

# Definite Directions for Open-Air Preaching

by Gawin Kirkham

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*Gawin Kirkham provides essential guidelines for effective open-air preaching, emphasizing leadership, audience engagement, and reverence.*

**Scripture:** Nehemiah 8:4, Ecclesiastes 12:13, Isaiah 58:1, Ezekiel 2:7, Matthew 5:16, Matthew 28:20, 1 Corinthians 14:40, 2 Corinthians 3:17, 2 Corinthians 4:2, 1 Timothy 4:13

**Topics:** "Open Air Preaching", "Evangelism Methods"

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## Description

Gawin Kirkham emphasizes the importance of open-air preaching and provides practical advice for street preachers. He highlights the need for a leader to organize the meetings and choose suitable locations, as well as the value of having helpers to maintain order and attract and retain the crowd. Kirkham stresses the significance of using the Bible effectively, cultivating reverence during open-air services, and dealing with interruptions wisely to ensure the message of the Gospel is proclaimed effectively and respectfully.

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## Transcript

[This article was taken from the book, "The Open-Air Preacher's Handbook" written by Gawin Kirkham. Brother Kirkham was the Secretary of the Open-Air Mission of London, England. The book was published in 1890 but has a timeless message for street preachers of today.]

WE are told that "Open-air Preaching can only be learned by doing it." No doubt that is in the main correct; as the art of swimming can only be learned in the water. But as the swimmer can learn more readily by a few plain directions- so the street preacher acquires his art more easily when aided by the experience of others. It is hoped, therefore, that the following HINTS will be found useful to those who desire to "purchase to themselves a good degree, and great boldness in the faith which is in Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 3. 13).

A Leader is Essential. -Some one should take charge of the meetings, and choose the place, the hymns, and the speakers. It is not necessary that he should be a practiced speaker, or a good singer; but he should be able to arrange and control. It is desirable also to have a leader of the singing, so that the preachers should not strain their voices in attempting high notes.

"Let all things be done decently and in order" (1 Cor. 14. 40)

The Choice of a Place. -In villages, a preaching station is more easily chosen than in towns. The village street or the village green may be occupied; or a farmer will lend a field. But "field-preaching" is not now so popular as in the days of Wesley and Whitefield. As a rule, it is desirable to be so near the houses that those who do not care to come out may yet hear inside. But in towns it is not desirable to select the busiest thoroughfares, unless it be on Sunday, when there is less traffic. A side street just off the main street is best. Large open spaces are not suitable, unless the helpers are numerous and the singing attractive. A passage should always be kept clear on the side-walk, so that foot-passengers may not be compelled to go into the middle of the street." Let every one of us please his neighbour, for his good, to edification" (Rom. 15. 2).

The Order of Service. -If the preacher is alone, like Jonah in Nineveh, he may begin by reading a chapter from his Bible, choosing a familiar and striking portion for this purpose. Or he may talk confidentially to two or three children till the curiosity of the grown-up people is awakened, and they gather round. Or he may hand a few tracts to the strollers and idlers, and encourage them to come and hear. But if he has helpers, they had better sing first. Then a brief lesson may be read, and a brief prayer offered. But if the people are not likely to stay for reading and prayer, speaking may begin after the first hymn. The addresses, as a rule, should be brief -say ten minutes or a quarter of an hour- with singing between; and the meeting limited to an hour. But the wise leader will not confine himself to any definite order, as one of the charms of an open-air meeting is its freedom "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3. 17).

Open-air Pulpits. -The kerbstone is a sufficient elevation when speaking to a handful of people: but it is an immense advantage to stand on a stool or chair, or raised platform, when speaking to an ordinary street crowd. The speaker can thus spare his voice, and be better heard than when he is on a level with the people. The common sense of street-preachers is sadly lacking when they will not thus aid their voices by standing head-and-shoulders above the people. Besides, this method is a Scriptural one: for we read in the account of the great open-air meeting in "the street that was before the water gate" in Jerusalem, that "Ezra the scribe stood upon a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose," and thus "opened the book in the sight of all the people; for he was above all the people" (Nehemiah 8. 4, 5). It is worthy of observation that that is the only place in the Bible where a "pulpit" is mentioned; so that the street-preacher is fairly entitled to its use on the best authority. "Jotham . . . stood in the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted up his voice, and cried" (Judges 9. 7).

