

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

The Public Gospel Invitation

By Joe R. Price

The public invitation is a vital part of preaching the gospel of Christ. Yet today, the gospel invitation is often diminished or depreciated. Drowning men need a lifeline. Dying men need to know of the hope that is offered through Jesus Christ.

Introduction

It would seem some Christians, including some elders and gospel preachers, are becoming increasingly comfortable with not explaining and extending a public invitation to obey the gospel when concluding gospel sermons.

Some tell us that offering a public invitation is a relatively recent phenomenon. This conclusion is likely so within the context of a historical analysis of denominations and their “altar call.” However, divine truth is not established and verified by the historical practices of American denominations or historical practices within American Restorationism. We are concerned with (and want a Bible answer to) the question of whether we have Bible authority to offer public gospel invitations.

Is it scriptural to urge sinners to “come forward” and obey God when we preach the gospel? The answer may seem self-evident, yet, we wish to *“test all things”* and *“hold fast what is good”* (1 Thess. 5:21). If Bible approval exists for public invitations to obey the gospel, is it an optional matter of judgment, or a mere tradition of churches of Christ? If Bible authority exists for preaching gospel invitations, we must do so (Col. 3:17). Put another way, what if we do not offer the gospel invitation when we preach? Are we following a Bible pattern by not so doing? What Scripture provides such a Bible pattern of abstinence?

What Does Scripture Say?

What does Scripture say about the origin of the public invitation to obey the gospel? The first gospel sermons (preached by the apostles) after the ascension of Jesus made public appeals to sinners to *“call on the name of the Lord”* to be saved (Acts 2:21-22, 36-39). Note this summary statement: *“And with many other words, he testified and exhorted them, saying, ‘Be saved from this perverse generation’”* (Acts 2:40). That is the origin of the public gospel invitation.

Our Master said, *“Come unto Me all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light”* (Matt. 11:28-30). Jesus publicly invited people to come to Him. We may confidently follow His example and invite sinners to come to Jesus for salvation. *Indeed, we must!*

The three thousand souls who gladly received the word of God on Pentecost had to identify themselves to the apostles in some way, or else they would not have known who wanted to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:41). Whether by raising their hand, coming forward, or going to the rear— it makes no difference. They identified themselves as believers who wanted to be saved (repent and be baptized) by publicly responding to the public call of the gospel to be saved.

The New Testament contains additional gospel invitations (both public and private): Acts 3:19-26; 8:5-8; 8:35

-37; 13:43; 22:15-16; 24:24-25; 26:20; 28:27-29; Rev. 22:17. These show that gospel preaching includes pleas to sinners to respond in faith and be saved (John 6:45). In the New Testament, sinners were invited (i.e., urged, persuaded, encouraged, instructed) to obey the gospel immediately. Should we not do the same?

A Developing Problem?

I am unaware of brethren who say we should not offer a gospel invitation when we preach. To my knowledge, no one says the public invitation is unauthorized and against the will of God. Yet, there seems to be a significant number of gospel sermons being presented with no gospel invitation offered to the audience. Many conclude with the general summation, “If you have a need, come forward while we stand and sing,” offering no elaboration or explanation about the need, why a need exists, and how to remedy said need. Why is there a growing absence of gospel invitations from preachers?

Some brethren seem convinced that the public invitation to obey the gospel is optional (a late arrival on the preaching scene), designed to be an emotional appeal rather than a genuine plea to respond in faith to obey Christ. While the origin and use of the public invitation among denominations are associated with unbiblical emotionalism and other false teachings (including how to be saved), the public invitation to obey the gospel of Christ did not originate in frontier America.

Perhaps we are hearing fewer gospel invitations because we do not want to deal with the “messy” circumstances of people’s lives? We want to present the gospel in a positive light, so we are tempted not to fully identify sin, explain its effects, and call sinners to obey Christ to be saved (Heb. 5:9)? If this is the state of affairs when we preach, we have abandoned the calling of the gospel (2 Tim. 4:1-5).

Could it be that the gospel invitation is becoming extinct in some pulpits because preaching has taken on an air of academia that is void of pressing appeals to repent or perish? For some, preaching has become the equivalent of giving a lecture, presenting a paper, offering a viewpoint, and analyzing positions instead of proclaiming the gospel with its necessary reproofs, rebukes, and exhortations that urgently call sinners to repentance (2 Tim. 4:2-4; 2 Cor. 6:2; Heb. 3:12-13; Acts 2:40). We would do well to recall that telling or hearing some new thing is not gospel preaching, but the ruminations of “this-world” oriented philosophers (Acts 17:21, 30-34; 1 Cor. 1:18-25). Such exercises rarely lend themselves to declaring absolute truth and the necessity of obedience to be saved (Acts 17:30-32). When churches advertise gospel meetings by introducing a preacher’s academic achievements to the community, is God’s word or human accomplishments offered to give credibility and incentive to hear the gospel? We know that the identifying marks of an evangelist are not educational degrees conferred by men (John 7:15; Acts 4:13; 1 Cor. 2:1-5). Why are they being used by some to introduce preachers?

Conclusion

We are not binding a “church of Christ tradition” or mimicking American evangelicalism when we publicly invite, urge, and persuade sinners to come to Christ. Preaching the gospel demands that we do so (2 Tim. 4:2). When we preach the word, we must identify sin (i.e., reprove), present the need for change (i.e., rebuke), and urge sinners to obey the gospel plan of salvation (i.e., exhort). Do not let any preaching opportunity pass without urging sinners to believe and obey the gospel. ***“Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men”*** (2 Cor. 5:11). May we always urge sinners to come and draw from the wells of salvation (Isa. 12:3; John 4:13). ■

“The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’ Let him who hears say, ‘Come!’ Let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely” (Rev. 22:17).

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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