

The Word on the Streets

Charles L. Campbell

Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, Georgia

When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were gathered in one place. A rush of wind filled the house, and tongues of fire rested on everyone. All were filled with the Spirit and began to speak in other languages. At this strange outbreak of the Spirit, Jews from all the nations gathered outside the house where the disciples were staying. Then Peter went out to the street, “raised his voice,” and proclaimed the gospel to the crowd.¹

The church reads and remembers this familiar story annually on the Day of Pentecost. We celebrate the coming of the Spirit, the birth of the church, the breaking down of barriers between peoples, the reversal of Babel (Gen 11:1-9). As we celebrate Pentecost inside our festively decorated sanctuaries, however, we may easily overlook one aspect of the story. From the beginning, the church’s preaching was a missional act, directed beyond the walls of the sanctuary to the surrounding culture(s). And, though it may cause many of us some discomfort, the initial form of the church’s missional proclamation was *street preaching*.²

Peter’s street sermon on Pentecost, moreover, is consistent with the rest of the biblical witness. Much of the preaching in the Bible takes place “in the streets,” in public places where people gather. Prior to Pentecost, street preaching had a long and rich history. The prophets of Israel proclaimed the Word of the Lord and performed their sign acts “on the streets.” Jonah, in particular, might be the paradigmatic missionary street preacher, walking through the entire city of Ninevah reluctantly proclaiming his message of repentance. And Jesus followed in the prophets’ footsteps. While he certainly preached in the temple and in homes, Jesus also regularly spoke in public places, including the streets and markets, where people gathered. After Pentecost, the tradition continued, as Paul became possibly the most effective street preacher in the history of the church. Whether because they were not always welcome in traditional meeting places or because they sensed the missional drive of the gospel or because they announced the public claims of God’s Word, the preachers in the Bible didn’t wait for people to come to them and hear their proclamation; they instead took the Word to the people on the streets.

In the history of the church, this tradition has been continued—and not just by stereotypical wild-eyed fundamentalists. Through the centuries, street preachers have played a significant role in the renewal of preaching and the reformation of the church. The preaching revival and ecclesial renewal in the thirteenth century, for example, was spearheaded by itinerant street preachers, the most well known among them St. Francis of Assisi. Sounding like a modern Salvation Army group, the Franciscans, when they entered a town or village,

would sing out their characteristic greeting in the vernacular, much as any traveling chapman or hawker would sing out his wares. The people, eager to hear news, would leave their shops and gather round, conducting them to the market-place, where they would start their hymns and preach their popular sermons.³

Later, the forerunners of the Reformation, including “heretics” such as the Lollards and Savonarola, took the Word out of the churches and into the streets.⁴ Apparently recognizing the value of this approach, the great Reformer, Martin Luther, reportedly proclaimed one Sunday that preaching should *not* be done inside churches.⁵ Two centuries later, George Whitefield, who had worn out his welcome in the established Church of England, took the gospel outside to the poor, who had been neglected by the church. A new world of possibilities opened on February 17, 1739, when Whitefield first preached to a group of poor colliers among the coals mines in Kingswood near Bristol.

The tradition of street preaching has continued in the United States, from the time Whitefield himself crossed the ocean and preached not only in the fields, but in the public squares of the cities. The ongoing story includes not only the preaching of the Great Awakenings, but the evangelism of the Salvation Army, the virtually unknown Roman Catholic street preachers of the mid-twentieth century, the public sermons of the civil rights movement, the liturgical direct action campaigns of the anti-nuclear movement, and the countless individual street preachers who have been proclaiming the Word on the street corners of America up to this very moment. Even Dorothy Day understood her Catholic Worker paper to be a way of taking the Word to the streets: “It is easy enough to write and publish a paper and mail it out with the help of volunteers to the four corners of the earth. But it becomes an actual, living thing when you get out on the street corners with the word, as St. Paul did in the early days of Christianity.”⁶

Throughout the history of the church certain groups and individuals have grasped the truth of Soren Kierkegaard’s words:

... sermons should not be preached in churches. It harms Christianity in a high degree and alters its very nature, that it is brought into an artistic remoteness from reality, instead of being heard in the midst of real life, and that precisely for the sake of the conflict (the collision). For all this talk about quiet, about quiet places and quiet hours, as the right element for Christianity, is absurd.

