

THE MISUSE OF THE ALTAR SERVICE

By Evangelist C. W. Ruth.

We fully believe in the use of the old-fashioned mourner's bench and altar service. It has doubtless been made a blessing and a means of grace to millions of souls. It was while kneeling at an old-fashioned mourner's bench, after a protracted season of repentance, where I obtained the forgiveness of all my sins, and found peace and joy in receiving Christ as a personal Savior.

As an evangelist I have used the mourner's bench method in revival work near half a century, in preference to any other method. As men have served Satan openly and publicly, it seems proper that their decision, and surrender to Christ, and their repentance, and confession of Christ should be just as public as was the life of sin. Hence, anything we may say here must not be construed as an argument against the mourner's bench method.

Nevertheless we are persuaded that even this sacred and God-honored institution may become a snare and delusion.

First, I would speak of those who would make the mourner's bench an essential to salvation. They seem to think that the mourner's bench is the only way, and the only place, in which a person could be saved. This is done by the minister placing an undue emphasis upon the mourner's bench in his insistence that all must come to that particular place; and by the individual in supposing he must wait until he can present himself at a public mourner's bench before he can find the Saviour. This of course is all erroneous. While it is true that no person can find Christ until the will is yielded, it is not essential that this take place at a public mourner's bench. Until the will is yielded unconditionally, Christ is found nowhere—not even at a mourner's bench; but when the will is fully yielded Christ may be found anywhere. We are persuaded that multitudes of people present themselves at the public altar of prayer who should have, and might have settled matters in the secret closet prayer. We fear it is detrimental, both to the person who makes a practice of it, and to the onlooking public, for people who have professed loudly to continue to run to the altar as seekers in every revival meeting conducted in the church. Such persons become known as "chronic seekers," and their testimony is largely discounted if not discredited. The reaction will naturally be, both to themselves and to the public, "What's the use?" Such persons will finally be regarded either as insincere, or as wholly unstable and unreliable.

A second class are such as come to the altar, or mourner's bench (we are using these terms interchangeably) as an experiment. They seem to think that by coming to the altar they might obtain an experience like someone else, or that by so doing they might "feel better." Frequently, they do not know just why they came, and want nothing in particular. They have come simply because others have come; or because they have been urged to come. On inquiring of such a one, "What do you want the Lord to do for you?" the reply was, "O I just came to the altar to keep the meeting going." While this doubtless was an exceptional case, we fear there are multitudes who make the mourner's bench the end, rather than simply a means to an end. Occasionally they refuse to pray and act as though they expected their contact with the mourner's bench to effect some marvelous change. Others present themselves in an attitude which seems to say, "Now work on me, and see what you can do with me, or for me." All such performance is a

misuse of the altar service, not to say, sacrilegious.

Another matter that we think needs correction in many of the altar services of the day, is the promiscuous and excessive instructions given to seekers, oftentimes by incapable persons, two or three shouting and talking to the same person at the same time, one saying "Hold on," and the other saying, "Let go," until the seeker must become utterly confused and distracted; the only hope for such a one is to disregard and ignore all such instructors, and in the desperation of their own souls pray through for themselves.

Another method of altar instruction that does not appeal to the writer, is that of engaging the seeker in conversation; or that of placing an open Bible in front of the seeker, asking him to read certain passages of scripture. This method, as it seems to the writer, must of necessity divert the thought and attention of the seeker from the Lord to the person thus engaging their attention; and when the seeker is intense and desperate, it interrupts and hinders his seeking. While we think it profitable, and helpful to remind seekers of scriptural promises that might apply to their individual needs, we think it best to let them pray until the Holy Spirit reveals Christ, and thus brings relief, and comfort, and assurance to the sin-burdened heart. Because a person assents to the truth, and mentally accepts and believes certain promises—that alone cannot satisfy the longing of his heart. I always believed and never doubted one word in the Bible, but that did not save me. My soul found no peace nor rest until Christ was revealed within. In answer to my prayer, "Lord, what is in the way; what wilt thou have me to do," the Spirit revealed some things, and had some things to say to me that no mortal lips could have spoken; and when these divine requirements were fully complied with, there was no time nor occasion to "try to believe," or to reason matters through, the work was done; and done so thoroughly and victoriously that in fifty years there has never been a single doubt about the matter. Praise God! We have observed that persons who are simply talked into the blessing, will soon be talked out again. My advice would be, do not hurry the seekers, but give them time and opportunity to "pray through," even though the victory is not obtained in the first service. In the meantime, generate an atmosphere of prayer and faith about them, and trust the Holy Spirit to make matters plain to them. He is ever faithful, and more interested than we could possibly be.

