

Street Preaching

By H.A. Ironside

Introductory Note

It is only at the request of the editor that I venture to put these papers before my younger or less experienced brethren; for I realize that it is always a difficult thing to instruct others in a matter of this kind. Street preaching, like all other means of proclaiming the Gospel, is a service to the Lord alone and none but He can equip His servants for the particular lines of ministry committed to them.

Nevertheless, I suppose it is, or should be, true, that one who has devoted much time during a period of a little over twenty years, to street preaching, ought, if at all observant, to be able to assist a little by hints and suggestions, those just beginning to take up this line of work.

So it is with this alone in view that I comply with the editor's desire at this time. Others might do it much better, and many will be able to add greatly to what I shall have to put before young- preachers; but such as it is I ask them to weigh it well, and to act only upon what commends itself to their spiritual judgment.

What to Preach

Unquestionably the first great requisite for one who goes before the public in any capacity is to be certain that he has a message to deliver, then to set it forth in the manner best calculated to grip his hearers' attention and arouse them to action.

This is true of all public speaking, whether on purely secular themes, or in presenting God's message to a needy world. No man has a right to appear before an audience in an unfit condition, with his subject half digested in his own mind and then to set it forth in a rambling, disconnected, sloppy manner. (I make no apology for the last adjective. It is distinctly descriptive of much preaching to-day.)

Demosthenes, the Greek orator, when asked for the first principle of oratory replied (not "Action!"—as he is generally credited with doing), but by using a word meaning it properly rendered, "to so speak as to carry that conviction which arouses to action." And this he declared to be the second and the third principles also. Now in order to do this successfully in preaching one must be certain of his own conversion. His life must be characterized by true piety and that single-hearted devotedness of Christ's interests, which commends the preacher as a man of God. I do not mean by this a mere veneer of sanctimoniousness, which is abominable hypocrisy, but vital godliness and holiness of life.

But all this may be true and yet a man may not be able to preach. To do so he must have gift as well as grace—and even the possession of gift will not suffice if he be not clear as to his message. Therefore the need of careful attention as to what to preach.

Many would reply at once, "Why, the Gospel, of course!" But this is not all. He must know how to present the particular phases of that Gospel in such a way as to reach the special class before him. Now the crowds congregating upon the streets of our great cities are generally a careless, untaught and often positively wicked class. Therefore it is of all importance that the preacher first of all sound a trumpet call to REPENTANCE. Do not waste time in the beginning of your address telling godless, vicious men that salvation is without works, that the churches are dead or dying, that Romanism is corrupt and Protestantism is in a state of confusion. Do not get out upon the street to argue

Street Preaching

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down some theologian who is not there, on some such point as baptismal regeneration, or sacramental salvation. Do not press too hurriedly the fact that salvation is free to all who believe. Insist first of all upon the apostolic theme that: "God commandeth all men everywhere to repent." Press upon your hearers the heinousness of sin—challenge the vileness, the filthiness, the unmanliness of their gross living—yet do it in a tender, earnest, loving way in the spirit of Him who wept over guilty Jerusalem. For a ranting, Pharisaic, denunciatory style of preaching will soon turn your hearers away in disgust. You may attribute their lack of attention to you and your message, to your "faithfulness"; but it is more than likely that your lack of tact and of the compassions of Christ were the real reasons for scattering the crowd.

In seeking to impress their guilt and need upon the people do not be afraid to illustrate. Spurgeon well said, "The sermon is the house; the illustrations are the windows that let the light in." Bear this in mind, and be careful to avoid a dry, theological, dogmatic style. But I shall have more to say on this when I write on *How to preach*.

When you see some evidence of an impression made on your hearers, then put before them in all its grand simplicity God's way of salvation through faith alone in Christ Jesus. But be careful to make it clear that faith is not a mere mental assent to the truth, but is the committing of oneself to the Savior of sinners without reservation of any kind. Make this plain. It is often the crucial point in preaching.

Therefore again remember the necessity of illustration. Do not attempt to be wiser than our blessed Lord Himself, who drew His illustrations from the whole realm of nature and from every walk in life. Follow the example of the great apostle to the Gentiles, who hesitated not to find similes in military, marine, and judicial circles; who pressed history and customs of strange people into service and who above all found in the entire Old Testament a veritable treasure house of apt illustrations.

Street crowds are often listless and idle— therefore the need of a specially interesting presentation of the glorious Gospel of the blessed God.