So then sermons should not be preached in churches but in the street, in the midst of life, of the reality of daily life, weekday life.⁷

Although mainline churches have shown little interest in street preaching, it has been one of the most enduring and vigorous forms of the church’s missional proclamation.

Beyond Stereotypes

There is good reason why many Christians are skeptical about street preaching. The current image of street preaching has been shaped by angry, abusive preachers who seek to “save souls” by standing on street corners and shouting vitriolic, judgmental words of “hellfire and damnation.” Both the message these preachers proclaim and the way they act hardly seem to deserve the name “gospel.” A friend of mine who worked for years in a women’s health clinic that performed abortions cringes at the slightest mention of “street preaching.” She and her patients endured terrible abuse by preachers who showered them almost daily with threats and hate. She wants nothing more to do with that kind of preaching, and most of us can sympathize with her.

Just because street preaching has been abused, however, is no reason to dismiss it. If that were the case, we would also have to dismiss Sunday morning “pulpit preaching,” which has certainly known its share of abuse. Moreover, even a cursory look at the history of street preaching suggests that our contemporary stereotypes are inadequate. Street preaching has not always focused narrowly on “saving souls” and has not always “turned people off” with a hate-filled message. Rather, street preaching has taken a variety of different forms and served a number of different purposes. A brief look at four of these alternatives can broaden our understanding of the Word on the streets.

Reform. Street preaching has frequently arisen at times when the church has grown moribund and in need of reform. Because of hardened or lifeless institutional structures and practices, preachers have taken to the streets as a means of renewing the Body of Christ. The itinerant preaching of St. Francis, for example, was driven by a desire to reform the life of the church. Francis’s ministry was shaped by a visitation from the Lord, who spoke to Francis from a cross in the ruined little church of St. Damian outside Assisi: “Francis, go and repair my church which, as you can see, is falling down.” This call motivated Francis’s preaching.⁸ Speaking in a vernacular, extemporaneous style, which often included dramatic gestures, symbolic actions, and simple everyday parables, Francis called people to repentance and new life in ways that were both engaging and popular—even entertaining. In this way, Francis and his followers “brought new life, faith, sentiment, and poetry into the dry or sluggish veins of a too conventional worship.”⁹

Similarly, George Whitefield, along with John Wesley, was driven to the streets by the failures of the established Church of England, which had grown out of touch with the common people and had fostered apathy and indifference among large numbers of Christians. Relying on the power of the Word and the movement of the Spirit, rather than on secular laws, social customs, and institutional habits, Whitefield’s “street preaching” was a direct challenge to the church. Rejecting classical models of preaching for extemporaneous, dramatic sermons that addressed the passions of his hearers, Whitefield’s style itself challenged the institutional pulpit of the Church of England.¹⁰ While definitely seeking to “save souls,” Whitefield’s larger purpose was the reform of the church.

Reconciliation. One of the most interesting chapters in the history of street preaching took place among Roman Catholics in the United States during the middle part of the twentieth century. At a time of strident anti-Catholicism in the United States, groups of Catholic priests, seminarians, and college women took to the streets to counter Protestant bigotry. Knowing that Protestants would never *voluntarily* visit Catholic churches, where they might learn the truth about Catholicism, members of the Vincentian religious community formed “motor missions” and went out to public places in the rural midwest to speak with their Protestant neighbors. As one of the organizers of the missions, Lester Fallon, put it, “the street was a place where non-Catholics could be reached.”¹¹

