

# OPEN-AIR PREACHING

A SKETCH OF ITS HISTORY AND REMARKS THEREON



By Charles H. Spurgeon

THERE ARE some customs for which nothing can be pleaded, except that they are very old. In such cases antiquity is of no more value than the rust upon a counterfeit coin. It is, however, a happy circumstance when the usage of ages can be pleaded for a really good and Scriptural practice, for it invests it with a halo of reverence. Now, it can be argued, with small fear of refutation, that open-air preaching is as old as preaching itself. We are at full liberty to believe that Enoch, the seventh from Adam, when he prophesied, asked for no better pulpit than the hillside, and that Noah, as a preacher of righteousness, was willing to reason with his contemporaries in the shipyard wherein his marvelous ark was builded.

Certainly, Moses and Joshua found their most convenient place for addressing vast assemblies beneath the unpillared arch of heaven. Samuel closed a sermon in the field of Gilgal amid thunder and rain, by which the Lord rebuked the people and drove them to their knees. Elijah stood on Carmel, and challenged the vacillating nation with "How long halt ye between two opinions?"

Jonah, whose spirit was somewhat similar, lifted up his cry of warning in the streets of Nineveh, and in all her places of concourse gave forth the warning utterance, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" To hear Ezra and Nehemiah "all the people gathered themselves to "ether as one man into the street that was before the water gate." Indeed, we find examples of open-air preaching everywhere around us in the records of the Old Testament.

It may suffice us, however, to go back as far as the origin of our own holy faith, and there we hear the forerunner of the Saviour crying in the wilderness and lifting up his voice from the river's bank. Our Lord Himself, who is yet more our pattern, delivered the larger portion of His sermons on the mountain's side, or by the seashore, or in the streets. Our Lord was to all intents and purposes an open-air preacher. He did not remain silent in the synagogue, but He was equally at home in the field. We have no discourse of His on record delivered in the chapel royal, but we have the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon in the Plain; so that the very earliest and most divine kind of preaching was practiced out-of-doors by Him who spake as never man spake.

There were gatherings of His disciples after His decease, within walls, especially that in the upper room; but the preaching was even then most frequently in the court of the Temple, or in such other open spaces as were available. The notion of holy places and consecrated meetinghouses had not occurred to them as Christians; they preached in the Temple, or in such other open spaces as were available. but with equal earnestness "in every house, they ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ."

It would be very easy to prove that revivals of religion have usually been accompanied, if not caused, by a considerable amount of preaching out-of-doors, or in unusual places. The first avowed preaching of Protestant doctrine was almost necessarily in the open air, or in buildings which were not dedicated to worship, for these were in the hands of the papacy. True, Wycliffe for a while preached the

Gospel in the church at Lutterworth; Huss and Jerome and Savonarola for a time delivered semi-Gospel addresses in connection with the ecclesiastical arrangements around them; but when they began more fully to know and proclaim the Gospel, they were driven to find other platforms.

The Reformation when yet a babe was like the new-born Christ, and had not where to lay its head, but a company of men comparable to the heavenly host proclaimed it under the open heavens, where shepherds and common people heard them gladly. Throughout England we have several trees remaining called "gospel oaks." There is one spot on the other side of the Thames known by the name of "Gospel Oak," and I have myself preached at Addlestone, in Surrey, under the far-spreading boughs of an ancient oak, beneath which John Knox is said to have proclaimed the Gospel during his sojourn in England. Full many a wild moor and lone hillside and secret spot in the forest have been consecrated in the same fashion, and traditions still linger over caves and dells and hilltops where of old time the bands of the faithful met to hear the Word of the Lord.

It would be an interesting task to prepare a volume of notable facts connected with open-air preaching, or, better still, a consecutive history of it. I have no time for even a complete outline, but would simply ask you, where would the Reformation have been if its great preachers had confined themselves to churches and cathedrals? How would the common people have become indoctrinated with the Gospel had it not been for those far-wandering evangelists, the colporteurs, and those daring innovators who found a pulpit on every heap of stones, and an audience chamber in every open space near the abodes of men?

