



### Jonah 3 Tracting and Open-Air Preaching

Regardless of the unconstitutionality of the decision to ban church information booths from this year's Fayetteville Dogwood Festival, the recent controversy showed that there are many today, even amongst professing Christians, who believe that preaching and distributing tracts in public is somehow unchristian, and that doing so is the relatively recent innovation of irritating modern fundamentalists. Others maintain that while distributing tracts and public preaching are historic Christian practices, that somehow the messages delivered by evangelists before the modern era were less offensive to the public and always well-received. Neither of these positions reflect the truth however. The fact is that public evangelism has been a part of Christianity since its inception, and that by and large the practice has always generated substantial opposition. In fact, preaching and distributing materials in public has often lead to the imprisonment or the martyrdom of those carrying it out, both in the bible and history. So let us then look a little at the biblical witness to the practice of open air evangelism together with a little of its history amongst the Reformed.

***Jonah 3:1 Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah the second time, saying,***

***2 "Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and preach to it the message that I tell you."***

***3 So Jonah arose and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the LORD. Now Nineveh was an exceedingly great city, a three-day journey in extent.***

***4 And Jonah began to enter the city on the first day's walk. Then he cried out and said, "Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!"***

***5 So the people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them.***

***6 Then word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes.***

***7 And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles, saying, Let neither man nor beast, herd nor flock, taste anything; do not let them eat, or drink water.***

***8 But let man and beast be covered with sackcloth, and cry mightily to God; yes, let every one turn from his evil way and from the violence that is in his hands.***

***9 Who can tell if God will turn and relent, and turn away from His fierce anger, so that we may not perish?***

***10 Then God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way; and God relented from the disaster that He had said He would bring upon them, and He did not do it.***

Frequently in the Old Testament, the prophets of God were called upon to go the people and preach his word in public, and often to an audience that did not appreciate the message.

Jonah, for instance, is called upon by God to go the capital of the Assyrian empire, Nineveh and preach that unless they repented, God would destroy them. Jonah was not invited to go to Nineveh, he did not the permission of the king, the Ninevites were not of Yahweh, neither was Jonah called upon to preach in a

synagogue or anything resembling a service of worship. As for the inherent appeal of his message, we read in Jonah 3:2-4 that he walked through the city for three days crying out “***Yet forty days, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!***” And yet it was the agency of this open air preaching that God used to cause the Ninevites to repent and the city was spared on this occasion. Literally, open air preaching saved the city from destruction.

Another famous prophet, Jeremiah also carried God’s warning of doom because of disobedience, this time to Jerusalem. He employed a basic rule of open air preaching, when you are sent by God to bring His message to a people, go to where the people are. The place he chose to bring the message was where he could expect large numbers of people to be gathered - the courts of the temple. It is important to note that this preaching was not by of the daily worship or approved of by the authorities and Passhur the chief priest at the time “***struck Jeremiah the prophet, and put him in the stocks that were in the high gate of Benjamin, which was by the house of the LORD***” (Jer. 20:2)

Jeremiah’s prophetic ministry was heartily disapproved of by the leaders and the majority of Jerusalem’s inhabitants, and he was frequently sanctioned and imprisoned. We do not have space to discuss other prophets like Elijah whose itinerating ministries frequently brought them into conflict with the authorities.

But when we turn from the example of the Old Testament to the new, we find that the the pattern of open air preaching established by the prophets in the Old Testament not only continues, but massively expands. Christ’s ministry in the New Testament is immediately preceded by that of John The Baptist whose entire ministry consisted of open air preaching and baptizing in the wilderness. His message also concerned the leadership and eventually his public preaching against Herod’s marriage to his Brother Phillip’s wife caused his arrest, imprisonment and execution.

Jesus, the Messiah of whom John had preached “***Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!***” came preaching both in the open air, in the synagogues, and like Jeremiah in the courts of the temple. We read in Mark 1:15 that what Christ preached is exactly the same thing He would later commission His disciples to preach in the villages of Galilee: “***The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.***”

Christ preached “standing” and “crying out” (John 7:37 etc.) during the festivals and holy days (and again, this was not approved of by the Jewish leaders, nor part of the official worship) On several occasions the authorities desired to seize Jesus for “illegal” preaching to crowds in the temple courts, but until the time appointed by God for the crucifixion, Christ was never taken.

Additionally, Christ commissioned and approved of the open air evangelism of His followers. At the time of his entry into Jerusalem prior to the Passover, we read “***the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice for all the mighty works they had seen, saying: " 'Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD!' Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!'"***(Luke 19:37)

The Pharisees were offended by what they were saying and called upon Jesus to bid his disciples to be silent, “Teacher, rebuke Your disciples.” they said. Christ’s answer to them was, “***I tell you that if these should keep silent, the stones would immediately cry out.***” It is worth pointing out, here as elsewhere in the Word of God, the fact that those who did not believe that Christ was the Messiah were offended by that message was never considered a valid reason not to preach it in public.

