

# Saved from a "Come-to-Jesus" Gala

by Bill Vossler

**T**o a thirteen-year-old boy, prayer at the end of Revival Meetings seemed interminable, so any distraction was welcome.

The previous evening a nine-stripe gopher had meandered over the threshold onto the dirt floor of the tabernacle near our small

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North Dakota town to check us out.

The gopher gazed at the scrubbed ranks of Germans-from-Russia farmers stuffed into their Sunday finery, lined up in stiff rows on alfalfa-bale pews. Its little bushy tail held high, the gopher darted back and forth in confusion, then raced up the middle aisle toward the altar, as if it could not wait to be saved. I was surprised the minister didn't take advantage and say, "*See, even God's little creatures desire their Savior.*" The way I saw it, this was nothing

but a Saving Exhibition, a "Come-to-Jesus" Gala. It all seemed forced and faked.

Just before the gopher skittered to the front, it stopped, spotted an exit, and fled through a side door. Just what I wanted to do. The smell of dust and alfalfa had become nauseating, not to mention

the psychological pressure to come up there and be saved by Jesus—*glory hallelujah!*

I was hoping this night would provide a similar distraction like last night's gopher, so instead of actually praying, I kept glancing

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sideways over my folded hands, past bowed heads of family members, their eyes closed and lips moving, while I gazed out through the open door into the summer twilight, waiting for the gopher to re-appear. Or anything of interest.

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So I nearly missed the drama playing out right in front of me.

## The Best Show in Town

In the next row, the worst young sinner in town jumped up. He smoked like a chimney, had a red face and bleary eyes from heavy drinking, constantly took the Lord's name in vain, told dirty jokes and gleefully exhibited and sold items he'd copped from Herr Mercantile. All while still in high school.

Now he marched toward the altar in double time, as though his courage might flag if he didn't get up there quickly enough. Young and foolish and unschooled and unforgiving as I was, I couldn't believe Jesus would take him. I knew about the sinners in the Bible, but from my limited knowledge, this one was worse.

I shook my head. I couldn't believe he was taking the cure. That would be like—like my older brother, who held me down and spit in my mouth, smacked me in the forehead with a rock, threw a knife at me and who (near as I could tell) didn't possess a religious bone in his body, deciding to make a beeline for the smooth-talking preacher while the congregation sang, over and over again, "*Just as I am, without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me, and that thou bidst me come to thee, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.*" It was beyond my comprehension.

Suddenly with a sob that self-same brother leaped up and flung himself out into the aisle and hur-



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ried towards the altar. My jaw must have filled with dust when it struck the ground. *“What are you doing?”* I wanted to say. By now he was up front, kneeling beside the town reprobate while the minister laid hands on their sweaty heads, praying aloud, thanking Jesus: *Thank you Lord, hallelujah, for these souls which will no longer tromp down the road to perdition, hallelujah*

public spectacle. For all I knew, if a quota of willing converts wasn't reached, they would start grabbing us up out of the rows. *“You there! And you, yes you, the one who is always pretending to pray, get up there,”* and they would have me.

Something about this entire process turned me off. It didn't seem real or sincere. It didn't seem like Jesus was calling us to come

This is one of the problems with legalism; it intertwines the church establishment together with Jesus, so susceptible youngsters like me end up wanting to flee church, and in the process reject everything—church and Jesus and God. All I remember from those days is the pain of not being good enough because I didn't want to go up front and give my life to Jesus.

**Something about this entire process turned me off. It didn't seem real or sincere. It didn't seem like Jesus was calling us to come home, but rather some show-off minister.**

*Lord Jee-sus, and if there are any others in the congregation tonight who feel the need, the draw of Jesus....*

The minister droned on, shaking the heads of those newly-born boys back and forth each time he exhorted adults to *“pray, pray, pray!”* for those other wayward children out there in the audience who were not yet saved. *“Convince them to gird on their armor of courage and stand and march up to the front*

home, but rather some show-off minister.

Though I couldn't put words to it, I sensed something unhealthy going on. Worst of all, because of all the constant pressure to conform to other people's desires—*“Come to Jesus, now!”*—I couldn't figure out how I actually felt. Did I want Jesus in my life or not?

Of course, today I realize I was rebelling against the legalism of

These folks were servants of Jesus, doing Jesus' will—at least that's what I thought for a long while, and because I felt treated shabbily, I wanted nothing more to do with them, or the church, or Jesus.

After I got married, my patient wife eventually led me back to Jesus with a few simple words: *“What's the message? Pay attention to the message from Jesus, not the messenger.”*

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*to come into the joy of the Lord.”*

I suspected any number of glances were flung towards me. I could feel eyes boring into me, almost feel the pressure of thumbs in my back, urging me to accept Jesus Christ as my Savior.

But I didn't want to. Not in public. Jesus said we should go into a closet and shut the door and pray, and I thought maybe that was how we should accept Jesus Christ as Lord. Silently, happily, alone. Just between him and me.

I was hyper-shy. Performing in public in any manner terrified me, so no way was I going to make a fool of myself up front. I ducked down lower and fervently began praying that I would be spared this

the practice of pressuring us youngsters, practically forcing us to step up front and be saved whether that was our true desire or not. Had I made the move, it would not have been to come to Jesus, but to be saved from the fear of reprisals and disappointments from my elders.

### **The Result**

The entire process did me a lot of damage. I drifted away for eleven years, un-churched. Not such a bad thing, I thought, because it left my Sundays free. But I was also, and much more importantly during those eleven years, un-Jesused.

That message, of course, is that Jesus gave his life to save each one of us, no matter how much we have sinned or been foolish or ignorant. Everyone. Even me. □

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