All through the Puritan times there were gatherings in all sorts of out-of-the-way places, for fear of persecutors. "We took," says Archbishop Laud, in a letter dated Fulham, June, 1632, "another conventicle of separatists in Newington Woods, in the very brake where the king's stag was to be lodged, for his hunting next morning." A hollow or gravel-pit on Hounslow Heath sometimes served as a conventicle, and there is a dell near Hitchin where John Bunyan was wont to preach in perilous times. All over Scotland the straths and dells and vales and hillsides are full of covenanting memories to this day. You will not fail to meet with rock pulpits whence the stern fathers of the Presbyterian church thundered forth their denunciations of Erastianism, and pleaded the claims of the King of kings. Cargill and Cameron and their fellows found congenial scenes for their brave ministries amid the mountains' lone rents and ravines.

What the world would have been if there had not been preaching outside of walls, and beneath a more glorious roof than these rafters of fir, I am sure I cannot guess. It was a brave day for England when Whitefield began field-preaching. When Wesley stood and preached a sermon on his father's grave, at Epworth, because the parish priest would not allow him admission within the (so-called) sacred edifice, Mr. Wesley writes: "I am well assured that I did far more good to my Lincolnshire parishioners by preaching three days on my father's tomb than I did by preaching three years in his pulpit."

Wesley writes in his journal, "Saturday, 31 March, 1731. In the evening I reached Bristol, and met Mr. Whitefield there. I could scarce reconcile myself at first to this strange way of preaching in the fields, of which he set me an example on Sunday; having been all my life (till very lately) so tenacious of every point relating to decency and order, that I should have thought the saving of souls almost a sin, if it

had not been done in a church." Such were the feelings of a man who in after life became one of the greatest open-air preachers that ever lived!

Once recommenced, the fruitful agency of field-preaching was not allowed to cease. Amid jeering crowds and showers of rotten eggs and filth, the immediate followers of the two great Methodists continued to storm village after village and town after town. Very varied were their adventures, but their success was generally great. One smiles often when reading incidents in their labors. A string of pack horses is so driven as to break up a congregation, and a fire engine is brought out and played over the throng to achieve the same purpose. Hand-bells, old kettles, marrowbones and cleavers, trumpets, drums, and entire bands of music were engaged to drown the preachers' voices.

In one case the parish bull was let loose, and in others dogs were set to fight. The preachers needed to have faces set like flints, and so indeed they had. John Furz says: "As soon as I began to preach, a man came straight forward, and presented a gun at my face; swearing that he would blow my brains out, if I spake another word. However, I continued speaking, and he continued swearing, sometimes putting the muzzle of the gun to my mouth, sometimes against my ear. While we were singing the last hymn, he got behind me, fired the gun, and burned off part of my hair.

After this, my brethren, we ought never to speak of petty interruptions or annoyances. The proximity of a blunderbuss in the hands of a son of Belial is not very conducive to collected thought and clear utterance, but the experience of Furz was probably no worse than that of John Nelson, who coolly says, "But when I was in the middle of my discourse, one at the outside of the congregation threw a stone, which cut me on the head: however that made the people give greater attention, especially when they saw the blood run down my face; so that all was quiet till I had done, and was singing a hymn."

I have no time further to illustrate my subject by descriptions of the work of Christmas Evans and others in Wales, or of the Haldanes in Scotland, or even of Rowland Hill and his brethren in England. If you wish to pursue the subject these names may serve as hints for discovering abundant material; and I may add to the list *The Life of Dr. Guthrie*, in which he records notable open-air assemblies at the time of the Disruption, when as yet the Free Church had no places of worship built with human hands.

I must linger a moment over Robert Flockhart of Edinburgh, who, though a lesser light, was a constant one, and a fit example to the bulk of Christ's street witnesses. Every evening, in all weathers and amid many persecutions, did this brave man continue to speak in the street for forty-three years. Think of that, and never be discouraged. When he was tottering to the grave the old soldier was still at his post. "Compassion to the souls of men drove me," said he, "to the streets and lanes of my native city, to plead with sinners and persuade them to come to Jesus. The love of Christ constrained me."

Neither the hostility of the police, nor the insults of papists, Unitarians, and the like could move him; he rebuked error in the plainest terms, and preached salvation by grace with all his might. So lately has he passed away that Edinburgh remembers him still. There is room for such in all our cities and towns, and need for hundreds of his noble order in this huge nation of London-can I call it less?

