

# Guidelines To Open Air Preaching

*By Kevin Williams*



The Gospel of Jesus Christ was never meant to be hid behind the walls of church buildings, and open air preaching is a wonderful way to take the good news “into the highways” (Matt. 22:9).

For myself, preaching the Gospel in the open air has been a wonderful privilege, seeing God move in both mighty and mysterious ways, and giving me glimpses of what it must have been like for Jesus preaching in the temple in John 7 (and other places), with questions and objections coming from all directions and different types of people in a rowdy crowd, and what it was like for Paul preaching in the market places.

In this article I want to share with you some helpful experiences that I have learned to be useful in open air preaching. I have not put these topics in any particular order, as one thing you will soon find in the open air is that things can be unpredictable. So may God use this article to help you step out in faith and through it draw closer to Him.

## **Beginners Be Prepared**

These days when I open air preach, I never have a pre-written message prepared. However, I did when I first began, and I would highly recommend that those who are new to open air preaching take the time to think about and mull over what you are going to say. Getting up for the first time to preach in the open air is, for most people, a nerve-racking experience, and the thought of getting “stuck” in mid-message is the fear of many. On top of that, opposition with people shouting things at you, and trying to put you off will normally come, and so being prepared is certainly helpful.

### **Be Realistic About The Length Of Your Message**

What I mean by this, is I've often observed people preaching 20 or 30 minute sermons in the open air like they would in a church building. Yet most of their audience is hearing between 30 seconds and two minutes, and so getting very little, or nothing at all, out of their message. In the days of George Whitefield and John Wesley, people would crowd around to hear a 30 minute to one hour sermon, like they would for a major sports event, but this is not normally the case in our day. If most of your listeners are only there for two or three minutes, then I suggest repeating the Gospel every two or three minutes and keep circulating your message.

### **Learn To Be Flexible**

Following on from my last point, a good practice is to think over how to share the Gospel in various lengths of time: one minute, three minutes, five minutes, and ten minutes. This will enable you to be prepared to adjust your preaching to each situation.

A group of us used to preach opposite a tram stop in the streets of Manchester City Centre where we had a ready-made crowd of 30-50 people for between three and seven minutes. The tram times were unpredictable and once we saw the tram coming around the corner, no matter what point we were up to in our message, it meant we had about 30 seconds to go to and explain the cross, and let them know of the offer of eternal life.

Also, learn to be flexible towards the different types of audiences you are preaching to. For instance if a Jewish person suddenly joins the crowd or passes by, I may quickly bring up a Messianic prophecy like Zechariah 12:10.

### **Don't Compete With Noisy Machinery**

Like in the instance above, when the tram finally got too close and was blowing its horn, there was no point in straining my voice in trying to compete with it. In that instance, once it got too loud, I would pause until the tram stopped, and then when it quieted down to a reasonable level, I would get another 30 seconds or so, whilst the passengers were boarding the tram.

Every now and then when I preach in the town centres, a noisy street cleaning vehicle will

pass by, and so rather than strain my voice I will simply pause my message for the 30 seconds or so until it passes. This may mean you will have to repeat some things you have already said to reiterate as new people may in that time join the crowd.

Also when picking your initial spot to preach from, make sure it is a place where people can hear you and you are not drowned out by competing noise.

### **Picking Your Spot**

When choosing where to preach, there is no point competing with traffic noise, or a street musician, or a shop with a loud PA System. Nor is there any point in preaching where people are not. If there are only a few people passing by then it is much better to approach them and just talk with them one-on-one, or one-to-a-group. For open air preaching you need to find a busy place where people are regularly passing by.

Observe the wind direction, and **preach with the wind behind you**. If the wind speed is only slight then this may not matter, but preaching with a strong wind behind you (especially if you are elevated) will make your voice carry a much longer distance.

Over time you will learn to project your voice so it 'bounces' off stone buildings and other objects, to help you be heard louder and further away.

### **Lift Up Your Voice Like A Trumpet**

Just like the rest of your body gets fitter with exercise, your vocals should get louder and stronger the more you preach. With regular practice you will be able to preach louder and for longer. **One word of caution: Don't preach from the throat** because if you do then not only are you likely to sound like a raging mad man, but you also won't last longer than 10 or so minutes. Make sure your voice comes from the stomach.

When you first start preaching your "big voice" may seem like it is all on one level with no variation of tone, making you sound harsh. But do not worry; over a short time as you get louder and with prayer God will help you develop a voice of compassion.

