all of these practices. But many of them trace their roots to the path he helped create. The road from "believe" to "decide" begins here.

In the next chapter we will meet D. L. Moody, perhaps the most beloved evangelist of the nineteenth century. Moody softened some of Finney's language and methods, yet he helped introduce another phrase that would become deeply embedded in evangelical culture:

"Accept Christ."

That expression would become so familiar that many Christians would eventually assume it came directly from the pages of Scripture. Yet, as we shall discover, its story is more complicated than most people realize.

Chapter 5—D. L. Moody and the Rise of “Accept Christ”

If Charles Finney marked the great turning point in evangelistic methods, Dwight Lyman Moody helped carry those methods into the mainstream of evangelical Christianity.

Few evangelists have been more loved than D. L. Moody. Unlike Finney, Moody was not known for theological controversy. He was practical, warmhearted, and intensely focused on reaching the lost. His preaching attracted enormous crowds on both sides of the Atlantic, and his influence extended far beyond his own lifetime through the founding of Moody Bible Institute.

Yet Moody occupies an interesting place in the history of the gospel invitation. On one hand, he inherited some of the changes introduced by Finney. On the other hand, he softened them. As a result, Moody became a bridge between the older emphasis on faith and the newer emphasis on decisions and public responses.

The Shoe Salesman Who Became an Evangelist

Moody’s story sounds almost impossible. He had little formal education. He never attended seminary. He was not known for polished speeches or impressive literary skills. In fact, his grammar was often criticized by educated listeners. Yet God used him to reach vast numbers of people.

What Moody lacked in education, he made up for in sincerity and passion. People sensed that he genuinely believed the message he preached. They also sensed that he genuinely cared about them. That combination made him one of the most effective evangelists of the nineteenth century.

Moody’s Greatest Concern

Like Whitefield before him, Moody was consumed with seeing people come to Christ. He was not interested in theological debates for their own sake. He wanted people saved. Everything else was secondary.

In his sermons, one theme appears repeatedly: God is inviting sinners to come.

Again and again, Moody described salvation as an invitation from God. The question facing the sinner was simple:

Will you accept God’s invitation?

That language became one of Moody’s trademarks.

The Emergence of “Accept Christ”

As we have seen, the New Testament primarily uses words such as:

- Believe
- Trust
- Receive
- Come

Moody frequently used another expression: *Accept Christ*.

To modern ears, the phrase sounds entirely normal. Many Christians have heard it all their lives. Yet this is one of the first places in our historical journey where it begins appearing with great frequency.

Moody often compared the gospel to an invitation that had already been issued. Christ had done everything necessary. The feast was prepared. The door stood open. The sinner's responsibility was simply to accept what God freely offered.

In many respects, this language was attempting to communicate the same truth found in John 1:12 and similar passages. People do not earn gifts. They receive them. That was Moody's emphasis. As a result, the phrase "accept Christ" became deeply embedded within evangelical vocabulary.

A Helpful Clarification

Before moving forward, we should recognize something important. Of all the newer expressions that entered evangelical language, "accept Christ" may be one of the least problematic.

Why?

Because it still directs attention primarily toward Christ as God's gift. When properly explained, acceptance is not presented as a work. It is presented as a response to what God has already accomplished.

In this respect, Moody often sounded much closer to Whitefield than to Finney. His focus remained largely centered upon Christ and His offer of salvation.

The real issue is not whether the phrase can be used correctly. The issue is whether later generations began treating acceptance as something distinct from faith. In Scripture, receiving Christ and believing Christ are essentially interchangeable concepts (cf. John 1:12). The danger comes only when acceptance becomes separated from faith and turns into a different kind of response.

The Inquiry Room

Although Moody softened some of Finney's language, he retained one significant feature of Finney's approach. He continued the practice of directing inquirers to receive personal counseling after meetings. This often took place in what became known as the inquiry room. Instead of urging people to an anxious bench, Moody encouraged interested individuals to meet with trained workers who could answer questions and explain the gospel more carefully.

On the surface, this represented an improvement over some of the pressure-oriented methods associated with earlier revivalism. People could ask questions. Counselors could provide instruction. Confusion could be addressed.

Yet the inquiry room also reinforced the growing expectation that an evangelistic meeting should culminate in some identifiable response. The trend begun by Finney continued, even if Moody's version was gentler and more pastoral.

What Moody Did Not Believe

One of the most overlooked aspects of Moody's ministry is that he did not share all of Finney's assumptions.

Moody repeatedly emphasized that conversion was ultimately the work of the Holy Spirit. He understood that no counselor, technique, or evangelist could create genuine faith. People could be persuaded intellectually without being converted spiritually. For that reason, Moody often warned against trusting methods. The gospel itself remained central. That conviction distinguished him from more extreme forms of revivalism. Moody wanted decisions, but he understood that only God could save.

A Subtle Shift Continues

Even so, a subtle shift was continuing. Consider the progression we have seen so far:

The New Testament

- Believe in Christ
- Trust Christ
- Receive Christ

Whitefield and Edwards

- Come to Christ
- Flee to Christ
- Rest in Christ

Finney

- Decide
- Choose
- Yield
- Come forward

Moody

- Accept Christ
- Accept God's invitation

Each step is relatively small. No single change appears dramatic in isolation. But viewed together, a pattern begins to emerge. The invitation is gradually acquiring additional layers of language. The simplicity of "believe on the Lord Jesus Christ" is beginning to share the stage with other expressions.

At this point, faith remains visible and central. Yet the vocabulary is becoming increasingly diverse.

How New Language Becomes Normal

One of the most fascinating lessons of church history is how quickly new expressions can become familiar.

The first generation notices the change. The second generation accepts it. The third generation assumes it has always existed.

That process appears to have occurred with “accept Christ.” By the early twentieth century, many Christians would regard the phrase as standard evangelical language. Few would stop to ask where it originated. Even fewer would realize that neither Jesus, Peter, Paul, Whitefield, Edwards, nor Wesley commonly used it.

The phrase had become part of the landscape. That pattern would repeat itself several more times before our story concludes.

The Road Toward Decision Language

Although Moody popularized “accept Christ,” another figure would prove even more influential in shaping the next stage of gospel invitations. His name was Reuben Archer Torrey.

Torrey admired Moody and worked closely with him. He shared many of Moody’s ministry goals. Yet Torrey took something that had been present only implicitly in earlier revival methods and made it explicit. He systematized it. He taught it. He wrote manuals about it. He gave it a name. The name was: “*Decision*.”

And from Torrey forward, the phrase “*decision for Christ*” would become one of the defining expressions of modern evangelicalism.

The story of how that happened is the subject of our next chapter.

Chapter 6—R. A. Torrey and the Birth of the “Decision for Christ”

If D. L. Moody helped popularize the language of “accepting Christ,” R. A. Torrey helped popularize something else: making a decision for Christ.

