

Biblical Principles & Practices of Open-Air Evangelism

By Malcolm H. Watts

An edited transcript of a talk in which he sets out the Biblical principles and practices both of evangelism in general, and open-air preaching in particular.

'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe whatsoever I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen' (Matt 28: 19-20).

EVANGELISM IN GENERAL

1. Our God is an evangelistic God.

From the very beginning of the Bible, we are confronted with God's evangelistic character. Indeed, the first to preach the Gospel was God Himself in the Garden of Eden, when He said to Satan, 'And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed: it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel' (Gen 3:15). As we turn through the pages of the Old Testament, God's evangelistic character becomes clearer and clearer, so that when we reach books such as the prophecy of Isaiah, we find God Himself proclaiming the Gospel with the utmost clarity: 'Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else' (Is 45:22).

Coming to the New Testament, we find

the evangelistic concern of God expressed in the person of His Son. It was He who had compassion upon the multitudes; He who wanted to gather them unto Himself; and He who stated, 'I must preach the kingdom of God to other cities also: for therefore am I sent' (Lk 4:43).

It is clear from the book of Acts that the Holy Spirit Himself has the same mind. For example, in Acts 2:38 Peter, filled with the Spirit, preaches the Gospel, urging his listeners to 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins'. Then in Acts 4, after the disciples had prayed that they might be able to speak the Word of God with great boldness, they were immediately filled with the Holy Spirit and went out and preached with great energy and with great effect.

2. The task of evangelism is committed and mandated to the Church.

The Church exists for three main reasons: firstly for the glory of God, secondly for the edification and sanctification of the people of God, and thirdly for the evangelisation of the lost. The last of these purposes is made clear in the great commission, given in Matthew 28 and Mark 16. Although Christ's words were addressed directly to the eleven, clearly they were wider in their reach, speaking not only to those present but also to disciples in every generation. We

can be sure of this because the commission ends with Christ speaking of being with His people always, even unto the end of the world. Paul makes it clear that the task of evangelism is entrusted to the people of God for all times. For example, in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 he speaks of them 'being put in trust with the Gospel', and in 1 Thessalonians 1:8 he says, 'from you sounded out the Word of the Lord not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith to God-ward is spread abroad'. The whole church was clearly mission-orientated and had a desire to spread the Word of God.

3. We owe it to our generation.

We are born at this particular time in history, and have generation-work to do, which involves presenting the Gospel to the people of our times. We owe it to them because, as Paul says in Romans 1:14, we are 'debtors both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians: both to the wise and the unwise'. Dr. Lloyd Jones, in his sermon on that text, describes a man who has been suffering from a crippling disease, from which it seems that death is the inevitable outcome. The man is put in touch with a doctor who prescribes him a medication which has a remarkable effect, curing him so that he makes a full recovery. One day, as the man is walking down the street he spots a man across the road with the identical condition to the one he suffered from. Can he walk on?

No! He owes it to the man to cross the road and share with him the news of the remedy. And we, having found the salvation of Christ, are obliged to our generation to tell them that sinners can be forgiven and that Christ can make a man whole.

4. There is great profit in engaging in the work of evangelism.

According to Proverbs 11:24-25, 'There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth...The liberal soul shall be made fat'. The idea behind this is that as you share the Word of God with others, you yourself receive blessing and your soul is enlarged. Fuller tells in his diary of how there was at one time great deadness and lack of assurance amongst the people in his church. However, he goes on to inform us that when he began to stir up the church to evangelism, an amazing transformation took place and the people's worries soon began to disappear. The problem had been that they were sitting in the pews dwelling on their own shortcomings, but once they were directed to their mission, they were greatly strengthened and blessed by the Lord, finding real faith and assurance. This is not to say that evangelistic work is the answer to all problems of lack of faith and assurance, but it is often the case that when people do get stuck into the task of evangelising, many of their problems soon disappear.