And now let me speak of some abuses and misuses of the altar service by the revivalist. Knowing that the public in general judges the success or failure of a so-called revival campaign by the number of persons who present themselves as "seekers" at the mourner's bench, and that his rating as an evangelist is largely determined by his success in persuading his hearers to thus present themselves, the evangelist at times is placed under very subtle temptation. If there is no response to his altar call, and the people seem unmoved, he may be tempted to upbraid and criticize, and scold them; and perhaps be betrayed into giving them a severe and drastic tongue lashing for being so hardhearted and unappreciative of his efforts. Another may be tempted to feel that since it is up to him to make a showing of some kind around the altar, he must get them somehow; and so he employs methods that in themselves are doubtful (and sometimes embarrassing); and having "cornered" them, by some "hook or crook"—on the supposition that the end justifies the means—the evangelist constrains them to come to the altar; and thus he is enabled to give a glowing report

of his revival. Or, he may be tempted to make a showing of some kind, by inviting all who want to become more Christlike; all who want to go deeper; all who want more power; all who want to see a revival, etc., etc., and thus by a very indefinite and general invitation, he may fill his altars. This would be all right, providing he means just what he says, and does not count and report them as so many "seekers." But to count and report them as "seekers" is entirely misleading, not to say, dishonest.

For the evangelist in our day knows full well that in all holiness churches the term "seekers" is used to designate such as are definitely seeking to be either saved, reclaimed, or sanctified. But for an evangelist to persuade and invite a lot of little children to come to an altar of prayer and let the evangelist pray for them; or get seekers by "pray," by inviting parents to come to the altar to represent their children, and others to represent unsaved friends and loved ones, and then count them, and report them as so many "seekers," and thus give forth the impression that because of the number of "seekers" the revival was a great success—to say the least, such tactics are reprehensible, and wholly unworthy of the gospel we preach.

Nor do we understand how evangelists can appear to be greatly burdened and deeply concerned for the salvation of the lost, and yet as soon as they have succeeded in persuading people to come to the mourner's bench, they seem to feel that their responsibility is ended, and their "burden" is gone, and, directly they themselves are gone—to the dining hall, and to bed—while souls are agonizing and struggling at the altar of prayer.

We do not mean to be cynical nor critical, for we know by experience there come times when physical weariness necessitates a relaxation, so that it seems necessary to do as did the fishermen on Lake Genessaret, when "they beckoned unto their partners which were in the other ship, that they should come and help them" (Luke 5:7), but they did not desert the ship, nor leave the burden of responsibility wholly to "their partners." It has always seemed to this writer that where there is real soul "travail" for others there is no letting go until deliverance has come. Paul said, "I travail in birth again until Christ be formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). May God help us all to escape professionalism, and be faithful and true to our heavenly calling.—*Herald of Holiness.*

WHEN THE COMFORTER COMES

"When the pilot comes on board," says Alexander Maclaren, "the captain does not leave the bridge, but stands by the pilot's side. His responsibilities are past, but his duties are not over. And when Christ comes into my heart, my effort, my judgment, are not made unnecessary, or put on one side. Let Him take the command, and stand beside Him, and carry out His orders, and you will find rest in your souls."

One of the great words in the New Testament is the word "Comforter" as used by Jesus in the promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit. One meaning of this word is *advocate*, or literally, *one called near to help*. It is not difficult to see in the work of the harbor pilot, mentioned by Dr. Maclaren an illustration of the glorious experience of the abiding Holy Spirit. Such an experience puts our work for the Lord into a new relationship; we are "workers together with Him." It is a great honor to be thus associated with the great God and it really takes drudgery out of Christian service.—*The Wesleyan Methodist.*