With Torrey, we reach another major milestone in the history of the gospel invitation. The shift that began with Finney was becoming more organized, more deliberate, and more systematic. What had previously been a tendency was now becoming a method. What had been a practice was becoming a philosophy of evangelism.

At the center of that philosophy stood one word: *decision*.

Moody’s Successor

Reuben Archer Torrey was uniquely positioned to influence evangelicalism. He served as a close associate of D. L. Moody and eventually became the first superintendent of Moody Bible Institute.

Unlike Moody, who was known primarily as a popular evangelist, Torrey was also a gifted organizer, teacher, and writer. He had a remarkable ability to take ministry practices and turn them into systems that others could reproduce. This talent greatly multiplied his influence. Millions who never heard Torrey preach would eventually be affected by his ideas through books, training materials, and evangelistic methods.

The Evangelist as a Personal Worker

One of Torrey’s most influential books was *How to Bring Men to Christ*. The title itself reveals his concern. Torrey wanted Christians to know how to guide people to a saving knowledge of Christ. This was not merely a book about theology. It was a manual, a handbook, a training course, and a strategy guide for evangelism. Throughout the book, one concept appears repeatedly: the importance of bringing a person to a *decision*.

Decision Becomes a Technical Term

Prior to Finney, evangelists certainly wanted people to respond. Whitefield wanted responses. Edwards wanted responses. Wesley wanted responses. The apostles wanted responses. No faithful evangelist has ever preached merely to inform. The difference is that earlier preachers generally described the desired response as faith. Torrey increasingly described it as a decision.

This was not merely a casual expression. It became technical vocabulary. A person was urged to make:

- a definite decision
- an immediate decision
- a personal decision
- a decision for Christ

The phrase would eventually become so widespread that many Christians would assume it came directly from Scripture. Yet the language is noticeably different from the language of the apostles.

The New Testament repeatedly speaks of believing. Torrey repeatedly speaks of deciding. The distinction may seem minor, but words shape how people think.

What's the Difference?

At this point, some readers may wonder whether too much is being made of terminology. After all, isn't faith itself a decision?

In one sense, yes. No one believes accidentally. Faith involves a personal response. But faith and decision are not identical concepts.

A person can decide many things. A person can decide to attend church, read the Bible, improve his life, or become religious. None of those decisions save anyone. The saving issue is not the act of deciding. The saving issue is faith in Christ.

The danger arises when the spotlight moves from the object of faith to the act of decision. Instead of asking, "Whom are you trusting?" people may begin asking, "Have you made your decision?"

The difference is subtle. Yet over time it can become significant.

Bringing People to the Point of Decision

Torrey believed evangelists should intentionally guide people toward an immediate response. He frequently warned against allowing inquirers to postpone action. If someone appeared interested, Torrey encouraged counselors to press for a clear decision.

From a practical standpoint, the approach is understandable. Anyone involved in evangelism has seen people delay, postpone, and procrastinate. Torrey wanted to confront that tendency. His concern was urgency.

In that respect, he shared something with Edwards. Both men believed people should respond today. Both opposed spiritual procrastination. But there was also an important difference. Edwards emphasized the urgency of faith. Torrey increasingly emphasized the urgency of a decision. That transition may seem small in a single sermon. Across generations, however, it proved transformative.

An Evangelistic Assembly Line?

One of the strengths of Torrey's approach was that it helped ordinary Christians engage in personal evangelism. He provided practical guidance, encouraged believers to speak boldly, and offered useful answers to common objections. These contributions should not be dismissed.

Yet every strength carries a potential weakness.

As evangelism became more methodical, there was a danger of reducing conversion to a process. If certain questions were asked in the proper order, if certain verses were presented, and if a person reached a certain conclusion, then a "decision" could be recorded.

The risk was that evangelism could begin to resemble a procedure rather than a proclamation. A person might be led to a decision without ever clearly understanding the gospel itself. That possibility worried some later critics.

The Growing Importance of Visible Results

Another development accompanied the rise of decision language. Increasingly, ministries began measuring success through identifiable responses.

How many people came forward? How many cards were signed? How many decisions were made? How many professions of faith were recorded?

These questions were not necessarily asked with bad motives. Evangelists wanted to know whether people were responding. Churches wanted evidence that the gospel was bearing fruit.

The problem was that visible decisions are easier to count than genuine faith.

Only God can see the heart. The church naturally gravitates toward things that can be measured. As a result, visible responses often gained greater prominence. This tendency would only increase in the decades ahead.

A Shift in Assurance

An unintended consequence of decision language appeared in the area of assurance.

Earlier generations often pointed believers back to Christ. Questions such as these were common:

- Do you believe God's promise?
- Are you trusting Christ?
- Is your confidence resting in Him?

As decision language grew, a different type of question sometimes emerged:

- When did you make your decision?
- Did you go forward?
- Did you sign the card?
- Did you pray the prayer?

Notice the difference.

The first group of questions points outward to Christ. The second group points backward to an experience.

This does not mean every evangelist intentionally promoted false assurance. Most certainly did not. But the possibility was now present. People could begin grounding assurance in a past action rather than a present trust in Christ.

That danger would become increasingly apparent in later generations.

From Faith to Formula

The historical trend now becomes easier to see.

The Apostles: Believe in Christ.

Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley: Come to Christ. Trust Christ. Flee to Christ.

Finney: Decide. Choose. Come forward.

Moody: Accept Christ.

Torrey: Make a definite decision for Christ.

Notice that each stage builds on the previous one. Faith language is not disappearing. It remains present. But new vocabulary is being added. The invitation is becoming progressively more complex.

What had once centered almost entirely on faith in Christ was beginning to incorporate decisions, public responses, and identifiable moments of commitment. The trend was still in its early stages, yet the direction was becoming unmistakable.

Preparing the Way for Modern Evangelicalism

Torrey's greatest historical significance may be that he transformed decision language into a standard evangelical expectation.

By the early twentieth century, the question was no longer simply: *"Will you believe?"*

Increasingly, it became: *"Will you make a decision for Christ?"*

That language would dominate American evangelism for much of the next century. It would appear in revival meetings, youth conferences, Bible camps, crusades, church services, radio broadcasts, and eventually television.

The phrase became part of the evangelical vocabulary, so common that most Christians never stopped to ask where it came from. Yet its roots can be traced directly to the developments we have been following.

The next chapter will introduce a colorful and energetic evangelist who carried decision language to millions of Americans. He preached in tabernacles filled with sawdust. He spoke with the passion of a revivalist and the enthusiasm of a former professional athlete.

His name was Billy Sunday, and under his ministry the phrase "decision for Christ" would become firmly embedded in American religious culture.

