

## **A Brawler & Broken Teeth**

**By Jesse M. Boyd**

After living eight years of my life as a false convert, I finally repented and placed my complete trust in the Lord Jesus Christ at the age of seventeen. For years thereafter, I was never really ashamed of the Gospel message and would certainly stand upon it when confronted. There were witnessing encounters; there were divine appointments; there were those whom the Lord allowed me to lead to Him. But, instead of a lifestyle of bold evangelism, I generally preferred my lifestyle to be my evangelism, more concerned, that is, with having friends than being a friend. A biblical and burning conviction to share my faith was long in coming.

Bible college and seminary really never taught me much in terms of New Testament evangelism. I remember trying to hand out some tracts once while in college. I and two other students were literally scared to death, walked around a nearby campus in Lynchburg, Virginia all evening trying to get up the nerve, and only ended up talking to one person. It was really quite pathetic. Even more pathetic was the fact that I found nothing upon which to draw from my recent Evangelism 101 class that night. The professor never once mentioned going out into the streets and naught was ever said about Gospel tracts. In fact, the only thing I remember about that course was the college credit I received for it.

Later, as I attended seminary, Evangelism was once again a required course of instruction. What I do remember is having to submit two reports, each detailing a witnessing encounter with a stranger. As it happened, I rushed over to a crowded mall the night before these assignments were due and hastily hurried around that place until I had two conversations about the Gospel, enough of a conversation at least that would translate into a report. Again, it was pathetic.

In 1999, seven years after I gave my life to the Lord, my wife and I underwent the cumbersome process of applying for service with a Baptist foreign missionary organization. The actual application paperwork required that we answer a number of questions in the realms of biblical doctrine and personal conviction. One particular question still sticks out in my mind: "How are you involved in witnessing to non-believers? Briefly relate a recent experience of sharing your faith with someone who was not a Christian." I really had to think about this one, unable to readily find an answer from the immediate past. It shames me even now to reminisce. I was a seminary student, called to the ministry and pursuing a place on the mission field. Yet, never had I gone to the streets to publicly proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Several years later, while finishing up seminary studies in the San Francisco Bay Area of California, things began to change. About midway through my second fall semester and in conjunction with the ministry of a house church that I was helping to plant, the pricks of the Holy Spirit grew increasingly difficult to ignore. I had set a goal of reading through the Book of Acts five times that semester, and what I found in chasing this goal made me sick to my stomach: I was indifferent toward the souls of men, and all the

theological “mumbo-jumbo” of seminary academia had blinded me to the simplicity of New Testament ministry and my responsibility as an ambassador of Jesus Christ to carry out the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20). Jesus’ last commandment before returning to the Father was not a good suggestion: “Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15), our responsibility. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned”, God’s problem. I knew this, but missiological academia had ingrained too much elaborate strategy and man-centered philosophy into my mind for me to see the obvious picture of what this is supposed to look like. A lot of people have a lot of crazy ideas about how to interpret the Book of Acts, but as I read through it five times, one right after another, I discovered that what I was reading was the God-inspired record of how the earliest disciples of Jesus Christ and the earliest New Testament churches understood and carried out the Great Commission, undoubtedly setting an example for subsequent generations to follow.

At the root, from Pentecost to Paul’s house arrest in Rome, was bold, public proclamation of the Gospel message in the public forum. There was Peter at Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter and John at the Temple (Acts 4), Stephen before his accusers (Acts 7), and Paul who “straightway” preached Christ in the synagogues following his conversion (Acts 9:20). There was Paul and Barnabas in Antioch of Pisidia (Acts 13); these “speaking boldly in the Lord” at Iconium (Acts 14:3); open-air preaching against idolatry at Lystra (Acts 14), the Philippian jail (Acts 16), Mars Hill (Acts 17), bold testimony before Felix, Festus, and Agrippa (Acts 24-26), etc., etc., etc. In Acts 5:42, the believers “ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ.” And when one considers the plethora of events that preceded this resolve, the modern-day churchgoer has more than enough reason to feel ashamed. As I swam through all of this, sometimes on the rocky headlands overlooking the Pacific near the seminary campus and sometimes in the quiet of my own apartment, one often overlooked truth tied all of this together, a spiritual uppercut of sorts that caught me with academic guard down. There is one clear picture in the New Testament of what it looks like to be filled with the Holy Spirit, something all believers are commanded to do (Ephesians 5:18), and that is conveyed loudly, the context magnifying, in Acts 4:31: “and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and they spake the word of God with boldness.” At once, my conscience was splattered beneath the anvil of God’s special revelation. Bold evangelism, I realized, is not a type of ministry to which the specially gifted believer is called. It is a foundational pillar of the New Testament church to which all who believe are commanded, the bedrock of the Great Commission. You simply cannot have genuine discipleship, church planting, church growth, or Christian charity without it. Many times in my Christian walk had I prayed to be filled with the Spirit, but rarely had I ever opened my mouth to proclaim the Word of God with boldness.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture and following what the Lord was teaching me out of the Book of Acts and into the rest of the Bible, I realized several things:

1. Proclamation is the God-ordained method for carrying the Gospel throughout the world (I Corinthians 1:21).

2. You cannot separate believing from speaking (II Corinthians 4:13; Acts 4:20).
3. Almost every major man of God from Noah, a “preacher of righteousness” (II Peter 2:5) to the Apostle John, imprisoned on the isle of Patmos “for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Revelation 1:9; Acts 3-4), was a public proclaimer of the Gospel of Jesus Christ (i.e. a street preacher, an intentional and confrontational evangelist).
4. Practically every sermon in the New Testament was delivered in a public forum where people were not necessarily gathered for that purpose.
5. The public proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ had been carelessly cast aside in this Laodicean age of technology, user-friendly “churchianity”, mission strategies, ministry platforms, statistics, and watered-down spirituality.

I had cast aside the bedrock of the Great Commission; I had ignored the God-ordained means for carrying the Gospel throughout the world; I had failed to live out God’s call on my life to ministry. “If the foundations be destroyed, what can the righteous do” (Psalm 11:3)? I needed to come up with an answer and that right quick. As I saw it, my entire future in service to the Lord hinged upon it.

As I pondered these things, I found myself scanning my bookshelf. Buried amidst a bunch of boring textbooks and useless volumes of spiritual fluff, I noticed a thin paperback--Street Preachers Manual by Gerald Sutek. Where in the world did that come from? To this day, I have no idea why that book was in my possession. Acts showed me clearly what I needed to do. The street preaching manual then showed me how. I marvel at the Providence of Almighty God.

I wasn’t the only one weathering this spiritual storm. The Nomad, a seminary pal with which I have subsequently shared many adventures, came to the same conclusions. We had to hit the streets; we had to be bold.

One Friday, we drove up to Fairfax, a San Francisco suburb known for witchcraft, covens, and just plain weirdness. Some people were hanging out in a public plaza, so we took a few tracts and made the Gospel of Jesus Christ the topic of conversation. There was a freedom that night, a spiritual zeal that I had not known many years before on that campus in Lynchburg, Virginia. Boldness, I found, was habit-forming, and I knew my life would forever be changed. The next weekend, our efforts begged a big question: What would happen if we actually started preaching out here like the Apostle Paul did on Mars Hill? Both of us were scared to death, so we drew straws to see who would have to preach in the open air first. The Nomad drew the short straw, so he started addressing the bystanders from II Corinthians 5:19-21. I can hear him even now. He started out too quiet and looked to be talking to himself, a mentally deranged babbling out of his mind. “You need to speak up,” I said. His voice soon became like a

trumpet, catching the attention of folks sitting nearby. The preaching was powerful; he was truly filled with the Holy Spirit. Then, it was my turn. I don't remember much about my first open-air sermon and have certainly delivered a countless many since, but I do recall returning home that night feeling confident, perhaps a little too self-assured. Yes, the Lord had taught us much that second fall semester at a seminary just outside the most beautiful city in the world. But, I still had a whole lot to learn, for there is much more to a life of bold proclamation than simply opening one's mouth to preach in the open-air.

The next weekend, we returned to Fairfax, and this reality came home to roost. The Nomad was there; a couple other brothers had joined us; I was preaching. A heckler approached and began to spout blasphemies I am unable to repeat. At first, I tried to ignore him. This became impossible, so I pointed my finger at him and said, "The next time you speak that way about my Lord and Saviour, you will be picking up your broken teeth from off the ground." He lunged at me; I went after him hungry for a brawl. The Nomad and my other comrades literally had to hold me back. When the matter dissolved, I was ashamed. "You cannot ever let that happen again," the Nomad chided. He was right. I wanted to be a bold street preacher, but I had shown myself a brawler. I wanted to proclaim Jesus Christ, but I spoke instead of broken teeth. I really had much to learn.

Time went on, and there were many more evangelistic outings on the streets of Fairfax, other nearby towns, and all over the various districts of San Francisco. People soon came to Christ; countless Bibles and Gospel tracts went out; and my understanding of obedience to the Great Commission changed forever. Hundreds of American cities and umpteen foreign countries later, hecklers have come in droves, and II Timothy 2:24-26 has planted itself in the forefront of my mind. Thank God I never again responded like I did that night in Fairfax--a brawler threatening broken teeth. God forbid that I ever will. Bold proclamation is unquestionably the heart of the Great Commission, the underpinning of all that is New Testament ministry, but without meekness and gentleness, the street preacher is destined for regret.