

Preaching for a decision

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 4, 2011](#) issue



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In his essay in this issue ("[Do you love people?](#)"), Lutheran pastor Peter Marty recalls a question he was asked during an interview for his first parish assignment. The question bothered him at the time, but it's one he kept pondering. His recollection reminded me of a question I was asked in an interview years ago. It bothered me at the time, and it also has stayed with me.

I had been ordained for a month and was meeting with two people appointed to evaluate my fitness for ministry. One of them became a dear friend and mentor; the other was a former missionary in Egypt, a fire-breathing evangelical who was legendary for publicly opposing pretty much everything the Presbyterian Church did or said. It was 1963: the church was talking about civil rights, poverty and peace. The former missionary didn't think the three causes had anything to do with ministry and said so. Since I believed that those issues were central to ministry, I knew the interview was going to be difficult at best—and perhaps a vocation-changing tragedy.

The questions were tough, and asked in a way that I perceived as accusative. As the missionary pressed me with questions about my personal faith and priorities, the gentler interrogator would bail me out. The question that I've never forgotten was, "Do you preach for a decision?" I knew what he meant. I knew that his sermons concluded with an altar call inviting people to make a "decision for Christ"—accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior—on the spot.

I said that my own decision for Christ was a process, not a one-time event, and had been going on for years. The really important thing about decision, I insisted, was that in Christ God had made a decision about human beings, including me. My questioner was not impressed. "But do you preach for a decision?" he persisted. Sensing that things were getting serious, I mumbled, "Yes, I preach for a decision."

The question has haunted me. We preachers proclaim good news and speak about all the amazing ways that good news penetrates, comforts, challenges and transforms lives. But my questioner had a point: proclaiming good news ought to in some way lead to a response, a decision of some kind. Otherwise proclaiming the good news of unconditional divine love can be an exercise in what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "cheap grace." Preaching ought to lead to people caring more, giving more and living more. It is the assurance of God's presence, to be sure, and it is testimony to God's healing love. But it is also an invitation to do something.

If we wrap up the Sunday morning service without posing a question to be answered, a challenge or an invitation, we have left critical work undone.