Chapter 7—Billy Sunday and the Popularization of the “Decision for Christ”

If R. A. Torrey helped formalize the idea of a “decision for Christ,” Billy Sunday helped make it part of America’s religious culture.

By the early twentieth century, the language of decision was no longer confined to evangelism manuals and personal-worker training courses. It was being proclaimed from massive revival platforms before crowds numbering in the thousands. At the center of this movement stood Billy Sunday. Energetic, colorful, and sometimes controversial, Sunday became the most famous evangelist in America during the first decades of the twentieth century. For millions of Americans, he embodied revivalism. Through his ministry, the language of public decision became deeply woven into the fabric of evangelical Christianity.

From Baseball Diamond to Revival Platform

Billy Sunday’s story reads like something out of a novel.

Before becoming an evangelist, he played professional baseball. Although he was never one of the game’s greatest stars, he was well known enough that newspapers regularly reported on his career.

Everything changed after his conversion.

Sunday left professional sports and eventually entered evangelistic ministry. The same energy that had made him an exciting athlete now made him an unforgettable preacher. He ran across platforms, waved his arms dramatically, acted out portions of his sermons, and spoke with passion, urgency, and humor.

Audiences loved him. Reporters followed him. Crowds flocked to hear him.

The Sawdust Trail

One phrase became permanently associated with Billy Sunday: *“Hitting the sawdust trail.”*

Many of Sunday’s evangelistic meetings were held in temporary wooden tabernacles. The floors were often covered with sawdust. At the end of the meeting, people were invited to leave their seats and walk forward. As they did so, they literally walked along sawdust-covered aisles.

This physical response became the defining symbol of Sunday’s invitations. To “hit the sawdust trail” meant publicly identifying oneself as someone responding to Christ. It was a visible, memorable, and emotionally powerful act. Not surprisingly, it quickly became one of the best-known religious expressions in America.

The Growing Importance of Public Response

Notice how far we have traveled from the invitations of Whitefield and Edwards. Whitefield had urged sinners to come to Christ. Sunday urged sinners to come to the front.

To be fair, Sunday certainly wanted people to trust Christ. The issue was not that faith disappeared. The issue was that a public response increasingly became the expected expression of that faith. The two ideas became closely linked.

For many people, the invitation itself was no longer complete until something visible happened. An observer could now see who responded. The response had become public, measurable, observable, and increasingly central to the evangelistic experience.

“Decision for Christ” Becomes Mainstream

By Sunday’s era, the phrase **“decision for Christ”** was no longer merely the language of evangelism textbooks. It had become popular vocabulary.

Newspaper reports frequently described individuals making decisions for Christ. Churches reported decisions for Christ. Revival campaigns recorded decisions for Christ. The phrase became so common that many Christians simply assumed it represented the normal way of describing conversion.

Yet an interesting question remains. Why had earlier generations rarely spoken that way? Why do we not find Peter reporting three thousand decisions at Pentecost? Why do we not find Paul encouraging the Philippian jailer to make a decision for Christ? Why do we not find Whitefield urging listeners to make decisions rather than trust Christ?

Again, the issue is not whether faith involves a personal response. The issue is how the response itself is described. Words matter because words influence understanding.

And evangelical language was changing.

The Power of a Public Moment

There is no denying the emotional power of Sunday’s invitations.

Imagine sitting in a crowded tabernacle. The sermon ends. The evangelist pleads for a response. Friends begin moving down the aisle. Others follow. Still others hesitate. The atmosphere is intense.

In such settings, public action can feel decisive and memorable. Many genuine conversions undoubtedly occurred. But the public nature of the response also created a new possibility. People could begin associating salvation with a particular moment of public action.

Instead of asking, “Am I trusting Christ?” they might ask, “Did I walk the sawdust trail?”

A useful response had the potential to become a substitute for the very thing it was intended to represent.

The Blessing and the Danger

Almost every development in our story contains both strengths and weaknesses, and Billy Sunday’s ministry was no exception.

His strengths were considerable. He preached Christ boldly. He called sinners to repentance. He believed people needed salvation. He confronted spiritual indifference with unusual force. Many modern churches could benefit from a measure of his evangelistic passion.

At the same time, Sunday’s ministry illustrates an important danger. The more visible the response becomes, the easier it is for people to focus on the response itself. This danger does

not arise because public responses are inherently wrong. It arises because human beings naturally gravitate toward the tangible and visible.

Faith is invisible. Walking an aisle is visible. Faith cannot be counted. Decisions can be counted. Faith resides in the heart. Public responses occur in front of witnesses.

The temptation to confuse the two is obvious.

The Normalization of Revival Methods

Another important development occurred during Sunday's ministry. Methods that once seemed new gradually became normal. This is often how historical change happens. The first generation debates an innovation. The second generation adopts it. The third generation cannot imagine life without it.

By the early twentieth century, many evangelicals simply assumed that revival meetings should conclude with some form of public invitation. Few stopped to ask whether Christians had always done things this way. Fewer still realized how recently many of these practices had emerged.

What began with Finney had become part of the evangelical tradition.

The Invitation Continues to Evolve

As our story moves into the twentieth century, an interesting pattern becomes clear.

The Apostles: Believe in Christ.

Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley: Trust Christ. Come to Christ. Flee to Christ.

Finney: Choose. Decide. Come forward.

Moody: Accept Christ.

Torrey: Make a decision for Christ.

Billy Sunday: Publicly demonstrate your decision.

Again, faith language has not disappeared. It remains present throughout the timeline. The issue is that additional concepts are steadily accumulating around it. The invitation is becoming more elaborate, more procedural, and more focused on identifiable moments and public actions.

The movement that began as a shift in vocabulary is gradually reshaping evangelical expectations.

Preparing the Way for Billy Graham

By the time Billy Sunday's ministry reached its peak, the essential framework of modern revivalism was already in place. Public invitations were common. Decision language was widespread. Visible responses were expected.

The stage had been set for the next great evangelist.

Unlike Sunday, this man would preach through radio, television, and eventually global media. His crusades would reach audiences measured not merely in thousands but in millions. His

invitation would become one of the most recognizable moments in twentieth-century Christianity.

For many people, it would define what evangelism looked like.

His name was Billy Graham.

And through his ministry, the phrase “decision for Christ” would become known around the world.

Chapter 8—Billy Graham and the Globalization of the Invitation

If Billy Sunday popularized the public invitation in America, Billy Graham brought it to the world.

For much of the twentieth century, no evangelist was more widely recognized than Billy Graham. He preached to presidents and prisoners, world leaders and factory workers, college students and retirees. His crusades filled stadiums on multiple continents. Through radio, television, films, and satellite broadcasts, his message reached hundreds of millions of people.

