

Open Air Preaching

Are you qualified?



By Ray Comfort

Perhaps the topic of open air preaching seems irrelevant to you. You could never see yourself standing up among strangers and preaching the gospel to them. Perhaps you lack the courage to do such a thing. Congratulations; you have just qualified yourself for the job. If you consider yourself a 'nobody' with nothing to offer God, you are His material. Now all you need is a compassion that will swallow your fear and a conscience that will give you no rest until you break the sound barrier.

Never Fear Hecklers

You may have a few concerns. Perhaps one of them is the thought of someone verbally disagreeing with what you say. These folk are what are known as "hecklers." The best thing that can happen to an open-air meeting is to have a good heckler. Jesus gave us some of the greatest gems of Scripture because someone either made a statement or asked a question in an open-air setting. A good heckler can increase a crowd of 20 people to 200 in a matter of minutes. The air becomes electric. Suddenly, you have 200 people listening intently to how you will answer a heckler. All you have to do is remember the attributes of 2 Timothy 2:23-26: be patient, gentle, humble, etc. Don't worry if you can't answer a question. Just say, "I can't answer that, but I'll try to get the answer for you if you really want to know." With Bible "difficulties," I regularly fall back on the powerful statement of Mark Twain: "Most people are bothered by those passages of Scripture they don't understand, but for me I have always noticed that the passages that bother me are those I do understand."

A "good" heckler is one who will provoke your thoughts. He will stand up, speak up, and then shut up so that you can preach. Occasionally, you will get hecklers who have the first two qualifications, but they just won't be quiet. If they will not let you get a word in, move your location. Most of the crowd will follow. Better to have ten listeners who can hear than 200 who can't. If the heckler follows, move again ...then the crowd will usually turn on him. One ploy that often works with a heckler who is out solely to hinder the gospel is to wait until he is quiet and say to the crowd (making sure the heckler is listening also), "I want to show you how people are like sheep. When I move, watch this man follow me because he can't get a crowd by himself." His pride usually keeps him from following.

If you have a "mumbling heckler" who won't speak up, ignore him and talk over the top of him. This will usually get him angry enough to speak up and draw hearers. There is a fine line between him getting angry enough to draw a crowd, and hitting you; you will find it in time. If you are fortunate enough to get a heckler, don't panic. Show him genuine respect, not only because he can double your crowd, but because the Bible says to honor all men, so you don't want to offend him unnecessarily. Ask the heckler his name, so that if you want to ask him a question and he is talking to someone, you don't have to say, "Hey you!"

Often, people will walk through the crowd so they can get close to you and will whisper something like, "I think you are a #@\$!\$" Answer loud enough for the crowd to hear, "God bless you." Do it with a smile so that it looks as though the person has just whispered a word of encouragement to

you. This will stop him from doing it again. The Bible says to bless those who curse you, and to do good to those who hate you. Remember that you are not fighting against flesh and blood. Hecklers will stoop very low and be cutting and cruel in their remarks. If you have some physical disability, they will play on it. Try to smile back at them. Look past the words. If you are reviled for the name of Jesus, "rejoice, and be exceedingly glad." Read Matthew 5:10-12 until it is written on the corridors of your mind. The most angry hecklers are usually what we call "backsliders." These are actually false converts who never slid forward in the first place. They "asked Jesus into their heart" but never truly repented. Ask him, "Did you know the Lord?" (see Hebrews 8:11). If he answers "Yes," then he is admitting that he is willfully denying Him, and if he answers "No," then he was never a Christian in the first place - "This is eternal life, that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Make the Bullet Hit the Target

It is obvious from Scripture that God requires us not only to preach to sinners, but also to teach them. The servant of the Lord must be "able to teach, patient, in meekness instructing" those who oppose them (2 Timothy 2:24,25). For a long while I thought I was to leap among sinners, scatter the seed, then leave. But our responsibility goes further. We are to bring the sinner to a point of understanding his need before God. Psalm 25:8 says, "Good and upright is the LORD: therefore will he teach sinners in the way." Psalm 51:13 adds, "Then will I teach transgressors your ways; and sinners shall be converted to you." The Great Commission is to teach sinners: "teach all nations . . . teaching them to observe all things" (Matthew 28:19,20). The disciples obeyed the command "daily in the temple, and in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ" (Acts 5:42, emphasis added). The "good-soil" hearer is he who "hears ...and understands" (Matthew 13:23).

Philip the evangelist saw fit to ask his potential convert, the Ethiopian, "Do you understand what you are reading?" Some preachers are like a loud gun that misses the target. It may sound effective, but if the bullet misses the target, the exercise is in vain. He may be the largest-lunged, chandelier-swinging, pulpit-pounding preacher this side of the Book of Acts. He may have great teaching on faith, and everyone he touches may fall over, but if the sinner leaves the meeting failing to understand his desperate need of God's forgiveness, then the preacher has failed. He has missed the target, which is the understanding of the sinner.