Having presented Christ in all His fullness as the propitiation and the Savior for all who trust Him, do not leave your hearers to go on their way till you have feelingly reminded them of the eternal consequences dependent on their acceptation or rejection of your message. But right here you need great care. The theme of eternal judgment is supremely awful. Do not proclaim it unless your own soul is awed by it. Beware, above all things, of a light, flippant handling of this fearful side of God's truth. On the other hand, watch against harsh, bitter invective, when dealing with so dreadful a subject. Do not be afraid of a tear, but shun a frown (your own, I mean). or a stern, angry tone at such a time; for those who listen will be quick to note it, if you take the place of judge and if you forget the unspeakable sorrowfulness of the doom of the wicked and unrepentant. On this also, illustrate, in the tender, solemn manner of the Lord Jesus whose stories of the rich fool and of Dives and Lazarus, must have gone home to His listeners' hearts in awful power. But here a word of caution. Do not attempt to pronounce on the eternal destiny of persons who apparently died unrepentant. Relate the known facts and leave the soul with God. You cannot know what may have passed between the vilest sinner and his God when apparently unconscious to all around.

Street Preaching

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How to Preach

Nothing perhaps is more difficult than for one preacher to attempt to tell others—be they ever so much less experienced—how to set forth the message of the Gospel in the manner best calculated to reach needy men and women.

But the Holy Spirit has Himself given us more than a hint on this very subject. To Scripture therefore let us at once turn—and if afterwards a few thoughts gathered from an actual seeking to carry out what is written, be offered, let them be received but as the suggestions of one who knows only too well how poorly he himself succeeds in putting them into practice. "And I, brethren, when I came to you," wrote the apostle to the Corinthian assembly, "came not with excellency of speech, or of wisdom, declaring unto you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling". And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man's wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power; that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God" (1 Cor. 2:1-5). Never was there a more ardent or experienced street preacher than the inspired man who penned these words. From them we gather at least five things that were characteristic of this and should characterize our proclamation of the Gospel.

First.—The street preacher (like every other preacher) must speak in the energy of the Holy Spirit. He must get his message from God and declare it as God's ambassador. This implies godliness of life. It also suggests careful preparation in the presence of God before going into the presence of men.

Some preachers would not think of getting up in a hall or chapel without being sure they had a distinct message to deliver; yet the very same men will stand out before perhaps a much larger audience on the street utterly without preparation and reel off the first thing that comes into their minds. It is "only the street," and what does it matter? Yet in that street crowd are hungry, needy souls who have asked bread for years only to receive stones and who, therefore, seldom or ever now enter the places set apart for public ministry of the Word. They need the best you have to give. Get it from God in secret and give it to them in the energy of the Spirit.

Second.—The street-preacher needs to be marked by deep earnestness. The five verses quoted must impress this on every serious reader. Men will overlook lack of brilliancy, they will forgive errors of grammar, but they will have nothing but feelings of contempt for a man who handles eternal verities in a listless, indifferent manner. To make others feel, you must yourself feel. Do not think this is fleshly energy, it is that serious earnestness that becomes all who handle such weighty themes.

Third.—Do not seek to astonish men by a vain display of ability. Neither "excellency of speech nor of wisdom" will quicken dead souls. Do not stoop to the tricks of the rhetorician or the pedantry of the elocutionist. Be yourself. Speak as you would speak of any other serious matter in your own way and style. Do not be afraid to learn from others, but avoid mere mimicry. God gave you your own particular individuality. Use it for Him, and in His fear.

Fourth.—Preach with a single eye to Christ's glory. With the Crucified before your soul, declare the Gospel as you would if He, Himself, were actually standing by you in His

Street Preaching

By H.A. Ironside

physical presence. You preach to men, but you beseech for Christ, "in Christ's stead." Do not stoop to buffoonery or anything of which He would not approve.

And now I reach the fifth point and a most important one it is: Be simple. Paul writes: "We speak wisdom among them that are perfect" (v. 6). Remember that your street hearers are very far indeed from having reached that stage. They are, generally speaking, poor, lost sinners, ignorant of Scripture, ignorant often even of human learning, and knowing not the power of God.

Speak to them out of a full heart, in such a manner, that they will be able to follow you without going home to consult the dictionary or the concordance. They will consult neither. If you fail to make yourself clear, they will go on their way making no further effort to fathom your deep and marvelous things.

"I would rather," wrote the apostle, "speak five words with my understanding, that by my voice I might teach others also, than ten thousand words in an unknown tongue," and this "in the church!" On the street be sure that you not only understand your own words, but that they are of such a character that the most ignorant listener will understand them, too.