The preachers sought “not to convert, but to create an atmosphere of tolerance through a simple, clear, non-argumentative explanation of Catholic beliefs.”¹² By speaking face to face with Protestants and distributing literature, the Vincentians hoped to dispel misunderstandings and show people that “their ill-will and prejudice against Catholics and the Catholic Church [were] resting on very poor foundations.”¹³

While the missions didn't fully alleviate anti-Catholic bigotry, genuine reconciliation did take place. On one occasion, a skeptical Protestant minister came to the preaching and then stayed to talk with the priests for several hours following the formal presentation. As one priest wrote about the Protestant pastor, "He was not nearer to being a Catholic when he left. But he was a friend."¹⁴ On another occasion, following a visit by the street preachers, local Protestants gave money and materials to help a small group of Catholics in the town construct a church.¹⁵ Nothing could seemingly be further from our contemporary stereotypes of street preaching.

Resistance. In the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements, radical Christians have engaged in street preaching to expose and resist the idolatrous powers of the world that challenge the Lordship of Jesus Christ. This kind of preaching dramatically and intentionally embodies the public and political character of the basic Christian confession, "Jesus is Lord." As one participant in the anti-nuclear movement wrote,

Whether at the gate of a bomber base, at a submarine station, or in front of a congressional office, being at a nuclear facility can provide Christians with the occasion to share the power and meaning of early apostolic faith. It is rather like the street preaching of the first century in downtown Rome. We can once again see that the routine proclamation of faith in Jesus, the simple theological affirmation of his lordship, is pregnant with political meaning.¹⁶

This kind of street witness has also taken the form of "liturgical direct action," through which believers bring Christian symbols and the "world-making power of liturgy" into the public arena.¹⁷ In addition to confessing the Sovereignty of God and exposing the idols of this age, street liturgies also publicly embody the vision of an alternative world. As Bill Wylie Kellerman has written of the public celebration of the Eucharist, "Gathered at the table, in the streets, the community sits down to a new social order."¹⁸ In the process, the church engages in a public "war of myths," not against human enemies, but against the principalities and powers of the world.¹⁹ The "collision" of which Kierkegaard speaks becomes acute in this form of street witness.

Solidarity. Every Wednesday morning, after serving breakfast to over one hundred homeless men, women, and children, volunteers at the Open Door Community in Atlanta, Georgia, go outside to worship with the homeless people who gather in the community's front yard on Ponce de Leon Avenue, one of the busiest streets in the city. Knowing that homeless people are rarely welcomed into middle class churches, the volunteers worship with them as an act of solidarity, much as George Whitefield went out to the poor when they were not welcomed in the Church of England. For their part, the homeless people embody the hospitality of Christian worship by welcoming the volunteers into their "living room." Standing in a circle and holding hands, the participants sing and pray, preach and testify amidst the noise of the rushing traffic. The goal is not to judge or convert. Rather, the two groups simply worship together as brothers and sisters in Christ, publicly embodying the diversity of the Christian community in the midst of a divided world. At a time when most churches discourage such worship, the streets provide the space where it can happen.

An Extreme Homiletic

As the preceding summary suggests, street preaching is a much broader and richer activity than contemporary stereotypes would suggest. Whatever form their preaching takes, however, street preachers have much to teach those of us who occupy pulpits on Sunday mornings. On the streets, superfluous layers are peeled away, and one is left with the very heart of preaching. Street preachers invite the rest of us back to the challenging and exhilarating essentials of our calling. They hold before us an “extreme homiletic.”

On the streets, for example, all of the institutional trappings of preaching are stripped away. No pulpit offers security; no sanctuary provides a “safe space”; no ordination grants the preacher status and authority. Rather, preachers must rely on God’s Word and the human voice alone. The words of John the Baptist, that paradigmatic preacher, take on new meaning: “I am the *voice* of one crying in the wilderness” (John 1: 23). Word and voice. When everything else is stripped away, these two remain for preachers: absolute trust in the Word of God and faithful stewardship of the human voice.²⁰

I read somewhere that preachers should roll up their Bibles and use them as megaphones when they proclaim the Word on the streets. For many of us, that may seem like a humorous and undignified image of the preacher. At root, however, that image captures the fundamental reality of preaching, which happens when the human voice is shaped and amplified by the Word of God. Word and voice. When these two come together, preaching happens. Street preachers remind us of the heart of our calling.