This is why the Law of God must be used in preaching. It is a "schoolmaster" to bring "the knowledge of sin." It teaches and instructs. A sinner will come to "know His will, and approve the things that are more excellent," if he is "instructed out of the Law" (Romans 2:18).

One of the most difficult things to do is draw a crowd to hear the gospel. Today's society has been programmed to want immediate action, and open-air preaching isn't too attractive to guilty sinners. Therefore we have to be as wise as serpents and as gentle as doves. A serpent gets its heart's desire subtly.

Getting Attention

Our desire is for sinners to gather under the sound of the gospel. Here is one way to get attention: Ask people passing by what they think is the greatest killer of drivers in the U.S. This stirs their curiosity. Some begin calling out "Alcohol!" or "Falling asleep at the wheel!" Tell them it's not and repeat the question a few more times, saying that you will give a dollar to the person who gets the answer. Tell them that they will never guess what it is that kills more drivers than anything else in America. A few more shouts emit from the crowd. People are now waiting around for the answer. What is it that kills more drivers than anything else in the United States? What is it that could be the death of you and me? You won't believe this, but it is "trees." Millions of them line our highways, waiting for a driver to kill. When one is struck, the tree stays still, sending the driver into eternity.

Then tell the crowd that you have another question for them. Ask what they think is the most common food on which people choke to death in U.S. restaurants. Over the next few minutes, go through the same scenario. People call out "Steak!" "Chicken bones!" Believe it or not, the answer is "hard-boiled egg yoke."

By now you have a crowd that is enjoying what is going on. Ask them what they think is the most dangerous job in America. Someone calls out "police officer." It's not. Someone else may name another dangerous profession like "firefighter." Say, "Good one ...but wrong." Give a suggestion by saying, "Why doesn't someone say 'electrician'?" Someone takes the suggestion and says, "Electrician!" Say, "Sorry, it's not electrician." The most dangerous job in the United States ...is to be the president. Out of forty or so, four have been murdered while on the job. Then tell the crowd you have another question. "Does anyone in the crowd consider himself to be a "good person"?" By now you will have noted who in the crowd has the self-confidence to speak out. Point to one or two and ask, "Sir, do you consider yourself to be a good person?" The Bible tells us that "every man will proclaim his own goodness" (Proverbs 20:6), and he does. He smiles and says, "Yes, I do consider myself to be a good person." Ask him if he has ever told a lie. Has he stolen, lusted, blasphemed, etc.? That's when all heaven breaks loose. There is conviction of sin. Sinners hear the gospel, and angels rejoice.

More Questions for Drawing Crowds

- Who wrote, "Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country"? (President Kennedy's speechwriter)
- What is the only fish that can blink with both eyes? (A shark)
- Who was John Lennon's first girlfriend? (Thelma Pickles)
- How long does it take the average person to fall asleep: 2 minutes, 7 minutes, or 4 hours? (7 minutes)
- How long is a goldfish's memory span: 3 seconds, 3 minutes, or 3 hours? (3 seconds)
- How many muscles does a cat have in each ear: 2, 32, or 426? (32)

If you have other Christians with you, have them form an audience and look as though they are listening to your preaching. This will encourage others to stop and listen. Tell the Christians to never stand with their back to the preacher. I have seen open-air meetings when a fellow laborer is preaching for the first time, and what are the Christians doing? They are talking among themselves. Why then should anyone stop and listen if those in front of the speaker aren't even attentive? It is so easy to chat with friends when you've heard the gospel a million times before. I have found myself doing it, but it is so disheartening for the preacher to speak to the backs of a crowd. Also, instruct Christians not to argue with hecklers. That will ruin an open-air meeting. I have seen an old lady hit a heckler with her umbrella and turn the crowd from listening to the gospel to watching the fight she has just started. Who can blame them? Remember, the enemy will do everything he can to distract your listeners. Don't let him.

An Elevated Position--"Soapbox" Style

If you are going to preach in the open-air, elevate yourself. For eighteen months, I preached without any elevation and hardly attracted any listeners. As soon as I did it "soapbox" style, people stopped to listen. Their attitude was "What has this guy got to say?" They had an excuse to stop. Also, elevation will give you protection. I was once almost eaten by an angry 6'6" gentleman who kept fuming, "God is love!" We were eye to eye ...while I was elevated.

On another occasion, a very heavy gentleman who had a mean countenance placed it about 6" from mine and whispered, "Jesus said to love your enemies." I nodded in agreement. Then he asked in a deep voice, "Who is your enemy?" I shrugged. His voice deepened and spilled forth in a chilling tone, "Lucifer!" I was standing beside my stepladder at the time so he pushed me backward with his stomach. He kept doing so until I was moved back about 20 feet. I prayed,

"Wisdom, Lord," then said, "You are either going to hit me or hug me." He hugged me and walked off. That wouldn't have happened if I had been elevated.