Now let me describe a street meeting held a few years ago that has indelibly impressed itself on my memory. A crowd of well on to three hundred had gathered to hear the singing. They were, many of them, of the very riff-raff of humanity. The first preacher caught their attention at once by beginning to tell of a man who had been as far from God as any among them. He described his fallen condition, his efforts to rise, his repeated falls. They listened breathlessly till he reached the climax and joyfully showed how he found at last the deliverance he sought in the Lord Jesus Christ. Then there was a telling Gospel appeal, closing with a solemn warning word, with plenty of Scripture sandwiched in.

The second speaker followed most aptly by giving an account (Paul-like) of God's dealings with himself, exalting the grace that saves and earnestly beseeching the lost to trust the Savior he had proven to be so true a Friend. When the crowd grew restless, he drew their attention again by a telling illustration and once more pressed home his first point: Jesus the Friend of sinners.

Then the third and last preacher took the stand and like snow before the sun, the crowd melted away in less than five minutes. He began with an attack on the Church of Rome, then shifted to a general arraignment of all Protestantism. As the people moved off, he tried to draw them back by contrasting the meeting with the efforts of the Salvation Army, especially dwelling on the fact that no collection was to be taken. But it was in vain. The crowd grew less every minute. Then he settled down to a theological disquisition on the relative merits of faith and works, this while orthodox, was to say the least, dry and prosy. About a corporal's guard remained (most of them drunk), and stared stupidly at the preacher, wondering what it was all about, while he rambled on and on.

If this article shall help any young preacher to follow the examples of the first two, and to refrain from the folly of the last one, it will have accomplished its object.

Ere closing I add a word as to illustrations. The Lord Jesus used the commonplace in

Street Preaching

By H.A. Ironside

preference to the unusual. He referred to those things with which His bearers had to do. Let us seek to learn of Him in this, as in all else. The most telling illustrations are those that picture life, and things with which your hearers are familiar. Therefore the need of becoming all things to all men, if by 3113' means you may serve some.

But right here, a word of caution. Be sure you are familiar with the subjects of which you speak. Nothing is more ridiculous to a sailor than to hear a lands-man describing sea-life in language that displays utter ignorance of his subject. Don't talk of mechanics, if ignorant of the use of tools. Don't relate instances having to do with mining, with military or political life, with business or social usages that will only make manifest how utterly you misunderstand the whole subject. I shall never forget the laugh that broke up the meeting one night when an earnest but misguided young preacher was describing an engineer trying; to make a heavy grade who "ran back to a work car and got the sand-box to sprinkle the rails with!" His hearers were railroad men, and they put him out of court at once, as an ignoramus, taking a place for which he was unfit. In this as in some other things the rule applies, "Be sure you're right, then go ahead!"

But remember that even the best preaching becomes wearisome if continued interminably. Learn to be brief. Have your leading thoughts plainly before you. Make them distinctly, clinch them firmly. Then give way to some one else. Two things will kill any street meeting; long, rambling discourses, and continual repetition. Some preachers are forever saying, "As I said before." Say it once, say it plainly, and then go on and say something else, but stop when you get through. Above all things don't tell people "Just one more point and I'll close," and then go on indefinitely. This is untruthfulness.

And now, having sought as earnestly and clearly as you know how to present the Gospel, which is the power of God unto salvation, seek the solitude of your closet, and pray that the seed sown may bear fruit to Christ's glory and the blessing of the lost. Don't make yourself miserable by analyzing your effort, but leave it, where faith leaves every care and sorrow, at His feet, once pierced for our sins.

Suggestions as to Methods

"I am made all things to all men," wrote the apostle, "if by any means I may save some." And he expounds his text by explaining how, to the Jew, he became as a Jew, and to the men of the nations as one of themselves, that he might avoid prejudicing his cause, and might gain their ears as he proclaimed, in a manner suited to each, the one great theme of Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

The street preacher needs to bear this ever in mind—thus to avoid, as far as possible in him is, a stereotyped, "brethrenistic" (pardon the word) method of presenting the Gospel. Some are naturally apt in adapting themselves to all kinds and conditions of men—others must make it their study.

The preacher is likened by the Lord Himself to a fisherman, angling for the souls of men. Let him copy the wisdom of the angler, and not use the same hook for every kind, nor bait every hook with the same material.

To illustrate: A well-known servant of the Lord, who has been much used of God in two continents, once found himself in the midst of a rough crowd of Irish Catholics. Mounting a dry-goods box (and in street preaching much strength is saved if something is utilized

Street Preaching

By H.A. Ironside

to place the speaker above his hearers) he began, "Men, I want to speak to you to-day about the religion of the blessed Virgin Mary!" In a moment all were attentive and respectful, too. The little word "blessed" had as much to do with it, as the apt theme. (If any hesitate as to its use, consult Luke 1:42 and 48.)