For many Christians living after 1950, Billy Graham's invitation became the very definition of evangelism. When they thought about responding to the gospel, they imagined exactly what Graham's meetings displayed: a choir singing *Just As I Am*, people leaving their seats, crowds moving toward the front, counselors waiting to receive them, and an invitation to make a decision for Christ.

By Graham's lifetime, methods that had begun with Finney and were expanded by Moody, Torrey, and Sunday had become an established tradition. Graham inherited that tradition and carried it farther than anyone before him.

The Crusade Invitation

Perhaps no scene became more familiar in twentieth-century Christianity than the close of a Billy Graham crusade.

The sermon would conclude. The choir would begin singing. Then Graham would invite people to come. His appeals often included phrases such as:

- "You come."
- "You come right now."
- "Get up from your seat and come."
- "Make your decision tonight."

The invitation was direct, personal, and urgent. Like Edwards, Graham believed people should not delay. Like Torrey, he urged a definite response. Like Sunday, he called for a public expression of that response. The various streams of revivalism had now converged into a single, recognizable form.

Why Graham Used Public Invitations

Billy Graham frequently explained why he asked people to come forward. In his understanding, Jesus had called people to confess Him publicly. A public response demonstrated sincerity and provided an opportunity for follow-up and discipleship.

Many who attended Graham's crusades found the experience profound and life changing. The invitation created a clear moment of decision. People left their seats and publicly identified themselves with Christ. From Graham's perspective, this was both biblical and practical.

Yet historians must ask a different question. Not whether Graham was sincere. Not whether God used his ministry. But whether this type of invitation reflected the same pattern found in the New Testament and among the earlier revivalists.

That is the historical question driving this book.

“Decision for Christ” Reaches Its Peak

With Graham, the phrase “decision for Christ” reached unprecedented prominence.

Newspapers reported the number of decisions. Churches celebrated decisions. Crusade statistics highlighted decisions. Evangelistic organizations tracked decisions. The language became so common that many Christians assumed it was a biblical term.

Yet an interesting fact remains. The New Testament never describes conversion that way. The apostles spoke of believing. They spoke of receiving Christ. They spoke of trusting God’s promise. They spoke of calling upon the Lord. They did not ordinarily speak of making decisions for Christ.

This observation does not automatically invalidate the phrase. It simply reminds us that the terminology originated later in church history. As we have already seen, it emerged gradually through Finney, Torrey, and the revivalist traditions that followed them. Graham helped make it universal.

A New Emphasis Appears

Although decision language remained central to Graham’s ministry, another development began appearing alongside it.

Increasingly, Graham spoke about:

- giving your life to Christ,
- surrendering your life to Christ,
- making Christ Lord of your life.

This language did not replace decision vocabulary. Instead, it was added to it.

The invitation was becoming broader. Earlier generations had emphasized faith. Later generations had emphasized decision. Now commitment language was joining the conversation as well. This represented another significant step in the evolution of the gospel invitation.

The emphasis was no longer merely: *“Make a decision for Christ.”*

Increasingly, it became: *“Give your life to Christ.”*

The distinction would become even more important in the decades ahead.

The Strengths of Graham’s Ministry

It is important to note that many admirable qualities characterized Billy Graham’s ministry. He preached the necessity of salvation. He proclaimed the death and resurrection of Christ. He called sinners to respond. He maintained a public witness for Christ over many decades.

These facts help explain why he earned such widespread respect, and any fair treatment must acknowledge them. The purpose of this book is not to diminish Graham’s impact or question his motives. Rather, it is to trace the development of invitation language.

From that perspective, Graham's significance is unmistakable. He became the most visible representative of decision-oriented evangelism in the modern era.

The Problem of Association

One unintended consequence of crusade evangelism was that many people began associating salvation with the invitation process itself.

Think about the sequence common at countless revival meetings:

- Hear the sermon.
- Feel conviction.
- Walk forward.
- Speak with a counselor.
- Pray.
- Receive assurance.

The process could be helpful. Yet it also created opportunities for confusion. A person might look back to the process instead of looking to Christ.

Consider the difference.

One believer says: "I know I have eternal life because Christ promised it to everyone who believes in Him."

Another says: "I know I have eternal life because I went forward at a crusade in 1975."

The first statement points to Christ. The second points to an experience.

The experience may have been genuine. It may even have been the moment faith occurred. But the basis of assurance has subtly shifted. One rests on Christ's promise; the other rests on a remembered event.

The distinction is important.

The Continuing Evolution of the Invitation

Our historical timeline now looks like this:

The New Testament: Believe in Christ.

Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley: Trust Christ. Come to Christ. Flee to Christ.

Finney: Decide. Choose. Come forward.

Moody: Accept Christ.

Torrey: Make a decision for Christ.

Billy Sunday: Publicly demonstrate your decision.

Billy Graham: Make a decision for Christ and come forward publicly.

At each stage, faith language remains present. Yet additional elements continue accumulating around it. The invitation is no longer focused exclusively on believing. It now includes decisions, public responses, visible commitments, and identifiable experiences.

But the story is not finished.

A final and enormously influential development was still coming. It would not take place in a stadium. It would not require a choir. It would not require a public altar call.

Instead, it would be printed in a small booklet that eventually circulated by the billions. Through that booklet, commitment language would become embedded in evangelical outreach around the world.

The figure behind this development was Bill Bright. And with him, the history of the gospel invitation would enter an entirely new chapter.

Chapter 9—Bill Bright, the Sinner’s Prayer, and the Language of Commitment

If Billy Graham globalized the public invitation, Bill Bright helped globalize the personal invitation.

The difference is significant. Graham’s invitation usually occurred before a crowd. Bright’s invitation could happen almost anywhere: in a dormitory room, at a kitchen table, on a college campus, in a coffee shop, on an airplane, or while reading a small booklet alone.

By the end of the twentieth century, Bill Bright’s influence on evangelistic language may have rivaled that of Billy Graham. Through Campus Crusade for Christ, later renamed Cru, Bright introduced a simple presentation of the gospel that was translated into scores of languages and distributed around the world. At the center of that presentation stood one small booklet: *Have You Heard of the Four Spiritual Laws?*

With it came a new stage in the evolution of the gospel invitation.

A New Era of Evangelism

Unlike Whitefield, Edwards, Moody, Sunday, or Graham, Bill Bright did not become famous primarily through large revival meetings. His ministry focused heavily on personal evangelism.

Bright wanted ordinary Christians to feel confident sharing the gospel. He believed evangelism should not be limited to professional preachers. Anyone could learn to explain the gospel. Anyone could lead a conversation. Anyone could point another person to Christ.

That vision helped fuel extraordinary growth. *The Four Spiritual Laws* became one of the most widely distributed evangelistic publications in history. For millions of Christians, it became their introduction to personal evangelism.

