

Born again and again

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue



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When it was time to be installed as pastor in my first congregation, I was interviewed by members of a presbytery committee responsible for admitting new ministers. I was startled when one man asked me bluntly if I “preached for a decision.” I’m not sure exactly how I responded in that moment, but decades later I can answer his question with a confident yes. All gospel proclamation deserves and requires response—a decision.

Traditionally, in the evangelical world, that decision comes in response to an altar call. Craig Barnes’s affectionate [memory of his father’s evangelical revival meetings](#) raises the underlying question of how any of us come to Christian faith.

I was exposed to revivalism, including the tent variety, by next-door neighbors. We Buchanans were steady Presbyterians but didn’t get overheated about it; our neighbors were red-hot Baptists who went to church twice on Sunday and also on Wednesday evenings. They didn’t smoke, play cards, or go to movies. When evangelists came through town, they helped arrange revival meetings in their church or a large circus tent.

I also attended the Baptist Young People’s Union. They featured great songs, Bible memorization contests that I excelled at, plentiful snacks, and cute girls. I tagged along to the revivals. The evangelist illustrated his sermon with a large flannel board and colorful characters and coordinated his appeal with the organist, who began playing softly and compellingly as the sermon came to its climax.

On one occasion, with my chum's encouragement, I went forward to "get saved." I expected something powerful to happen when I knelt in front of the altar, but I felt nothing. So I returned the next night and went forward . . . still nothing. I didn't feel a thing except self-consciousness and the profound hope that my baseball buddies would never find out about my experience.

When I finally told my parents about the altar call, my mother patiently explained that for some of us conversion is not a onetime, emotionally laced event but a process and that maybe I had taken one small step in a larger journey.

That's what it is for many of us. Conversion is both decision and process, and a "decision for Christ" is made every day for the rest of our lives. We decide in the context of the lives we live—lives of amazing complexity with economic, political, and relational challenges, with moments of deep disappointment but also moments of great beauty and ecstasy. We decide daily to be Christ's man or woman and to stumble along behind him that day as best we can.

I don't think I ever heard the gospel of love at those Baptist youth meetings, prayer meetings, and revivals. I did hear that there was plenty wrong with me and that I was in a whole lot of trouble. It took much longer for grace to penetrate and gain a foothold.

But not for a moment do I regret or resent what happened in that tent when a preacher placed his hands on my head and asked Jesus to save me. It was one step in a journey that I've been on throughout my life and that has taken me places where I never expected to be. In some way, at some time, each of us has to get up out of our chair and decide to take a first step.