No sort of defense is needed for preaching out-of-doors; but it would need very potent arguments to prove that a man had done his duty who has never preached beyond the walls of his meetinghouse. A defense is required rather for services within buildings than for worship outside of them. Apologies are certainly wanted for architects who pile up brick and stone into the skies when there is so much need for preaching rooms among poor sinners down below. Defense is greatly needed for forests of stone pillars, which prevent the preacher from being seen and his voice from being heard; for high-pitched Gothic roofs in which all sound is lost, and men are killed by being compelled to shout till they burst their blood-vessels; and also for the willful creation of echoes by exposing hard, sound-refracting surfaces to satisfy the demands of art, to the total overlooking of the comfort of both audience and speaker.

Surely also some decent excuse is badly wanted for those childish people who must needs waste money in placing hobgoblins and monsters on the outside of their preaching houses, and must have other ridiculous pieces of popery stuck up both inside and outside, to deface rather than to adorn their churches and chapels: but no defense whatever is wanted for using the Heavenly Father's vast audience chamber, which is in every way so well fitted for the proclamation of a Gospel so free, so full, so expansive, so sublime.

The great benefit of open-air preaching is that we get so many newcomers to hear the Gospel who otherwise would never hear it. The Gospel command is, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature," but it is so little obeyed that one would imagine that it ran thus, "Go into your own place of worship and preach the Gospel to the few creatures who will come inside." "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in"- albeit it constitutes part of a parable, is worthy to be taken very literally, and in so doing its meaning will be best carried out.

We ought actually to go into the streets and lanes and highways, for there are lurkers in the hedges, tramps on the highways, street-walkers and lane-haunters, whom we shall never reach unless we pursue them into their own domains. Sportsmen must not stop at home and wait for the birds to come and be shot at, neither must fishermen throw their nets inside their boats and hope to take many fish. Traders go to the markets; they follow their customers and go out after business if it will not come to them; and so must we. Some of our brethren are prozing on and on to empty pews and musty hassocks, while they might be conferring lasting benefit upon hundreds by quitting the old walls for a while, and seeking living stones for Jesus.

I am quite sure, too, that if we could persuade our friends in the country to come out a good many times in the year and hold a service in a meadow, or in a shady grove, or on the hillside, or in a garden, or on a common, it would be all the better for the usual hearers. The mere novelty of the place would freshen their interest, and wake them up. The slight change of scene would have a wonderful effect upon the more somnolent. See how mechanically they move into their usual place of worship, and how mechanically they go out again. They fall into their seats as if at last they had found a resting place; they rise to sing with an amazing effort, and they drop down before you have time for the doxology at the close of the hymn because they did not notice it was coming.

What logs some regular hearers are! Many of them are asleep with their eyes open. After sitting a certain number of years in the same old spot, where the pews, pulpit,

galleries, and all things else are always the same, except that they get a little dirtier and dingier every week, where everybody occupies the same position forever and forevermore, and the minister's face, voice, tone are much the same from January to December -you get to feel the holy quiet of the scene and listen to what is going on as though it were addressed to "the dull cold ear of Death."

As a miller hears his wheels as though he did not hear them, or a stoker scarcely notices the clatter of his engine after enduring it for a little time, or as a dweller in London never notices the ceaseless grind of the traffic; so do many members of our congregations become insensible to the most earnest addresses, and accept them as a matter of course. The preaching and the rest of it get to be so usual that they might as well not be at all. Hence a change of place might be useful; it might prevent monotony, shake up indifference, suggest thought, and in a thousand ways promote attention and give new hope of doing good. A great fire which should burn some of our chapels to the ground might not be the greatest calamity which has ever occurred, if it only aroused some of those rivals of the seven sleepers of Ephesus who will never be moved so long as the old house and the old pews hold together.

Besides, the fresh air and plenty of it is a grand thing for every mortal man, woman and child. I preached in Scotland twice on a Sabbath day at Blairmore, on a little height by the side of the sea, and after discoursing with all my might to large congregations, to be counted by thousands, I did not feel one half so much exhausted as I often am when addressing a few hundreds in some horrible black hole of Calcutta, called a chapel. I trace my freshness and freedom from lassitude at Blairmore to the fact that the windows could not be shut down by persons afraid of drafts, and that the roof was as high as the heavens are above the earth. My conviction is that a man could preach three or four times on a Sabbath out-of-doors with less fatigue than would be occasioned by one discourse delivered in an impure atmosphere, heated and poisoned by human breath, and carefully preserved from every refreshing infusion of natural air.