The Genius of Simplicity

One reason for the booklet’s success was its simplicity. The presentation was concise, easy to memorize, easy to share, and easy to reproduce. A college student could learn it. A businessman could learn it. A new believer could learn it.

Bright had created a tool that could be used almost anywhere.

From an organizational perspective, it was remarkably effective. Yet the very simplicity that made it effective also made it influential. The language used in the booklet would eventually shape the way millions of Christians described salvation itself.

A New Invitation Formula

As we have seen throughout this book, earlier generations emphasized:

- Believe in Christ
- Trust Christ
- Come to Christ
- Receive Christ

Later generations added:

- Make a decision for Christ

- Accept Christ
- Come forward publicly

Bill Bright introduced another layer.

The Four Spiritual Laws taught that an individual could receive Christ through a prayer. The booklet concluded with a model prayer, often called a sinner's prayer. In that prayer, the reader was encouraged not only to receive Christ as Savior but also to invite Him to take control of life.

This represented a significant development in invitation language. For the first time in our story, reception, commitment, and discipleship concepts were being packaged together into a single, repeatable formula.

"Take Control of the Throne of My Life"

One phrase from the booklet became especially influential. The prayer included the request: "Take control of the throne of my life."

That expression deserves careful attention.

Notice how different it is from the language commonly found in the evangelistic sermons of Whitefield, Edwards, or even Moody. The focus is no longer simply: *Believe in Christ*. Nor is it merely: *Accept Christ*.

Now the invitation includes the idea of yielding control of one's life. In effect, commitment language has moved from the margins of the invitation to the center of it.

This does not necessarily mean Bright intended to teach salvation by works. Most likely, he was trying to encourage wholehearted trust in Christ. Nevertheless, the language itself represented an important historical shift.

The Blending of Categories

One of the most fascinating developments in modern evangelism is the way several different ideas became merged together.

By the late twentieth century, a typical invitation might ask someone to:

- Believe in Christ.
- Receive Christ.
- Invite Christ into life.
- Commit life to Christ.
- Make Christ Lord.
- Pray a prayer.

All within the same presentation.

As a result, distinctions that earlier generations often maintained began to disappear. Consider the New Testament pattern. Faith is the means by which eternal life is received. Discipleship is the call to follow Christ after salvation. Growth, obedience, surrender, and commitment belong to the Christian life.

The categories are related, but they are not identical.

Many modern invitations, however, combined them into a single moment. The result was often theological compression. Concepts that the New Testament discusses separately were being presented together.

The Rise of “Ask Jesus Into Your Heart”

Around the same period, another expression became increasingly popular: *“Ask Jesus into your heart.”*

The phrase became especially common in children’s ministries, youth programs, vacation Bible schools, and evangelistic materials designed for young people. For many Christians, it became the standard way of describing conversion.

Yet there is an interesting historical observation. Neither Jesus nor the apostles used the phrase. Neither Whitefield nor Edwards used it. Neither Wesley nor Moody centered their invitations around it.

This does not automatically mean the phrase is false. The question is whether it communicates the gospel clearly.

When a child hears, *“Ask Jesus into your heart,”* what exactly is the child being asked to do?

- Believe?
- Receive?
- Pray?
- Commit?
- Invite?

The phrase can mean different things to different people, and that ambiguity is part of the reason it became controversial.

A New Kind of Assurance

Another change accompanied the rise of the sinner’s prayer. Increasingly, assurance became connected to having prayed a prayer.

A conversation might sound something like this:

“Are you saved?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“I prayed the prayer.”

Notice how different that is from the New Testament emphasis.

The apostles pointed people to Christ. They pointed people to God’s promise. They pointed people to faith. The basis of assurance was the trustworthiness of Christ.

By contrast, many modern believers were taught, often unintentionally, to look back to a prayer. The prayer may have expressed genuine faith, but a prayer is not faith itself. A person can pray without believing. Likewise, a person can believe without praying.

The distinction matters.

The Triumph of Commitment Language

By the close of the twentieth century, commitment language had become deeply embedded in evangelical culture.

Expressions such as these became common:

- Commit your life to Christ.
- Give your life to Christ.
- Surrender your life to Christ.
- Make Christ Lord of your life.
- Let Jesus take control.

These phrases appeared in sermons, books, youth conferences, Christian radio programs, and evangelistic literature. Many Christians never questioned them because they were all they had ever known.

The language felt biblical. The language felt familiar. The language felt evangelical.

Yet by now we are in a position to ask an important historical question: Would Whitefield have spoken this way? Would Edwards? Would Wesley? Would Peter? Would Paul?

The answer appears far less obvious than many modern Christians assume.

Looking Back Across Two Centuries

At this point, our timeline has become quite revealing.

The New Testament: Believe in Christ. Receive Christ. Come to Christ.

Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley: Trust Christ. Flee to Christ. Rest in Christ.

Finney: Choose. Decide. Come forward.

Moody: Accept Christ.

Torrey: Make a decision for Christ.

Billy Sunday: Publicly demonstrate your decision.

Billy Graham: Come forward and make a decision for Christ.

Bill Bright: Receive Christ through prayer. Invite Christ into your life. Give Him control.

The pattern is unmistakable. Faith language remains present, but layer after layer has been added over time. Decision language was added. Public response language was added. Prayer language was added. Commitment language was added. Lordship language was added.

The invitation has become far more complex than the simple calls to believe that dominate the New Testament.

The Question We Can No Longer Avoid

Up to this point, we have primarily been historians. We have observed. We have traced developments. We have followed the evolution of evangelistic language across nearly three centuries.

But a question is now unavoidable.

If many of the phrases common in evangelical churches today cannot be found in the New Testament and were rarely used by the Great Awakening evangelists, why are they so widespread now?

Why do modern Christians routinely use language that Peter, Paul, Whitefield, Edwards, and Wesley largely did not use?

And perhaps even more importantly: Have these developments clarified the gospel, or have they sometimes obscured its simplicity?

Those questions take us from history into theology. The next chapter will explore perhaps the most provocative question in this entire book:

Chapter 10—Why Do Modern Christians Use Phrases the Apostles Never Used?

As we arrive at this point in our journey, it may be helpful to pause and reflect on what we have discovered.

The New Testament repeatedly invites people to:

- Believe in Christ.
- Trust Christ.
- Receive Christ.
- Come to Christ.

The Great Awakening evangelists largely used the same vocabulary. Whitefield called sinners to Christ. Edwards urged them to flee to Christ. Wesley spoke of trusting Christ alone for salvation.

Then, over the next two centuries, new expressions gradually appeared:

- Accept Christ.
- Make a decision for Christ.
- Come forward.
- Pray the sinner's prayer.
- Ask Jesus into your heart.
- Commit your life to Christ.
- Give Jesus control of your life.

