

Revival without tents

by [M. Craig Barnes](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue



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I can still smell the wet canvas and sawdust of my father's revivals. Like many old-school country preachers, he believed that any self-respecting revival was held in a tent. The fact that he'd been sent by his denomination from Texas to serve as a "home missionary" in Long Island, New York, didn't dissuade him.

Every year he rented an old circus tent and set it up in the parking lot of the church he had planted. My brother and I would string naked light bulbs between the tent poles, push the cheap electronic organ onto a plywood stage elevated by cinder blocks, and set up wooden folding chairs that would pinch your butt if you weren't careful. I have no idea how Dad found sawdust on Long Island.

The choir was composed of women wearing zippered housedresses and the few husbands who were compelled to join them. One of the highlights of the evenings was the Eastern Valley Boys Quartet. The boys wore green blazers and had too many teeth. The really big guy sang tenor, and the small one had an amazing bass voice. We knew little about the guest preachers—where they went to seminary or even if they'd gone to seminary. Unlike the stereotype of revivals, however, the sermons were not about hellfire and damnation. Mostly they were a call to receive the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

What I remember most about those hot nights was the altar call. Just before the choir began singing, "I Surrender All," my father would stand at the front and say, "Jesus was dying to love you. All you need to do to accept this love is to step out of

your seat, come down the aisle, and give your life over to the forgiving love of Jesus. It doesn't matter what you have done, whether it was very bad or very good, you can't get to God without surrendering all of it to Jesus."

The people who filled that tent were blue collar, if they were lucky enough to have collars. Many were out of work; some were addicted to things that had pretty much destroyed their lives. But there it was—a simple invitation to step out of your seat, step away from whatever separated you from God, and come home to the Savior.

Since those days I've collected too many academic degrees and a theology that no longer fits in my dad's revival tents. If I don't get to sing a Kyrie in a worship service, I feel cheated. And I have grave doubts about the long-term benefit of altar calls. In the words of Karl Barth, discipleship is not about a momentary act but a movement of conversion back to God. Right, I get that.

But the old revival altar call was actually quite similar to the point of Augustine's *Confessions*. There he claimed that in the end becoming a Christian was a matter of surrendering to the grace of God. His intellectual pursuits could not get him to God, nor could he redirect his addicted passions to love the holy. Salvation came only when he heard a voice that invited him to step out from the life he'd built for himself and surrender it to God who in Jesus Christ was dying to forgive and love us.

Those of us in the mainline traditions don't really know what to make of revivalism. Not many of us walk down the aisle to confess and surrender our sins to God. We don't think that we receive the grace of God because we have found faith; we believe faith is a response to the prevenient grace of God. I get that too.

What I do not get is why the more theologically sophisticated a person becomes, the less likely she or he is to have any interest in inviting people to experience conversion. The apostle Paul knew a lot more theology than most of us before he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus. So he was wrong. This is what we are not so good at confessing—that there is more to Jesus than we know.

We in the liturgically devoted Christian traditions are as in need of repentance and surrender as those who shuffled into my father's revival tent. We gave up the revival tents, thankfully, but for some reason we also gave up the invitation to surrender all to Jesus.

Every Sunday people continue to make their way into churches around the world hoping to hear a word from God. And the word they most want to hear is that change is still possible. All week they've been hearing messages to which they've become addicted—work harder, lose weight if you want to be happy, keep searching for your soul mate, try to be the smartest person in the room, and worry about those who don't look like you. These messages only create crazy, self-absorbed sinners.

All of these soul-eroding anxieties have to be surrendered before you can enjoy the transforming grace of God. It isn't that hard. All you have to do is step out and keep walking toward the Savior who was dying to love all of us. A better mission for your life is waiting at the altar.

That's the invitation of all revivals. We could use one today.