Elevation will also give you added authority. Often hecklers will walk right up to you and ask questions quietly. This is an attempt to stifle the preaching, and it will work if you are not higher than your heckler. If they come too close to me, I talk over their heads and tell them to go back to the heckler's gallery. They actually obey me because they get the impression I am bigger than they are.

When Ezra preached the Law, he was elevated (Nehemiah 8:4,5). John Wesley used elevation to preach. Jesus preached the greatest sermon ever on a mount (Matthew 5-7), and Paul went up Mars' Hill to preach (Acts 17:22). So if you can't find a hilltop to preach from, use a soapbox or a stepladder.

Are we seeking merely a "decision for Christ"?

As you share the gospel, divorce yourself from the thought that you are merely seeking "decisions for Christ." What we should be seeking is repentance within the heart. This is the purpose of the Law, to bring the knowledge of sin. How can a man repent if he doesn't know what sin is? If there is no repentance, there is no salvation. Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3). God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9).

Many don't understand that the salvation of a soul is not a resolution to change a way of life, but "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." The modern concept of success in evangelism is to relate how many people were "saved" (that is, how many prayed the "sinner's prayer"). This produces a "no decisions, no success" mentality. This shouldn't be, because Christians who seek decisions in evangelism become discouraged after a time of witnessing if "no one came to the Lord." The Bible tells us that as we sow the good seed of the gospel, one sows and another reaps. If you faithfully sow the seed, someone will reap. If you reap, it is because someone has sown in the past, but it is God who causes the seed to grow. If His hand is not on the person you are leading in a prayer of committal, if there is not God-given repentance, then you will end up with a stillbirth on your hands, and that is nothing to rejoice about. We should measure our success by how faithfully we sowed the seed. In that way, we will avoid becoming discouraged. Billy Graham said, "If you have not repented, you will not see the inside of the Kingdom of God."

Angry Reactions from the Crowd

When you're preaching open-air, don't let angry reactions from the crowd concern you. A dentist knows where to work on a patient when he touches a raw nerve. When you touch a raw nerve in the heart of the sinner, it means that you are in business. Anger is a thousand times better than apathy. Anger is a sign of conviction. If I have an argument with my wife and suddenly realize that I am in the wrong, I can come to her in a repentant attitude and apologize, or I can save face by lashing out in anger.

Read Acts 19 and see how Paul was a dentist with an eye for decay. He probed raw nerves wherever he went. At one point, he had to be carried shoulder height by soldiers because of the "violence of the people" (Acts 21:36). Now that is a successful preacher! He didn't seek the praise of men. John Wesley told his evangelist trainees that when they preached, people should either get angry or get converted. No doubt, he wasn't speaking about the "Jesus loves you" gospel, but about sin, Law, righteousness, judgment, and hell.

Foolish Questions

The Bible warns us to avoid foolish questions because they start arguments (2 Timothy 2:23). Most of us have fallen into the trap of jumping at every objection to the gospel. However, these questions can often be arguments in disguise to sidetrack you from the "weightier matters of the Law." While apologetics (arguments for God's existence, creation vs. evolution, etc.) are legitimate in evangelism, they should merely be "bait," with the Law of God being the "hook" that brings the conviction of sin. Those who witness solely in the realm of apologetical argument may just get an intellectual decision rather than a repentant conversion. The sinner may come to a point of acknowledging that the Bible is the Word of God, and Jesus is Lord - but even the devil knows that. Always pull the sinner back to his responsibility before God on Judgment Day, as Jesus did in Luke 13:1-5.

Beware of "Christians"

Whenever you are in an open-air situation, be suspicious of so-called Christians who are intent on distracting workers from witnessing. They argue about prophecy, of how much water one should baptize with, or in whose name they should be baptized. It is grievous to see five or six Christians standing around arguing with some sectarian nitpicker, while sinners are sinking into hell.

There is one passage in Scripture to which I point for all those who want to witness or preach in the open-air. It is 2 Timothy 2:24-26. Memorize it. Scripture tells us that sinners are blind. They cannot see. What would you think if I were to stomp up to a blind man who had just stumbled, and say, "Watch where you're going, blind man!?" Such an attitude is completely unreasonable. The man cannot see. The same applies to the lost - spiritual sight is beyond their ability. Look at the words used in Scripture: "Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God ...The god of this world has blinded the minds of them which believe not ...But the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness to him: neither can he know them ...Having the understanding darkened ...because of the blindness of their heart ...Ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth." With these thoughts in mind, read 2 Timothy 2:24-26 again and look at the adjectives used by Paul to describe the attitude we are to have with sinners: "must not strive ...be gentle ...patient ...in meekness." Just as it is unreasonable to be impatient with a blind man, so it is with the sinner.