None of these expressions appeared overnight. Most were introduced by sincere Christians with evangelistic motives. Yet a question remains: Why did these new phrases become so popular?

The answer tells us much about the strengths and weaknesses of modern evangelicalism.

The Desire to Be Practical

One reason these expressions became popular is easy to understand. Pastors and evangelists wanted clarity.

Imagine preaching the gospel to a crowd of two thousand people. You explain who Christ is. You explain His death and resurrection. You explain the promise of eternal life. Then the sermon ends. What happens next?

Many evangelists wanted a practical way to answer that question. They wanted listeners to know exactly how to respond. As a result, invitations became increasingly specific.

Instead of saying: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," many evangelists found themselves saying:

- "Pray this prayer."
- "Walk forward."
- "Raise your hand."
- "Make a decision."

Those instructions gave people something concrete to do. From a practical standpoint, that made sense.

The problem is that clarity and simplicity are not always the same thing. A method may clarify a process while unintentionally obscuring the gospel itself.

The Human Love of Visible Responses

There is another reason these developments occurred.

Human beings naturally prefer visible things. Faith is invisible. Walking an aisle is visible. Faith cannot be counted. Decisions can be counted. Trusting Christ occurs in the heart. Signing a card can be recorded in a report.

This tendency affects all of us. When churches report evangelistic results, they naturally describe things they can observe. A pastor can count hands raised. He can count people who come forward. He can count completed decision cards.

He cannot directly count saving faith. Only God sees the heart.

That reality creates a powerful temptation. Without intending to do so, Christians can begin treating visible responses as if they were the same thing as faith.

The Search for Assurance

Another factor is the universal desire for assurance. Every believer wants to know: “How can I know I am truly saved?”

The New Testament answers that question by pointing people to Christ’s promise. Jesus said: “He who believes in Me has everlasting life.”

The confidence rests in Christ and His word. Yet many Christians struggle to rest entirely in an invisible promise. Visible experiences often seem easier to grasp. As a result, some people begin finding assurance in experiences rather than in Christ.

They may think:

- I know I’m saved because I walked forward.
- I know I’m saved because I signed a card.
- I know I’m saved because I prayed a prayer.
- I know I’m saved because I made a commitment.

These experiences may have accompanied genuine faith. The problem is that they are not the object of faith. Christ is.

Whenever assurance shifts from Christ’s promise to a personal experience, confusion is rarely far behind.

The Merging of Salvation and Discipleship

Perhaps the most significant development of all was the gradual merging of salvation and discipleship.

The New Testament teaches both. Salvation is important. Discipleship is important. Faith is important. Obedience is important. The problem arises when these distinct truths are compressed into a single invitation.

Consider two statements.

The first says: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

The second says: "Commit every area of your life to Christ, surrender completely to His authority, place Him on the throne of your life, and follow Him faithfully."

The second statement contains many good and biblical ideas. The question is whether it answers the Philippian jailer's question: "What must I do to be saved?"

The apostles consistently answered that question by directing attention to Christ and faith in Him. Many modern invitations answer it by describing the Christian life that should follow salvation.

Those are not identical things.

And when they become confused, the gospel itself can become harder to understand.

What Happens When Language Changes?

Some readers may wonder whether all this concern over wording is really necessary. After all, can't people use different expressions while still communicating the same truth?

Certainly. Language changes constantly.

The goal is not to create a list of approved phrases. The issue is deeper than vocabulary. Language shapes understanding.

Suppose a child hears only this: "Ask Jesus into your heart."

What does the child understand?

Perhaps faith.

Perhaps prayer.

Perhaps obedience.

Perhaps something else entirely.

The phrase itself does not explain.

Or consider the expression: "Commit your life to Christ."

What exactly does that mean? Must a person commit every area? Must he promise future obedience? Must he surrender fully? How much commitment is enough?

Different people answer those questions differently.

That is the problem. The phrase often raises questions the biblical invitation does not raise.

The Simplicity of the Apostolic Invitation

One of the most striking discoveries in this study is the simplicity of the New Testament pattern.

The apostles repeatedly directed people away from themselves and toward Christ. Their message was wonderfully simple:

- Christ died for sinners.
- Christ rose from the dead.
- Eternal life is found in Him.
- Believe in Him.

That simplicity does not eliminate discipleship. It simply places discipleship in its proper place. The Christian life flows from salvation. It does not define the condition for receiving salvation.

The apostles could discuss obedience, holiness, service, sacrifice, stewardship, and Christian growth at great length. Yet when asked how eternal life is received, they consistently returned to faith in Christ.

The View from Church History

Church history seems to tell a similar story.

For nearly eighteen centuries, the dominant invitation vocabulary focused primarily on faith. The wording varied somewhat, and different preachers had different styles. Yet the central emphasis remained remarkably stable.

- Trust Christ.
- Believe Christ.
- Come to Christ.
- Receive Christ.

Not until the nineteenth century do we begin seeing significant emphasis on decisions, public responses, and commitment language.

The shift was gradual. The motives were often good. Yet the result was undeniable. The invitation became more complicated. More words were added. More concepts were added. More expectations were added.

The simplicity of faith increasingly shared the stage with other ideas.

A Question for Every Reader

At this point, the question is no longer merely historical. It becomes personal.

If a friend asked you today: “What must I do to be saved?” How would you answer?

Would your answer sound more like Peter and Paul? More like Whitefield and Edwards? More like Finney? More like Billy Graham? More like Bill Bright?

The question is worth considering carefully.

Not because history is our authority. Scripture is our authority. History simply helps us notice when our language has drifted from earlier patterns.

And once we notice that drift, we are forced to ask whether the newer language clarifies the gospel or complicates it.

That question leads us naturally into the final major section of this book.

For nearly three hundred years, evangelical invitation language has been moving from faith, to decisions, to commitments, and to increasingly complex formulas.

What are the theological consequences of that shift? Has it brought greater clarity? Or has it sometimes produced confusion?

The answer to those questions may be the most important conclusion of this entire study.

Chapter 11—From Clarity to Confusion: The Theological Implications of the Changing Gospel

Invitation

History is fascinating. But history alone is not the reason this book was written.

If our goal were merely to learn how evangelistic methods changed over time, we could stop here. We have already traced the development from the New Testament to the present day. We have seen how invitation language evolved from believing, trusting, and coming to Christ into invitations involving decisions, altar calls, public responses, sinner's prayers, and life commitments.

The larger question is this: Does any of it matter?

I believe it does. In fact, it matters tremendously.

The reason is simple: The invitation shapes people's understanding of the gospel.

When we tell people how to be saved, we are answering one of the most important questions a human being can ever ask. If our answer is clear, we help people understand God's offer of eternal life. If our answer is confusing, we may unintentionally obscure the very message we are trying to communicate.