On another occasion he was surrounded by godless Socialists, all more or less infidel. He announced for his topic, "The Friend of the Laboring Man," and soon had close attention as he pointed out how the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ brought temporal cheer to homes long cursed by drink, poverty, and kindred evils. Had he, in either instance cited, begun by denouncing the views, religious or economic, of his auditors, he would have been left to preach to the air—if not actually handled roughly.

Suitable singing is a great help in drawing a company together upon the street, as well as an excellent means of sounding out the Gospel. Rousing sacred songs with clear, ringing choruses are generally best. The frequent repetition of one or two lines cause the words to be remembered, and often to find an almost irritating lodgment in the mind, that at last reaches the heart and conscience. The simpler the matter the better, in street singing. Don't select hymns that you like—but try to think of the effect upon the listeners—or those who do not even care to listen. An orderly, quiet crowd will of course, get the words of any hymn sung—but the average restless street audience must be reached by the oft-repeated chorus, or the frequent refrain. "A shelter in the time of storm," or "Christ receiveth sinful men," are typical sacred songs for this purpose.

On the other hand, an old, well-known hymn, which many have been familiarized with in childhood, and around which cluster tender memories, will often prove an arrow from the Lord's quiver. "It was 'Rock of Ages,' that smashed me," said a young man, to the writer, years ago. "My mother sang it as she was dying. I've tried to forget her counsel, but that hymn has brought it all back to-night. Tell me how I may be saved, and know it!"

Don't be over particular about every word being theologically correct 'either, if the general tenor of a hymn is sound. Some would hardly sing Wesley's grand old prayer-song, "Jesus, Lover of my soul," because not wholly in accord with their conception of truth, still this hymn has broken more proud hearts, than half the exact expressions in verse to be found in our hymn-books. Try to put yourself in the room of your hearers and express their needs for them.

Where possible to arrange it, there is nothing finer for the street than a male quartette. Godly brethren, with harmonious voices, singing together for the love of souls and with God's glory in view, can do almost as much by well-selected Gospel songs as the speaker—or at any rate they prepare the way for an effective presentation of the truth. Few who participated in the street meetings held on "Barbary Coast," San Francisco, for years, with a quartette of this kind to do the singing, will forget the solemn impressions made and the eager way in which the great crowds drank in every word. Nor has the writer ever found it easier to preach than when following up this consecrated singing. I am persuaded that there are many gatherings where a quartette of this kind might be formed and where coupled with much prayer, and devotion to Christ, rich blessing would result.

Should women stand upon the streets with the brethren to help in singing, where there is nothing of the special character above suggested? In my judgment, emphatically, YES!

Street Preaching

By H.A. Ironside

Modest, godly women give a tone to street-work that is often conspicuously lacking. Their sweet, clear voices, attract the ear, and their presence puts the seal of respectability on many a meeting that might otherwise be despised and completely misunderstood. Besides our sisters are thus afforded an opportunity of showing whose side they are on, that is invaluable. A lack of sobriety on their part would, in so conspicuous a position, do incalculable harm; but a quiet grace and an earnest demeanor will commend the Gospel.

Another hint as to singing ere I close this part of the subject. Where possible have the words used learned off by heart. There is a spontaneousness and freshness coupled with singing like this, that is lost when all eyes are looking on a book. Sing from the heart, clearly and distinctly, looking the people full in the face and you will carry weight not otherwise manifested.

The last hint I shall crave apace to write a little upon, is the propriety of constantly keeping the meeting "moving." Nothing so tends to make a crowd restless as long waits between addresses, or between singing and speaking. The moment a hymn is concluded a brother should be ready to speak, or vice versa. Awkward pauses, with brethren looking at one another, or whispering together, are sure to start the people to dispersing. You must either move or they will. Don't talk about "waiting on the Lord " at such a time. It is absurd to go before a company of people so utterly unprepared that you have to wait for your message after the meeting has begun. Wait on the Lord in your closet—or together in the meeting-room ere going out. But go before an audience as "the Lord's messenger in the Lord's message," and deliver the latter promptly, and earnestly, but be sure to stop when you get through. Interminable harangues are a great mistake. So are interminable papers on street preaching. So, having penned what was on my heart, I here conclude, putting all before my younger brethren for their prayerful consideration.

H. A. Ironside.

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