Moreover, by cutting through the trappings of organized religion, street preaching has historically challenged the exclusiveness of both the institutional church and the ordained ministry. The proclamation of the Word, street preachers have recognized, is the calling, not just of a select few, but of the entire church. On the streets women and lay people have been welcomed into the church’s ministry of proclamation, even when they were not permitted into church pulpits. The streets have literally been a place where the voices of those oppressed by the church have been liberated to preach the Word. Whitefield and Wesley welcomed women and lay people into the preaching ministry. Catherine Booth and her daughter, Evangeline, themselves Salvation Army street preachers, created a space for women to proclaim the Word.²¹ And even in the Roman Catholic church, women and lay people were officially recognized as street preachers long before they were permitted to preach in the church.²² On the streets, the Word has regularly burst its institutional bounds and created an inclusive ministry.

In addition, in a number of ways, street preachers remind the American church of the counter-cultural dimensions of the gospel. In a culture that seeks to relegate the Christian faith to the private sphere, street preachers embody the gospel’s public claims. Street preachers remind us that the Word of God cannot be limited to the privacy of the individual human heart or be contained within the walls of a pristine sanctuary. Rather, as Kierkegaard noted, the gospel belongs on the streets amidst the realities of public life. Whatever their particular message, street preachers enact this truth as they stand on street corners and proclaim the Word. They invite all of us who preach to take the gospel from the private sphere into the public arena. To do so constitutes a fundamental challenge to a culture that would privatize religion.

Such preaching also challenges a culture that has no room for fanatics. In a liberal culture, the one intolerable thing is fanaticism—unless, of course, one is a fanatical

sports fan or a fanatical patriot. Street preachers, however, remind the rest of us that the gospel calls for a fanatical response, which involves the totality of our lives. Although this response too often takes a hateful and destructive (i.e. anti-Christian) form in many street preachers, nevertheless, the radical convictions of these preachers serve as a challenge to a church that all too often sells its soul in order to enjoy “freedom of religion.”²³

Finally, street preaching disrupts any notion that the gospel is a welcome Word in our culture. Preaching week in and week out among believers in the church, pulpit preachers can sometimes be lulled into a sense of complacency and forget that the gospel is often an alien Word in a strange land, a Word that people do not care to hear, a Word that creates conflict and resistance. After preaching on the streets one morning, an experienced pastor wrote of the “collision” between the gospel and the world—and of the exhilaration of preaching at the point of that “collision”:

Preaching on the street was the most elemental, basic, gut-wrenching preaching I have ever experienced. It was preaching in its purest form because it was the gospel confronting the world without the benefit of protection or comfort or order for the preacher. . . . On the street there is always the possibility that the spoken Word will cast out a demon or confront evil in such a way that open spiritual warfare will result. I felt that whenever anyone in our class preached it was as if we were challenging the principalities and powers to reveal themselves for what they are. The sheer brazenness and audacity of challenging the world to hear a liberating gospel message . . . made street preaching the most exciting preaching I have done or experienced.²⁴

Street preaching offers a clear reminder that the gospel is a strange Word that the world does not always want to hear. It is the Word that led to Jesus’ crucifixion. At the same time, however, street preaching challenges the church to recapture the audacity and exhilaration of speaking the odd Word of God before the powers of the world.

Notes

¹ Although Acts 2 doesn’t explicitly state that Peter and the disciples went outside to the street, the text requires this interpretation. The number of people who had gathered could not possibly have fit into the house (see v. 5-6, and v. 41). In addition, the emphasis on Peter’s standing with the other disciples and “raising his voice” points in this direction (v. 14). The clear implication is that at some point Peter and the disciples went outside to the street to “address the crowd.”

