

A Defense of Open-Air Preaching

By now most of the church family knows that Pastor Jon has finally lost it; last Saturday (May 22, 2004) a group of ten people from our church (two were actually from First Baptist in Holley) went to the Lilac Festival in Rochester and did open air preaching. Has Pastor Jon finally gone off of his rocker? What would make a pastor in a comfortable church do something as "unseemly" as making a public spectacle of himself and the people who went with him?

It has nothing to do with making a spectacle of ourselves or of our church. It has everything to do with literally preaching the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, can what we do on Sunday morning be rightly called "preaching" at all? Should it be? Should we even try to "preach" on Sunday morning? The word "preach" means public proclamation of the message of salvation. What we do on Sunday should be "teaching" the saints to live godly lives. What we have in contemporary evangelical Christianity are thousands of weekly evangelistic services within church buildings where less than 2% of believers invite unsaved friends and family to hear a paid professional try to elicit some sort of decision for Christ. To say that this kind of evangelism is woefully inadequate is a gross understatement.

We could call this method of evangelism "in-dragging", as opposed to Biblical "out-reach." It is something similar to a fisherman fishing INSIDE of his boat rather than casting the net outside of it. Only a foolish fisherman would try to catch fish inside of his boat! What kind of foolish churchianity have we created which accepts as normal this kind of evangelism? It certainly is not Biblical; try to find this model in the Book of Acts or anywhere else in the New Testament, if you can.

Is it any wonder that most regularly attending church goers are Biblically and doctrinally illiterate? How could it be any different? Most Sunday morning sermons are geared to reach the three or four unbelievers who were invited to the church service or the 50% of the congregation or more who are false converts. As a result, the soundly saved saints continue in a state of spiritual starvation, unless they happen to go to a church which has a Biblically sound Sunday School program, evening service, or discipleship group and *they actually attend these things* (a breed of Christian even rarer than the churches which still offer these things).

How is it that contemporary pastors have abandoned their evangelistic zeal? A traveling missionary evangelist once told this writer that in more than a decade of service he only had a pastor go with him to seek and save the lost outside of the church building once. Once! Another fellow pastor once cautioned this writer against doing open air preaching because it might inconvenience law enforcement. If it inconveniences law enforcement to enforce the law regarding freedom of speech...does this sentence even need to be completed?

There was a time when a pastor who did not do open air preaching was not considered worthy of the title. We talk so much about revival and it is nothing but talk because we do not imitate the Biblical methodology of those who were used of God to bring revival. Consider for a moment the people that God used in the most powerful ways: John Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, D.L. Moody, General William Booth, R.A. Torrey. These men all preached open air!

I close this essay with a lengthy quote from the prince of preachers, Charles Spurgeon. The quote comes from the book, "Lectures To My Students". In this volume, Spurgeon spent two chapters on the topic of open air preaching. This writer's prayer is that these words will penetrate your heart and break it to reach the 150,000 people who die every day, the vast majority of which are going to Hell.

"I fear that in some of our less enlightened country churches there are conservative individuals who almost believe that to preach anywhere except in the chapel would be a shocking innovation, a sure token of heretical tendencies, and a mark of zeal without knowledge. Any young brother who studies his comfort among them must not suggest something so irregular as a sermon outside the walls of their Zion. In the olden times we are told 'Wisdom crieth without, she uttereth her voice in the streets, she crieth in the chief places of concourse, in the opening of the gates'; but the wise men of orthodoxy would have wisdom gagged except beneath the roof of a licensed building. These people believe in a New Testament which says, 'Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in' and yet they dislike a literal obedience to the command. Do they imagine that a special blessing results from sitting upon a particular deal board with a piece of straight-up paneling at their back (pew)—an invention of discomfort which ought long ago to have made people prefer to worship outside on the green grass? Do they suppose that grace rebounds from sounding boards, or can be beaten out of pulpit cushions in the same fashion as dust? Are they enamored of the bad air, and the stifling stuffiness which in some of our meeting houses make them almost as loathsome to the nose and the lungs as the mass-houses of the Papists (Catholics) with their cheap and nasty incense? To reply to these objectors is a task for which we have no heart: we prefer foeman worthy of the steel we use upon them, but these are scarcely worth a passing remark. One smiles at their prejudice, but we may yet have to weep over it, if it be allowed to stand in the way of usefulness.

"No sort of defence 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 meeting-house. A defence is required rather for services within buildings than for worship outside of them."

Many of us fundamental evangelicals claim spiritual lineage to Spurgeon and others who were cut from the same cloth. If the cliché is true that the apple does not fall far from the tree, how is it that we find ourselves in another orchard altogether?

Brothers and sisters, do not fear open air preaching. It is our spiritual birthright, traced back much further than Spurgeon, but going back as far as John the Baptist, Jesus Christ, Peter, and Paul. May God have mercy on us for trading this glorious birthright for a bowl of Campbell's soup. Appealing to our flesh though it may be, it cannot compare to the riches of the inheritance of a purely Biblical methodology.