I once preached a sermon in the open air in haying time during a violent storm of rain. The text was, "He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth," and surely we had the blessing as well as the inconvenience. I was sufficiently wet, and my congregation must have been drenched, but they stood it out, and I never heard that anybody was the worse in health, though, I thank God, I have heard of souls brought to Jesus under that discourse. Once in a while, and under strong excitement, such things do no one any harm, but we are not to expect miracles, nor wantonly venture upon a course of procedure which might kill the sickly and lay the foundations of disease in the strong.

Do not try to preach against the wind, for it is an idle attempt. You may hurl your voice a short distance by an amazing effort, but you cannot be well heard even by the few. I do not often advise you to consider which way the wind blows, but on this occasion I urge you to do it, or you will labor in vain. Preach so that the wind carries your voice toward the people, and does not blow it down your throat, or you will have to eat your own words.

There is no telling how far a man may be heard with the wind. In certain atmospheres and climates, as for instance in that of Palestine, persons might be heard for several miles; and single sentences of well

known speech may in England be recognized a long way off, but I should gravely doubt a man if he asserted that he understood a new sentence beyond the distance of a mile. Whitefield is reported to have been heard a mile, and I have been myself assured that I was heard for that distance, but I am somewhat skeptical. Half a mile is surely enough, even with the wind, but you must make sure of that to be heard at all.

Heroes of the Cross -here is a field for you more glorious than the Cid ever beheld when with his brave right arm he smote the paynim hosts. "Who will bring me into the strong city? who will lead me into Edom?" Who will enable us to win these slums and dens for Jesus ? Who can do it but the Lord? Soldiers of Christ who venture into these regions must expect a revival of the practices of the good old times, so far as brickbats are concerned, and I have known a flowerpot to fall accidentally from an upper window in a remarkably slanting direction. Still, if we are born to be drowned we shall not be killed by flowerpots.

Under such treatment it may be refreshing to read what Christopher Hopper wrote under similar conditions more than a hundred years ago. "I did not much regard a little dirt, a few rotten eggs, the sound of a cow's horn, the noise of bells, or a few snowballs in their season; but sometimes I was saluted with blows, stones, brickbats, and bludgeons. These I did not well like: they were not pleasing to flesh and blood. I sometimes lost a little skin, and once a little blood, which was drawn from my forehead with a sharp stone. I wore a patch for a few days, and was not ashamed; I gloried in the cross. And when my small sufferings abounded for the sake of Christ, my comfort abounded much more. I never was more happy in my own soul, or blessed in my labors."

I am somewhat pleased when I occasionally hear of a brother's being locked up by the police, for it does him good, and it does the people good also. It is a fine sight to see the minister of the Gospel marched off by the servant of the law! It excites sympathy for him, and the next step is sympathy for his message. Many who felt no interest in him before are eager to hear him when he is ordered to leave off, and still more so when he is taken to the station. The vilest of mankind respect a man who gets into trouble in order to do them good, and if they see unfair opposition excited they grow quite zealous in the man's defense.

As to style in preaching out-of-doors, it should certainly be very different from much of that which prevails within, and perhaps if a speaker were to acquire a style fully adapted to a street audience, he would be wise to bring it indoors with him. A great deal of sermonizing may be defined as saying nothing at extreme length; but out-of-doors verbosity is not admired; you must say something and have done with it and go on to say something more, or your hearers will let you know.

"Now then," cries a street critic, "let us have it, old fellow." Or else the observation is made, "Now then, pitch it out! You'd better go home and learn your lesson." "Cut it short, old boy," is a very common admonition, and I wish the presenters of this advice gratis could let it be heard inside Ebenezer and Zoar and some other places sacred to long-winded orations. Where these outspoken criticisms are not employed, the hearers rebuke prosiness by quietly walking away. Very unpleasant this, to find your congregation dispersing, but a very plain intimation that your ideas are also much dispersed.