The Value of Helpers. -One of the most interesting sights to men and angels is a solitary preacher, crying like John the Baptist in the wilderness, "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matt. 3. 2). But it is more to the preacher's comfort and the good of the work to have a band of helpers. Some can sing; while others can give tracts. They help to gather a crowd; to maintain order amongst the children; to keep the pavement clear; and to cheer the preacher by their presence and their prayers. In commencing a meeting, instead of standing behind, or at the side of the preacher, these helpers should face him, so as to form part of the audience, and encourage others to gather behind them. But, as a rule, they should not interfere with a disturber, as that is better done by the leader; nor should they be allowed to give tracts at the meeting while the service lasts. This latter course sadly distracts the attention of the hearers, though it is a very common proceeding on the part of kind and active helpers. Christians should be encouraged to stand at open-air meetings, even if they cannot sing -ladies especially. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5. 16).

The Art of Attraction. -The preacher has first to secure and then to retain his hearers. As "music hath charms," good singing should be cultivated; and the singers should understand that harmony and

sweetness are far more important than mere noise. Ladies render important service in street choirs. Solos, duets, trios, and quartettes -may occasionally be introduced. But the singing should be in harmony with the preaching, and not merely a pretty performance to please the ear. It should be appropriate, lively, and abundant, and entirely under the control of the leader of the meeting.

The distribution of Hymn-sheets is helpful in keeping a crowd together. The exhibition of a picture or diagram is good by way of variety. Harmoniums are the most common at open-air services; but a cornet is the most effective for leading the singing. Prettily painted banners are pleasing to the eye; and when they have on them the name of the church or mission from which the workers come, are useful in directing the people where to worship inside. A duplex lamp placed on a tripod is a great help in meetings after dark; though a street lamp may be made to do duty where a special one cannot be had. But these arts of attraction must be in harmony with the apostle's rule: "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some" (I Cor. 9. 22).

The Art of Preaching. -Whatever means may be used to draw the people together, it will depend largely upon the preacher himself whether they are retained. Cold, formal, measured, precise preaching will not do. Nor will what may be called "a good sermon" indoors necessarily do outside. Life, fire, and energy are essential, as the powder is essential to carry the shot. There is an indefinable style needed for open-air preaching which can only be acquired by practice. The preacher's temptation is to rely too much upon impulse and surroundings, and so to neglect his studies. But if he is to be successful he must study; and his studies must include books, and men, and nature. The exhortation of Paul to Timothy is as important for the out-door preacher as for the regular pastor- "Give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee. Meditate upon these things, . . . that thy profiting may appear to all (I Tim. 4. 13-15).

The Bible in the Street. -The preacher's chief weapon must ever be the Word of God, wielded by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet the Bible must be sparingly used in the street. The lesson may be read from it; but in preaching, it is better to quote from it than to be perpetually giving chapter and verse, especially if this involves turning over the leaves to look for them. There is a powerful magnetism in the human eye; and rarely should the preacher's eye be taken off his hearers if he wishes to retain his hold of them. But the preacher who has the greatest knowledge of the Bible, and the ability to quote appropriate texts correctly, other things being equal, will be the most successful. It is a good thing to set young preachers to read the lesson, as it encourages them afterwards to speak. Those who would bless and save their fellow-creatures must heed the Lord's commission to Ezekiel: "And thou shalt speak My words unto them, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear" (Ezek. 2. 7).

Voice Culture. -But while the Word of God is the preacher's chief weapon, the human voice is the medium by which that weapon reaches the people. How many books have been written on the art of speaking! -and yet how few really effective speakers there are! The voice is soon injured in the openair unless it is used with care. Generally the young preacher starts in too high a key, and in too loud a tone. He forgets the oft-repeated advice

" Begin low, speak slow;

Aim higher, take fire."

Knowing this, John Wesley said to his preachers, "For God's sake, don't scream." There is no doubt that the moderate and steady use of the voice out of doors strengthens it, and also the chest of the speaker.