² By “street preaching” I mean preaching that goes out to people in public spaces, rather than waiting for people to come to the preacher. I thus am not referring to all “open-air” preaching, some of which relies on people coming to a designated place to hear a well-known preacher. A Billy Graham crusade, for example, is not “street preaching.” And much of the preaching of the Awakenings, although done in the open air, would fall outside this category.

³ Harold Goad, *Greyfriars: The Story of St. Francis and His Followers* (London: John Westhouse Publishers, 1947), 87.

⁴ Charles H. Spurgeon, “Open-Air Preaching: A Sketch of its History and Remarks Thereon,” 1; available from <http://biblebelievers.simplenet.com/StreetPreaching2.html>; Internet; accessed 25 January 1999. See also John R. Archer, “Wycliffe, John,” in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Preach-*

ing, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 514-16.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Attack Upon "Christendom,"* trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton Univ. Press, 1944; Beacon paperback edition, Boston: Beacon Press, 1956), viii. Of the Reformation, Spurgeon writes, "... where would the Reformation have been if its great preachers had confined themselves to churches and cathedrals? How would the common people have become indoctrinated with the Gospel had it not been for those far-wandering evangelists, the colporteurs, and those daring innovators who found a pulpit on every heap of stones, and an audience chamber in every open space near the abodes of men?" Spurgeon, 2.

⁶ Dorothy Day, *The Long Loneliness* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1952; reprint, 1981), 204.

⁷ Kierkegaard, viii.

⁸ John R. H. Moorman, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (London: SCM Press, 1950): 19-22.

⁹ Goad, 92.

¹⁰ Harry S. Stout, "Whitefield, George," in *The Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 503-504. In the encyclopedia, see also Ted A. Campbell, "Itinerant and Open-Air Preaching," 274-76.

¹¹ Douglas J. Slawson, "Thirty Years of Street Preaching: Vincentian Motor Missions, 1934-1965," *Church History* 62 (1993): 64.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 79. The Vincentians were not the only street preachers in the Roman Catholic Church at that time. David Goldstein and Martha Moore Avery (both laypeople) organized the Catholic Truth Guild, which later became the Catholic Campaigners for Christ. Having a more evangelistic and social purpose, Goldstein and Avery preached about the bearing of Catholicism on contemporary issues and events. See Debra Campbell, "A Catholic Salvation Army: David Goldstein, Pioneer Lay Evangelist," *Church History* 52 (1983): 322-32.

¹⁴ Slawson, 73.

¹⁵ Ibid., 74.

¹⁶ Mernie King, "Like Street Preaching in Downtown Rome: Witnessing at Nuclear Weapons Facilities," in *Waging Peace: A Handbook for the Struggle to Abolish Nuclear Weapons*, ed. Jim Wallis (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1982), 210.

¹⁷ Bill Wylie Kellerman, *Seasons of Faith and Conscience: Kairos, Confession, Liturgy* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991), 128.

¹⁸ Ibid., 121.

¹⁹ Ibid., 103. See Ephesians 6:12.

²⁰ "Voice" here should not be interpreted too narrowly. "Voice," for example, may include "signing" for those who are deaf.

²¹ Donald W. Dayton and Lucille Sider Dayton, "Women as Preachers: Evangelical Precedents," *Christianity Today* (May 23, 1975): 4-7; Pamela J. Walker, "Proclaiming Women's Right to Preach," *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 23: 3/4 (1994): 20-23, 35.

²² See Campbell, "A Catholic Salvation Army"; also Debra Campbell, "'I Can't Imagine Our Lady on an Outdoor Platform': Women in the Catholic Street Propaganda Movement," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 3 (1983): 103-114.

²³ On the temptations of American "freedom of religion," see Stanley Hauerwas, "The Politics of Freedom: Why Freedom of Religion is a Subtle Temptation," in *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 69-92.

²⁴ Chris Michael, "Preaching on the Street," TMs, p. 1.