### **Preach With Elevation. Get A Soap Box. Preferably A Step Ladder**

Elevation makes a huge difference. This is underestimated by so many, so let me repeat this principle again, because it is so important:

**Elevation makes a huge difference! Because:**

**No.1. It means your voice will travel further.** Loudspeakers in buildings are placed at a height for a reason. When you are elevated your voice will travel further, and also your voice will pick up more of the wind from a higher point.

**No.2. You are more visible and prominent.** If you are shouting whilst standing on the ground in a high street, then to passers-by, you look like a mad man. However, when you are on a soap box or a step ladder, then people will give you more respect and stop by to

listen, because it gives people the impression that you have something to say.

**No.3. For your own protection.** When you are preaching, people will sometimes come right up to you and if you are on the same level ground as them, then this can be very intimidating when people come right in your face. Nor can you continue shouting when someone's face is only inches away from yours. However if you are on a step ladder, then when people come close up, they may still be aggressive, but it's not natural for even the most hardened men to pick a fight with someone who looks eight or nine feet tall. Think of an animal that makes its hair stand on end when threatened. The extra height gives the same psychological effect.

**Also,** it is much better to **take your own ladder or soapbox** to stand on, rather than stand on a public bench or steps.

**Firstly,** because then you can find the best place to open air, and set up your ladder and preach from there, rather than being restricted to preaching from places that are often substandard.

**Secondly,** if you are on public property, like standing on a bench then there is nothing to stop an aggressive heckler getting up alongside you.

This is not to be legalistic though, for instance, you may one day be out shopping, when a great opportunity to open air preach arises. In which case you should preach as God presents the opportunity, ladder or no ladder.

### **Engage The Heckler**

Some of the worst open air preaching advice I have encountered is when I hear people say, "When I get a heckler, I completely ignore him, and just keep focused on my message and so he soon goes away."

Listen! **A good heckler is an open air preacher's best friend.** Banter between the preacher and the heckler can turn a crowd from just a few people to sometimes even a hundred in a matter of minutes. Who wouldn't stop to watch a lively debate in the street, especially on a subject in which most people have their own strong opinions?

Make it a priority to pray for God to send a good heckler.

### **Leave Answering The Heckler To The Preacher**

When there is a group of you, and the one who is preaching gets a heckler, don't make the mistake of trying to help the preacher by answering the heckler. This will just draw the crowd away from the preaching. If the person preaching is inexperienced and feels it is getting too much for him, he could simply say "My friend here is now going to step up and answer your objections."

## Don't Use Man-Centered Apologetics

There seems to be an increasing number of people today who spend so much time using apologetics to answer objections - and going into such depth with their answers - that the Gospel (which is "the power of God unto salvation" (Rom. 1:16) is not preached. I've seen open air preachers with good crowds spend 30 minutes answering objections before moving on to the Gospel, but in that time many people have come and gone; people who listened to an objection or two being answered but never heard how they may be saved.

There was a time when I myself used apologetics to draw a crowd. However, I have since changed my view, since much of what is called apologetics today is man-centered and unbiblical. If a man on trial in a human court said "I don't believe in judges and law," the judge would not say, "Hold the proceedings! We must first spend whatever time necessary to convince this man that judges and law exist before we can go on with the trial." Or if a policeman was pointing his gun at a criminal and telling him to raise his hands, and the criminal replied, "I don't believe in guns," the policeman would not respond by putting his gun away! Yet this is exactly what many Christians do today. The Word of God is the sword of the Spirit (Eph 6:17), and yet when an unbeliever says to a Christian, "I don't believe the Bible," the Christian will often put his sword back into its sheath and stop using it, resorting instead to man's reasoning.

You cannot intellectually argue someone into the Kingdom of God. Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 1:17 that if we attempt to preach the Gospel with cleverness of speech, we empty the cross of its power. In contrast to that, a good description of Biblical apologetics is found in Acts 18:28, which tells how Apollos "powerfully refuted the Jews in public, *demonstrating by the Scriptures* that Jesus was the Christ." Biblical apologetics is not about cleverness of speech, but the simple proclamation of what the Scriptures say about Jesus! Again, when Jesus Himself was preaching and teaching, He answered objections by saying, "Have you not read?" always directing people to what the Word of God said. If you attempt to use human reasoning to persuade people, then their argument is against you. However, if you simply declare to them what God says in His Word, then their argument is with God, and God never has any problem defending Himself. As Charles Spurgeon once said, "Scripture is like a lion. Who ever heard of defending a lion? Just turn it loose; it will defend itself."

For a long time I used apologetics to gain a crowd, and though I often preached to large numbers of people in that time, I never saw anyone converted. However, from the first day that I switched to answering objections the more Biblical way - by simply declaring what the Scriptures say - I started to see people converted and joining our church. And even though I no longer use apologetics to gain a hearing as I once did, the crowds that gather to listen in the open air are just as large as before.