That is why the historical developments we have examined are not merely academic. They are deeply practical and profoundly theological.

The Gospel Is Supposed to Be Clear

One of the striking features of the New Testament is its simplicity.

When the Philippian jailer asked, "What must I do to be saved?" Paul and Silas did not seem confused. There was no discussion, no hesitation, no lengthy explanation of commitment, no list of requirements, and no examination of future discipleship plans.

The answer came immediately: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

That simplicity appears repeatedly throughout Scripture. Jesus calls people to believe. John writes so people will believe. Peter points people to Christ. Paul proclaims justification by faith.

Again and again, the issue remains the same. The gospel points people to Christ, and faith receives what Christ has already accomplished.

How Confusion Enters the Conversation

Confusion often enters when additional concepts become attached to the gospel invitation.

Most of these concepts are biblical in themselves. That is what makes the issue difficult.

Consider the following words:

- obedience
- surrender
- dedication
- discipleship

- commitment
- lordship
- service

Every one of those concepts is important. Every one is taught in Scripture. Every one belongs in Christian teaching.

The question is not whether these ideas are biblical.

The question is: Where do they belong?

Do they answer the question, “What must I do to be saved?” Or do they answer the question, “How should I live now that I am saved?”

The New Testament consistently distinguishes between receiving eternal life and growing as a disciple. Modern often sometimes blur that distinction.

When Good Things Become Conditions

One way to understand the problem is to recognize that a biblical truth can become problematic when placed in the wrong category.

Imagine telling a lost person, “You should obey Christ.” That statement is true.

Or, “You should follow Christ.” Also true.

Or, “You should surrender your life to Christ.” Again, there is truth in the statement.

But suppose the person asks, “Do I have to do those things to receive eternal life?”

Now the issue changes.

The moment obedience, surrender, commitment, or discipleship becomes a condition for receiving eternal life, the gospel of grace becomes distorted.

Faith looks away from itself and toward Christ. The question is not, “Have I committed enough?” The question is, “Is Christ sufficient?”

The New Testament consistently answers that question with a resounding yes.

The Problem with Ambiguous Language

Many modern invitation phrases share a common weakness: they are open to multiple interpretations.

Consider the phrase, “Give your life to Christ.”

What exactly does it mean?

Ask ten Christians, and you may receive ten different answers. One person means believe in Christ. Another means dedicate yourself to Christ. Another means become a disciple. Another means surrender all known sin. Another means make Jesus the absolute ruler of every area of life.

The phrase itself is open to various meanings. And that is precisely the problem.

Compare it with: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

While people may still debate the nature of faith, the invitation itself is directed clearly toward Christ and His promise. It is difficult to misunderstand the object of faith.

The phrase, give your life to Christ, leaves the hearer uncertain about what is actually being required.

Satan's Old Strategy

Scripture describes Satan as a deceiver. Jesus called him a liar and the father of lies.

One of Satan's most effective strategies throughout history has been to obscure God's truth. He rarely attacks by replacing truth with obvious nonsense. More often, he attacks by mixing truth with confusion. The gospel is no exception.

If unbelievers become confused about what God requires for salvation, the message itself can become hidden beneath layers of misunderstanding. Likewise, if believers become confused, they may unintentionally pass that confusion on to others.

A fog then settles over the very point where clarity is most needed.

The issue is not whether every modern phrase is heretical. Most are not. The issue is whether some of them make the gospel less clear than Scripture itself does.

A Mist in the Pulpit

Howard Hendricks famously observed: "A mist in the pulpit results in a fog in the pew."

That statement captures the concern of this book. When evangelists and pastors use imprecise language, hearers often become even more confused than the speakers intended.

A preacher may mean: "Trust Christ."

But the congregation may hear: "Promise lifelong obedience."

A preacher may mean: "Believe God's promise."

But the listener may hear: "Make a greater commitment."

A preacher may mean: "Receive Christ by faith."

But the hearer may understand: "Pray this prayer correctly."

Good intentions do not always guarantee clear communication. That is why words matter.

What Earlier Generations Can Teach Us

One of the most valuable lessons from this historical study is the realization that earlier generations often used simpler language.

The apostles pointed people to Christ. Whitefield pointed people to Christ. Edwards pointed people to Christ. Wesley pointed people to Christ.

Their invitations certainly differed in style, but the central emphasis remained remarkably consistent:

- trust Christ
- believe Christ

- come to Christ
- receive Christ

They spoke much about discipleship. They spoke much about obedience. They spoke much about holy living. But those subjects were generally discussed as the fruit of salvation rather than the means of obtaining it. That distinction helped preserve clarity.

Returning to the Simplicity of Faith

The purpose of this book is not to create a new vocabulary police force.

Christians can use a variety of expressions and still communicate the gospel accurately. The issue is not whether a particular phrase appears in a tract or sermon. The issue is whether Christ remains at the center.

When someone asks, “What must I do to be saved?” our answer should direct attention to Christ and His promise.

The apostles did not tell sinners to examine the depth of their commitment. They directed them to the sufficiency of Christ. They did not focus attention on the quality of the sinner’s response. They focused attention on the reliability of the Savior. That remains the safest approach today.

The clearer Christ becomes, the clearer the gospel becomes.

The Great Lesson of This Study

As we look back across nearly three centuries of evangelical history, one lesson rises above all others.

The language of the gospel invitation has changed significantly. The language of faith remained, but over time it became surrounded by additional layers:

- decision language
- public-response language
- sinner’s-prayer language
- commitment language
- surrender language
- lordship language

Some of these developments were well-intentioned. Some may even have helped certain people understand the gospel. Yet they also introduced opportunities for misunderstanding that earlier generations rarely faced.

History therefore serves as a warning. The church must continually evaluate its language in light of Scripture. Not tradition. Not popularity. Not effectiveness.

Scripture.

Whenever our invitations become more complicated than the apostolic message, we should pause and ask whether we are helping people see Christ more clearly or less clearly.

Because in the end, the issue is not whether people make a decision. The issue is not whether people walk an aisle. The issue is not whether people pray a prayer. The issue is not whether people can remember a moment.

The issue is whether they have believed the One who said: "He who believes in Me has everlasting life."

And when that remains the center of our message, the fog begins to lift, and the simplicity of the gospel shines once again.

Chapter 12—Returning to the Apostolic Invitation

As we come to the end of this journey, it is important to remember what this book has not attempted to do.

It has not argued that every evangelist after Whitefield was wrong. It has not argued that every altar call is sinful. It has not argued that every person who prayed a sinner's prayer is confused about the gospel. Nor has it argued that God cannot use imperfect methods.

Church history provides abundant evidence that God has often used imperfect people, imperfect churches, and imperfect methods to accomplish His purposes. The issue is not whether God can work through human weakness. The issue is whether we are communicating the gospel as clearly as possible.