5. There is great guilt in neglect of evangelism.

Proverbs 3:27 says, 'Withhold not good from them to whom it is due, when it is in the power of thine hand to do it'. The 'good' may be many things, but clearly includes the declaration of the Gospel. The implication is that if we deny this to others, we incur guilt. In Acts 20:26, Paul declares that having preached the kingdom of God, he was pure from the blood of all men. In other words, having spread the Gospel amongst both the Jews and the Greeks, he did not have their souls upon his conscience. This applies to all the people of God, with every one of us called to 'be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear' (1 Pet 3:15).

7. The romance of soul-winning.

'He that winneth souls is wise' (Prov 11:30). There is no other experience akin to winning a soul. We cannot and should not take any glory or credit for it, but to think that God has helped us to help someone find Christ is wonderful. To look upon a person that you have pointed to the Saviour is a feeling that fills the soul with joy. Paul has a recurring theme in his epistles, when he speaks of having begotten people through the Gospel. We ought to make it our daily prayer that God would use us to this end.

OPEN-AIR PREACHING IN PARTICULAR

1. God authorises open-air preaching.

There are numerous examples in the Bible of outdoor preaching. In the Old Testament, Moses, Elijah and Ezra, to name but three, were all open-air preachers. In the New Testament, we have the greatest example of all, Christ's Sermon on the Mount, and we have the examples of Peter preaching in the heart of Jerusalem in Acts 2, and Paul preaching on Mars Hill in Acts 17. God's methods haven't changed and to maintain that there are better ways to spread the Gospel, as many sadly do today, is to depart from the Bible. Our duty is not to keep the way of salvation within the four walls of our church, but to 'go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in' (Lk 14:23).

2. The advantages of open-air preaching.

There are three main advantages of preaching outdoors. The first is the glory of God. There is something marvelously public about preaching outside, and even if we were to see no souls converted, it would still be justified because we stand there as witnesses for the glory of God, reminding people that there is a God with whom they have to do. Secondly, we are doing what we should be doing, rather than foolishly expecting people to come

in. In John 15 Jesus said to His disciples that He had ordained them, that they should go and bring forth fruit. The fruit is the fruit of conversions, and so by preaching the Gospel outside, we literally fulfil Christ's mandate. Thirdly, we reach people we would never reach otherwise. Even those who would never darken the door of a church come into the Market Square and hear something, however little, of the Gospel, and so we have reached them for Christ.

3. The right approach to open-air preaching.

When preaching outdoors, we must recognise that we are reaching a vastly different congregation than the one that meets on the Lord's Day. Although we must ultimately set forth the Gospel of Salvation through Jesus Christ, the Bible teaches us that we should adjust the way we get that message across according to those we are addressing. For example, when Peter spoke to the Jews in Acts 2, he was able to reason with them out of their own scriptures. But when Paul spoke to the Athenians in Acts 17, it is noteworthy that he began with the concept of God as Creator of Heaven and Earth. As a nation, we have regressed from the people in Acts 2 to the people in Acts 17. We are no longer nominally Christian, but manifestly pagan and it is therefore necessary for us to begin with the very existence of God, before we can even mention sin, judgement, the death

of Jesus Christ for sinners and the need of repentance and faith. Our aim should be to get across the very essence of the Gospel: Ruin by the Fall, Redemption by the Blood and Regeneration by the Holy Spirit.

Finally, when preparing to give an open-air message, the following practical points ought to be borne in mind:

- Make sure you prepare your message well, and pray much about it (2 Tim 2:15).
- Choose a verse or a short passage and ensure it is read and referred to from time to time (Heb 4:12).
- It must be a 'message', not a polished 'sermon' (1 Cor 2:1-5).
- Look at the people whom you are addressing (Mk 10:21).
- If heckled, it is almost always best to ignore it and to carry on preaching (Prov 26:4).
- Develop an 'argument' and reason with people from the Scriptures (Acts 17:2).
- Make sure you know when and how to finish.

'Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the Word of the Lord may have free course, and be glorified...'(2 Thes 3:1).