Yet there are times when, owing to some condition of body or of atmosphere, or both, the voice of the most practiced speaker fails. It is then the height of folly to continue using it. It should rest; and only by that process will it be regained. Or if it becomes a little husky by speaking, it may often be recovered by singing, taking care to sing that part which is easiest. Spurgeon has a valuable lecture "On the Voice" in the first volume of his "Lectures to my Students." If preachers would take the trouble to enunciate their words more distinctly, they would speak with far less labour and with more effect. "Lift up thy voice like a trumpet" (Isa. 58. 1).

The Cultivation of Reverence. -It is true that we do not go into the streets to worship, but to proclaim the Gospel; nevertheless, if we are to commend "ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God" (2 Cor. 4. 2), there must be reverence in this open-air temple, as much as in a consecrated building. This is best accomplished by realizing the Lord's presence. "Lo, I am with you alway" (Matt. 28. 20). This realized presence prevents the spirit of trifling and levity, which are, alas! far too common at open-air assemblies, both on the part of the preacher and his helpers. It was this realized presence which produced such a marvellous effect at the meeting "in the street that was before the water gate," as described in Nehemiah 8. 6, when the people "bowed their heads, and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground."

There is another aid to reverence in the attitude of the preacher. How many preachers fail to mark I Cor. 11. 4: "Every man praying or prophesying (i.e. preaching), having his head covered, dishonoureth his head." This is a plain direction, which should be adhered to except in very severe weather, or by those who are liable to take cold easily. A further aid to reverence is the attitude in prayer. Happily it is the custom almost universally for the preacher and his helpers to uncover their heads during prayer; and this act is a sermon in itself. There are so many disturbing elements out of doors that the promoters should do all in their power to produce a becoming solemnity at street meetings. "Let us exalt His Name together" (Psa. 34. 3).

How to Deal with Interruptions. -But with the best arrangements and the wisest proceedings, interruptions will occur. If the police interfere, it is more seemly to give way than to have a dispute by standing on our rights." If a thoroughfare is blocked, the police may interfere by virtue of the authority vested in them; but even if they are wrong, it is better for the preacher to complain to their superiors than to contend with them in the presence of a crowd, seeing he represents the Gospel of peace. If a householder complains, however frivolous the objection, the police are bound to remove the preacher on such complaint being made. He cannot legally be arrested, but he may be summoned before a magistrate for resisting lawful authority. If a drunkard interferes, it is generally useless to argue with him. The police should protect the preacher by removing him; but sometimes a kind-hearted helper may persuade him to walk away. If the interruption is by a Romanist or an infidel, it means discussion; and if the preacher begins a discussion, there is an end of the preaching. Men who have studied these questions in all their bearings may discuss, for truth has nothing to fear from error; but the ordinary preacher shows his wisdom by continuing his preaching, and declining discussion. "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt. 10. 16).

"THE CONCLUSION OF THE WHOLE MATTER" (Eccles. 12. 13). As the object and end of preaching is the glory of God and the salvation of sinners, those methods should be pursued which are most likely to bring about this end. Prayer, Preaching, and Perseverance will work wonders by the blessing of God. If one plan fails, another should be tried. Young preachers should not be discouraged, for it may be some time before they can determine the question whether the Lord means them to be open-air preachers or not. They should be instant in season and out of season, seeking to pluck brands out of the fire. Success

is more likely to be attained by connecting the outdoor meeting with an indoor one.

The direction is, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled" (Luke 14. 23). And while some of the seed (to change the figure) may fall by the wayside, or on stony or thorny ground, some will fall into good ground, and bring forth fruit, even a hundredfold (Matt. 13. 8). So-

" Out in the highways, out in the byways,

Out in the dark paths of sin,

Go forth, go forth with a loving heart,

And gather the wanderers in! "

The following was written in the album of a lady who was slighted by some of her friends because she played the harmonium and sang at open-air services:

Go on shine errand, singing for the Lord,

Making rich melody with heart and voice;

Gather thy message from His holy Word,

And, hoping in the Word, do thou rejoice.

Some may despise thee, some may heed thee not,

And others be in doubt of what is right;

But whether thou be heeded or forgot,

Heed thou thy Master- "Go in this thy might!"

When thrones, and principalities, and powers

Are scattered to the winds for evermore,

A record of these consecrated hours

Shall greet thee on the ever-shining shore.

earless then go, with a glad heart and free!

The Gospel message carry far and wide;

The pleasure of the Lord thou yet shalt see,

Ile in thy work shall yet be glorified.

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