That question brings us back to where we began.

If someone asks, "What must I do to be saved?" what should we say?

The Goal Is Not to Return to the Eighteenth Century

Some readers may fear that this book is calling for a return to the methods of Whitefield, Edwards, or Wesley.

That is not the goal.

The authority for the church is not church history. The authority for the church is Scripture.

Whitefield was not infallible. Neither was Edwards. Neither was Wesley. Neither was Moody. Neither was Graham. Every generation must evaluate its beliefs and methods in light of the Word of God.

Church history is valuable because it helps us recognize when changes have occurred. Scripture tells us whether those changes are good, bad, or somewhere in between.

Our goal, therefore, is not historical archaeology.

Our goal is gospel clarity.

What Should We Preserve?

One of the most encouraging discoveries in our study is that the central biblical invitation is wonderfully simple.

Again and again, Scripture directs attention to Christ. The gospel invitation does not primarily focus on the sinner's promises. It focuses on God's promise. It does not center on what we pledge to do for Christ. It centers on what Christ has already done for us.

That is why expressions such as these are so powerful:

- Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.
- Trust Christ.
- Receive Christ.
- Believe God's promise.
- Rely upon the Savior.

Such language immediately directs attention away from the sinner and toward Christ. The emphasis falls where it belongs: on the Savior, not the response; on the promise, not the performance; on the gift, not the recipient.

That is one reason these expressions have proven so durable throughout church history.

The Difference Between Root and Fruit

One of the simplest ways to preserve gospel clarity is to keep a clear distinction between the root and the fruit of salvation.

Faith is the root. Discipleship is the fruit.

Believing is the root. Obedience is the fruit.

Receiving Christ is the root. Following Christ is the fruit.

The New Testament values both.

The mistake is not preaching discipleship. The mistake is confusing discipleship with the condition for receiving eternal life.

A healthy tree eventually produces fruit. But fruit does not create the tree.

Likewise, the Christian life should produce growth, obedience, love, service, and spiritual maturity. Those realities are important. Indeed, they are essential to God's purpose for believers. But they flow from salvation. They do not define the means by which salvation is received.

Keeping that distinction clear helps keep the gospel clear.

Standing in the True Grace of God

Near the end of his first epistle, Peter wrote: "I have written to you briefly, exhorting and testifying that this is the true grace of God. Stand firm in it."

What a wonderful expression: *The true grace of God*. That phrase captures the burden of this entire book.

Grace directs our attention away from ourselves and toward Christ. Grace reminds us that salvation is God's gift. Grace reminds us that Christ did the work. Grace reminds us that faith receives rather than earns.

Grace does not minimize discipleship.

Grace provides the foundation upon which discipleship is built.

When the church keeps grace central, gospel clarity flourishes. When grace becomes obscured by layers of conditions, commitments, promises, and procedures, confusion often follows.

The Invitation We Cannot Improve

After three centuries of evolving invitation language, we arrive at a profound conclusion:

The simplest invitation remains the strongest one.

Not because it is old. Not because it was used by Whitefield. Not because it was used by the apostles. But because it points so directly to Christ.

No evangelist has ever improved upon the invitation found in Scripture. No slogan has surpassed it. No methodology has replaced it. No formula has made it clearer.

When the Philippian jailer asked: “What must I do to be saved?”

Paul answered: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.”

More than nineteen centuries later, that invitation still shines with remarkable clarity. It points sinners to Christ. It magnifies grace. It leaves no room for boasting. And it reminds us that eternal life is not earned through promises made to God, but received through faith in the One who loved us and gave Himself for us.

That is the apostolic invitation. And after tracing the long history of gospel invitations, we maintain that it is still the best one.

Epilogue

The Conversation Every Christian Should Have

Imagine that it is late in the evening. You are sitting across the table from a friend. The conversation turns serious. Perhaps a family crisis has softened his heart. Perhaps a funeral has forced him to think about eternity. Perhaps he has simply grown tired of carrying life's burdens alone.

After a few moments of silence, he looks at you and asks: "What must I do to be saved?"

At that moment, church history suddenly becomes practical.

The debates are no longer academic. The quotations no longer matter. The timelines no longer matter. The question is standing right in front of you.

What will you say?

For many Christians, the answer arrives wrapped in phrases they have heard their entire lives. They may say:

- Ask Jesus into your heart.
- Give your life to Christ.
- Commit your life to Christ.
- Make Jesus Lord of your life.
- Pray this prayer.

Those who use these expressions may have sincere intentions and may personally understand them in a biblical sense. They want people to trust Christ and receive eternal life.

But after tracing the history of gospel invitations, we are compelled to ask a simple question: Why not say what the apostles said?

Why not use the language Scripture itself places at the center? Why not point directly to Christ? Why not tell people exactly what Paul told the Philippian jailer?

"Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

The great lesson of this study is not that every Christian of the past was wrong or that every modern evangelist is confused.

The lesson is much simpler.

Over time, the church added layers of language around the gospel invitation. Some of those layers may have been helpful. Some may have been harmless. Some may have created confusion. But beneath all those layers, one message remained unchanged.

Christ died for sinners.

Christ rose from the dead.

Christ offers eternal life as a gift.

And everyone who believes in Him receives that gift.

The heart of the gospel never changed.

Perhaps that is why the apostolic invitation still feels so fresh after nearly two thousand years. It does not ask us to measure the depth of our commitment. It does not ask us to evaluate the sincerity of our surrender. It does not ask us to examine the intensity of our emotions.

Instead, it directs us away from ourselves and toward Christ.

The focus is not: "Have I done enough?"

The focus is: "Is Christ enough?"

The New Testament answers with a clear and joyful yes.

Christ is enough.

His work is enough.

His promise is enough.

His grace is enough.

That does not diminish the importance of discipleship. Far from it. A healthy Christian should desire to follow Christ, obey Christ, serve Christ, and grow in Christ. The New Testament repeatedly calls believers to these things.

But they are the fruit of salvation, not its basis.

The Christian life rests upon a foundation already laid. That foundation is Christ Himself.

As we close this book, perhaps the best application is to ask ourselves a simple question: *If someone asked me today what he must do to be saved, would my answer make the gospel clearer or more complicated?*

That question is worth pondering.

Our words matter. Not because certain phrases possess magical power. Not because church history demands it. But because the gospel deserves clarity.

Whenever possible, we should strive to speak in ways that direct attention away from human performance and toward Christ's finished work. The clearer Christ becomes, the clearer the gospel becomes.

The last 300 years of church history have witnessed a shift from *believe*, to *decide*, to *commit*.

Yet at the end of the journey, we discover that the oldest invitation remains the simplest and the best: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved."

May God help us proclaim that message with clarity, confidence, and grace until Christ returns.