In the street, a man must keep himself alive, and use many illustrations and anecdotes, and sprinkle a quaint remark here and there. To dwell long on a point will never do. Reasoning must be brief, clear, and soon done with. The discourse must not be labored or involved, neither must the second head depend upon the first, for the audience is a changing one, and each point must be complete in itself. The chain of thought must be taken to pieces' and each link melted down and turned into bullets: you will need not so much Saladin's saber to cut through a muslin handkerchief as Coeur de Lion's battle-axe to break a bar of iron. Come to the point at once, and come there with all your might.

Short sentences of words and short passages of thought are needed for out-of-doors. Long paragraphs and long arguments had better be reserved for other occasions. In quiet country crowds there is much force in an eloquent silence, now and then interjected; it gives people time to breathe, and also to reflect. Do not, however, attempt this in a London street; you must go ahead, or someone else may run off with your congregation. In a regular field sermon pauses are very effective, and are useful in several ways, both to speaker and listeners, but to a passing company who are not inclined for anything like worship, quick, short, sharp address is most adapted.

In the streets a man must from beginning to end be intense, and for that very reason he must be condensed and concentrated in his thought and utterance. It would never do to begin by saying, "My text, dear friends, is a passage from the inspired Word, containing doctrines of the utmost importance, and bringing before us in the clearest manner the most valuable practical instruction. I invite your careful attention and the exercise of your most candid judgment while we consider it under various aspects and place it in different lights, in order that we may be able to perceive its position in the analogy of the faith. In its exegesis we shall find an arena for the cultured intellect, and the refined sensibilities. As the purling brook meanders among the meads and fertilizes the pastures, so a stream of sacred truth flows through the remarkable words which now lie before us. It will be well for us to divert the crystal current to the reservoir of our meditation, that we may quaff the cup of wisdom with the lips of satisfaction."

There, gentlemen, is not that rather above the average of word-spinning, and is not the art very generally in vogue in these days? If you go out to the obelisk in Blackfriars Road, and talk in that fashion, you will be saluted with "Go on, old buffer," or "Ain't he fine? My eye!" A very vulgar youth will cry, "What a mouth for a tater!" and another will shout in a tone of mock solemnity, "Amen!" If you give them chaff they will cheerfully return it into your own bosom. Good measure, pressed down and running over will they mete out to you. Shams and shows will have no mercy from a street gathering.

But have something to say, look them in the face, say what you mean, put it plainly, boldly, earnestly, courteously, and they will hear you. Never speak against time or for the sake of hearing your own voice, or you will obtain some information about your personal appearance or manner of oratory which will probably be more true than pleasing. "Crikey," says one, "wouldn't he do for an undertaker! He'd make 'em weep." This was a compliment paid to a melancholy brother whose tone is peculiarly funereal. "There, old fellow," said a critic on another occasion, "you go and wet your whistle. You must feel awfully dry after jawing away at that rate about nothing at all." This also was specially appropriate to a very heavy brother of whom we had aforetime remarked that he would make a good martyr, for there was no doubt of

his burning well, he was so dry.

It will be very desirable to speak so as to be heard, but there is no use in incessant bawling. The best street preaching is not that which is done at the top of your voice, for it must be impossible to lay the proper emphasis upon telling passages when all along you are shouting with all your might. When there are no hearers near you, and yet people stand upon the other side of the road and listen, would it not be well to cross over and so save a little of the strength which is now wasted?

A quiet, penetrating, conversational style would seem to be the most telling. Men do not bawl and halloo when they are pleading in deepest earnestness; they have generally at such times less wind and a little more rain: less rant and a few more tears. On, on, on with one monotonous shout and you will weary everybody and wear out yourself. Be wise now, therefore, O ye who would succeed in declaring your Master's message among the multitude, and use your voices as common sense would dictate.

In a tract published by that excellent society "The Open-Air Mission," I notice the following:

### **QUALIFICATIONS FOR OPEN-AIR PREACHERS**

A good voice.

Naturalness of manner.

Self-possession.

A good knowledge of Scripture and of common things.

Ability to adapt himself to any congregation.

Good illustrative powers.

Zeal, prudence, and common sense.

A large, loving heart.

Sincere belief in all he says.

Entire dependence on the Holy Spirit for success.

A close walk with God by prayer.

A consistent walk before men by a holy life.