In Matthew 10 we read Jesus sent his Apostles out, not because they had been invited to speak in the synagogues, but to evangelize the inhabitants regardless of whether they wanted to hear. He sent them out preaching 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' We learn later that this message was rejected by the majority of those cities.

Jesus Himself also went and personally evangelized those who had expressed no prior interest in hearing the gospel. For instance, in John chapter 4 we read how he evangelized a non-Jewish woman (a Samaritan) when she came to draw water from the well. By some modern standards, this offensive approach was compounded when after the woman believed she went and evangelized the inhabitants of her city, who had also never formerly expressed a desire to hear the Gospel!

Jesus made it clear in his parables and instructions that it was His intention that His message of repentance and faith should be preached by his disciples in "the streets and lanes of the city" (Luke 14:21) and that this message should be preached not just to Jews but to all the nations. He instructed them that they would be His witnesses, "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." (Acts 1:8)

While some of this preaching and disciple making occurred in houses and synagogues, some of the most famous examples occurred in public, and was addressed to crowds who had gathered for other reasons. The great Pentecost sermon preached by Peter in Acts 2 was not preached in a synagogue or a house, but in the open air and to men who had come from all over the world to Jerusalem to worship at the temple, not listen to Christ's disciples.

This pattern was to continue and frequently the disciples went up to the Temple courts to preach, not because they had been invited to do so, but because they knew they people would be there. In Acts 5 following their arrest for this "illegal" preaching, the Apostles are commanded by the Sanhedrin to stop, but we read they refused, and "daily in the temple, and in every house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."

But it was not merely the twelve disciples who preached in public, we read in Acts chapter 8 that after strong persecution of the Christians broke out in Jerusalem, Christ's followers – ordinary men, women, and children, "who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word." Others specifically ordained to be evangelists like Phillip went into the villages of Samaria and publicly preached Christ to them. Obviously, there were no Jewish Synagogues in Samaria, in order to reach the Samaritans such preaching would necessarily have occurred in places of public gathering such as the market and town square, and did not occur "by invitation".

The greatest of the NT missionaries, Paul, was himself a converted persecutor. Lest we forget, Paul was personally converted by Christ not in the synagogue, but after Christ interrupted his journey to Damascus. We do not read that Paul was upset by this interruption of his business, or even by his being temporarily blinded in the process!

While Paul often preached in the Synagogues of Asia Minor and Europe, and was devoted to planting churches (the biblical pattern is one of open preaching bringing people into the established church) his pattern of preaching was to go where the people were so in Athens we see him preaching "in the marketplace daily with those who happened to be there" (Acts 17:17) as well as at the Aeropagus which was a place for philosophical discourse.

This itinerating ministry of Paul's led to beatings, fights with wild animals, stoning, imprisonment, and eventually his death, but he was never dissuaded from preaching the gospel, even when the crowd was overwhelmingly hostile to his message. This pattern of public evangelism even unto martyrdom was the biblical norm and as we shall see was to be followed by evangelists throughout Christian history, to the present day.

Let us turn now to post-Apostolic Christian History...

After the close of the Apostolic age, Christians continued to preach the gospel in public, even during over two hundred years of Roman Persecution (100-313). Even after the empire was won over to the faith, missionaries such as Ulphilas, Patrick, and Columba carried the good news into the Western Europe, preaching in the houses of commoners and the courts of the pagan kings, and by 800 preaching and not the sword had spread Christianity throughout Europe. Soon Missionaries would preach Christ amongst the fearsome Vikings of Scandinavia, Greenland, and Iceland.

During the Middle Ages, the practice of evangelism suffered as the knowledge of the scriptures diminished and the Gospel was obscured by ritual and superstition.

But even at this time the Lord had his witnesses, men like Peter Waldo (1140-1218), founder of the Waldenses. Because the translation of the scriptures into common languages was forbidden, the Waldenses translated books of the bible themselves and went into the villages two by two preaching the word to the common people. Because they were seen as a threat to the hegemony of the Roman church, the Waldenses were viciously persecuted, but never silenced.

In 14<sup>th</sup> century England John Wycliff was also grieved by the lack of biblical knowledge amongst the common people, and set out to create the first translation of the bible into English which was then copied and widely distributed amongst the commoners. Wycliff also created an order of itinerating preachers, called "Lollards" by their enemies who went from town to town preaching.

It was not however until the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that gospel tracts and bibles in the vernacular languages began to be made widely available. Prior to this time, it had been possible to inhibit the spread of Reformation and Revival by putting preachers to death and burning their laboriously copied tracts and bibles. But with the invention of the printing press, and the increase in literacy the good news spread as never before. As Spurgeon commented regarding the success of Martin Luther, "Of what use was the malice of men against Martin Luther? ... They thought to put an end to him, but his little tracts went everywhere."