My point here is not to draw attention to results, because no matter how evangelism is done it is God who must cause the growth (1 Cor. 3:6). But on the other hand, we need to realize that it is when we do God's *work* God's *way* that we can expect to see God's *blessing*. There is a growing number of Christians today who don't seem to expect God to do much of anything when His Word goes forth, and their lack of faith in God has a damaging effect on

their evangelism. We should expect to see God convert people when His Word is faithfully proclaimed, and we should never come to the point where we're surprised when He does.

### **Keep In Control**

What I mean by this is often whilst you are answering one persons objection, someone else may shout another objection, demanding you answer them on the spot. What they are doing here is just trying to prevent you from answering. When this happens simply tell them that this person was before them and that you will answer their question in turn. When you do this, they will feel rude, and their butting in then becomes an attack on the other listeners rather than the preacher.

### **Finish Your Answers**

Often, in the middle of answering an objection, the person who asked the question will try to interrupt by shouting out another objection. And he or she may keep on doing this every time you answer the next objection. When that happens don't make the mistake of cutting short your answers and moving on to the next objection without properly answering the first. Obviously in this case the heckler is not really interested in your answers. But remember, other people are listening in. Don't make the mistake of half answering many questions, whilst fully answering none.

### **Avoid Highly Complex Objections**

Occasionally you may get an objection (and it may or may not be genuine) which would not only take a long time to answer (even five minutes can be a long time in the open air), but it is highly likely that apart from the person you are speaking to, no one else in the crowd will have a clue what you are talking about. In which case don't lose half of your audience in trying to answer one persons "technical trivia" question. In this situation I would normally just say, "It would take too long to answer here, and go over the heads of most of the other people listening, but send me an email or speak to one of the others who have come out with me", and then carry on preaching.

### **Be Clear In Your Answers**

In my experience most people objecting do not properly understand their own objections. Many have simply read or heard something by a skeptic which they are happy to believe, no questions asked. But at the same time, they do not understand what the skeptic actually said. So make sure you explain things clearly, and remember more people are listening than the person who asked the question.

### **Don't Preach In 'Christianese'**

Christians have a lot of words and phrases that the average person does not understand, or they mean different things to different people, like "repent", "walk", "born again",

“justified” etc. Now I am not saying do not use these words, in fact some are essential. But we must clearly explain what we mean. Explain the way of salvation in simple terms.

### **Keep Your Voice Lifted Up Like A Trumpet**

One of the first times I preached in the open air, I recorded myself. And I didn't notice until later when I listened to the recording, that when a group of girls came by who I had an interaction with, that I had made the mistake of considerably lowering the level of my voice, as if I was just speaking to these few people close by rather than the whole square. Always keep your voice lifted high. Remember when you open air preach you want to be heard by everyone in range.

### **You're Trying To Win People, Not Offend Them**

Some time ago a street preacher was arrested for preaching against Father Christmas, after complaints of children crying. The Bible does not say 'Go ye into all the world and preach against Father Christmas'. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is offensive enough without causing offence where it is not needed. Nor are we there to preach about politics. Don't cause unnecessary offense.

### **Show Love and Compassion**

If you preach without love then you will sound like a gong or a clanging cymbal. This is something you must constantly pray for. If you regularly preach in the open air and lift the Name of Jesus high then you will be met by a lot of hatred, and so if you don't guard against it then it is very easy to become cold hearted.

### **Pray, Pray, Pray and Pray**

One of the saddest things regarding many groups that open air preach is neglect of prayer. On more than a few occasions I've seen groups of Christians get together for evangelism, and do nothing more than a quick 5 or 10 minutes of prayer. Sometimes people will have a great time of fellowship beforehand, and maybe even fit in a devotional Bible Study and words of encouragement, but then they reduce prayer to an 'added extra'. Don't expect the Spirit of God to move if you're not going to spend quality time waiting upon God in prayer.

I suggest at least one hour of prayer (and enjoying God) before you go out to evangelize, and include singing a few hymns praising God in that. This may mean one hour less on the streets, but it will be worth it.

### **Check Your Motive: Is It To Know And Enjoy God In A Greater Way?**

“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness;  
and all these things shall be added unto you.” Matt 6:33

Evangelism should be driven by love of God and love of fellow man. You must constantly

keep check of this, and be careful to make sure that evangelism does not become a ritual or an idol.

Driving home one evening after an amazing day of open air preaching in which I had seen God move in a mighty way, with crowds of hundreds hearing the Gospel, I was jumping for joy, singing at the top of my voice along to Matt Redman on the car stereo 'Lord Let Your Glory Fall', and praising God. Then I felt God say, "Why didn't you praise Me like this last week, when you had just a few people stop to listen?" Ouch!