During the late 17<sup>th</sup> century in Scotland, the King used military force in an attempt to stamp out biblical Presbyterianism once and for all, denied the use of Churches these faithful Presbyterians called Covenanters met in barns and on the moors to worship God. These ministers and their flock were subject to imprisonment or immediate execution when detected. For instance the great Covenanting Minister John Brown was the very close friend of both Richard Cameron, the Lion of the Covenant, and of Alexander Peden, the Prophet of the Covenant. Peden had married Brown to Isabel Weir in 1682, and after this simple Puritan ceremony had said to Isabel: 'Ye have a good man to be your husband, but ye will not enjoy him long; prize his company and keep linen by you to be his winding sheet, for ye will need it when ye are not looking for it, and it will be a bloody one.' His prophecy proved all too true, and only a few years later Brown was shot by Claverhouse outside his house in front of his wife and children, the killer said to her with a sardonic smile: 'What do you think of your fine husband now?' And through her sad tears she bravely answered: 'I ever thought much good of him, and more than ever now...' In the end, it

was the faith of these men and women and not the attempts of their persecutors to silence them, that prevailed.

From the Reformation onwards, whenever revival broke out in Europe or the gospel was spread to a new country, the twin agencies were the distribution of literature and public preaching. When Christianity was at a low ebb in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain and America, itinerating evangelists preaching in fields, and cemeteries, and town commons once again fanned the embers of the faith into flame. Famous itinerating Evangelists like George Whitefield preached to thousands of hearers in Britain and throughout the American Colonies and remarked ***"I believe I never was more acceptable to my Master than when I was standing to teach those hearers in the open fields." ... "I now preach to ten times more people than I should, if had been confined to the Churches."*** – Whitefield

This preaching came at a high cost however, both Whitefield and Wesley frequently endured heckling and having everything from dung to stones thrown at them. And not a few of the open air evangelists of this period were martyred while preaching the gospel. Bishop JC Ryle notes of the opposition to their work, "Let us observe how men like Wesley and Whitefield and Venn and Romaine stood alone in their day and generation and revived English religion in the face of opposition from men high in office and in the face of slander, ridicule and persecution from nine-tenths of professing Christians in our land. ... Their proceedings were neither fashionable nor popular, and often brought on them more persecution and abuse than praise. But the few weapons they used, they used well."

One hundred years later, in Victorian England, open air preaching and tracting still frequently resulted in abuse and opposition, but famous Baptist Evangelist Charles Haddon Spurgeon, who had himself begun as a street preacher encouraged young men to continue in it none-the-less, *"Christian young men, you who have begun to preach in the street, or distribute tracts, or visit from house to house, though Satan hinders you very much, I pray you now redouble your efforts. It is because Satan is afraid of you that he resists you, because he would rob you of the great blessing which is now descending on your head. Resist him, and stand fast."*

To the North in Scotland, a revival began amongst the Scottish Presbyterians of the Free Churches, and Pastors like Robert Murray McCheyne encouraged their members to go out and do whatever they could to spread it via their own efforts.

McCheyne himself records his own frequent use of tracts to spread the gospel whenever the opportunity presented itself, and even when he was abroad. One letter sent back from France to Scotland recorded: "That day we sailed down the Rhone more than 100 miles, through a most wonderful country. We hoped to have spent the Sabbath at Marseilles; but just as we entered the Mediterranean Sea, a storm of wind arose, and drove the vessel on a barren island at the mouth of the Rhone. ... There were about twelve fishermen's huts on the island, made of reeds, with a vine growing before the door, and a fig tree in their garden. We gave tracts and books in French to all our fellow passengers, and to the inhabitants, and tried to hallow the Sabbath - May 2, 1839.

America had more than its share of street preachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it is worth noting that the famous evangelist D.L. Moody, began his career as a street preacher. It is said of him, *"One of his regular practices in the late sixties was to exhort the passersby in the evenings from the steps of the court house. Often these impromptu gathering drew as many hecklers as supporters."*

The 20<sup>th</sup> century had certainly had its share of public evangelists, In conclusion let me end with the words of a man who was converted at a Billy Graham rally and went on to found Operation Mobilization, a Christian Missions Organization:

“Without a doubt the most effective means of getting the gospel message to the unsaved is by taking it to them. That is where the bottleneck lies. The evangelistic method of the Apostle Paul was not so much a 'You come hear me' evangelism, as it was an 'I'll bring it to you' evangelism. Paul was a great officer in the army of the Lord, a man of intellect and influence, but he never stopped knocking on doors to witness for His Lord. Yet today it is very difficult to find Christian men and women who are willing to go from house to house witnessing and distributing literature to the unconverted. Satan is a master strategist; he will do everything to keep us from eye-to-eye contact with the unconverted.”

Now what of you, Christian? I mentioned some of the many Reformed pastors who exhorted their congregation to greater efforts, here is a typical exhortation from a sermon McChesney preached in April 1842 was: ***“Do you do what you can for your neighbors? Can you pass your neighbors for years together, and see them on the broad way, without warning them? Do you make a full use of tracts, giving suitable ones to those that need them? Do you persuade Sabbath-breakers to go to the house of God? Do you do anything in Sabbath schools? Could you not tell little children the way to be saved? Do you do what you can for the world? The field is the world.”*** – April 26, 184