It is wonderful when God draws big crowds. I pray for that, and I am confident in God who is faithful to answer prayer and do great things, but we should never forget what a great privilege it is to go out as ambassadors for Jesus Christ and proclaim how great God is and His glorious salvation when just a few or even no one seems to be listening. Your desire should be to draw closer to Jesus and come to know Him in a greater way in all that you do. If you make this your priority then I assure you that God will never let you down. Glorify God and enjoy Him!

### **Load Your Preaching With Scripture. Memorize**

*"Where the word of a king is, there is power"* (Ecc 8:4). As I learned from Charles Spurgeon, it is God's words that convert people, not our own explanations. So fill your preaching with Scripture and in order to quote Scripture in the open air, you must memorize Scripture.

### **Fill Your Preaching With Christ. Who He Is And How Great He Is**

The Apostle Paul said "we preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23), yet in much evangelism today, Jesus Christ is reduced to a footnote. If you want to win people to Christ then you must preach Him.

### **Make Disciples**

The great commission in Matthew 28:19-20 is to make disciples and teach them in all things, and so where possible evangelism should be done in the context of the local church. Make sure your church fellowship details are on your tracts. Tell them about it, how to get there and offer transport help.

### **Witness and Tracting Whilst The Preacher Is Preaching**

Most open air preachers I know do not like the others with them to tract the crowd whilst they are preaching. Their thinking behind it is that people will go from listening to the preacher to reading a tract. I differ on this, and believe it is best to tract everyone in the crowd, otherwise many will leave without a tract. In fact I normally preach with a pile of tracts in my hand and encourage people to take one.

I also encourage the people with me to discreetly witness to people listening. When I say

discreetly, what I mean is, don't go into the middle of the crowd and witness to people listening to the preacher, and don't be loud, or you will just break up the crowd as attention will turn to you, but maybe start up a witnessing conversation with someone you see watching at a distance. Ask them what they think of what is being said and take it from there. If people listening see you with tracts, Bible and t-shirt, so they know you are obviously with the preacher, then many times people will approach you.

### **Wear Gospel Clothing**

Granted I cannot find a Scripture verse to support this, but Wesley and Whitefield wore their preacher's robes in the open air for a reason. Wearing our matching t-shirts, with the cross and Scripture verses on them, has led to countless conversations. Sometimes people listening to the preacher will look for others wearing our matching evangelism t-shirts.

### **Keep It Legal**

Get to know the law of the land regarding where you can and cannot preach. There are enough good legal places to preach without unnecessarily offending by preaching on private property without permission.

### **Be Careful Who Gets Up To Preach**

When we first started open air preaching, we would leave the step ladder or soapbox set up in between people speaking. However we have learned to guard the soap box and take up the ladder, as we have had Muslims try to get up and preach, and also on one instance a guy who I did not know suddenly got up on my ladder without asking and started preaching. At first he seemed to be Christian, but it turned out he was a Seventh Day Adventist, and when a heckler gave him some abuse, he suddenly chased him across the street and pinned him against the wall. As you can imagine this did not do our witness a whole lot of good.

### **How Will You React To Hostility?**

Whilst open air preaching I have been kicked, punched, had bottles and cans thrown at me, knocked off my ladder and also had an awful lot of hate-filled speech hurled at me. Much of this is done with the intent of trying to get you to react in an unloving way. All of these are perfect chances to show the love of Christ, by turning the other cheek and going the extra mile, and using them as an illustration for the Gospel.

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*This article was updated June 2010  
with the section Don't Use Man Centered Apologetics*



**Thank you** to Garrett Holthaus, John Dees, and Mona Leiter at Lake Road Chapel for proof reading this article. See: [www.lakeroadchapel.org](http://www.lakeroadchapel.org) and their edifying blog: [www.thoughtsonthewayblog.blogspot.com](http://www.thoughtsonthewayblog.blogspot.com)

**Further Resources:**

A five Sermon Evangelism Series: **How To Share Your Faith Biblically**  
[www.puritanfellowship.com/2009/05/evangelism-how-to-share-your-faith.html](http://www.puritanfellowship.com/2009/05/evangelism-how-to-share-your-faith.html)

**Gospel Tracts:**

Lake Road Chapel, M.O. have a number of excellent Gospel tracts available (including 'How Would You Feel If Your Thought Life Were To Be Shown On Nationwide TV?')  
See <http://www.lakeroadchapel.org/resources.html>

**Great sermons:** [www.sermonaudio.com/gcc](http://www.sermonaudio.com/gcc)

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