DOES STREET EVANGELISM WORK?

Are the days of public evangelistic rallies behind us, or should we get over our British reserve and get stuck in?

JAY SMITH

PAUL ANDERSON-WALSH

YES

I've been doing street evangelism for more than 20 years at Speaker's Corner in Hyde Park and elsewhere in London. You have to create a crowd, so I usually start with something controversial that will catch their attention. People like the theatre, and public preaching is theatrical. If people yell at you, that's great theatre. Public preaching isn't about discipleship but it can do four things.

First, it gets the gospel out. People film our debates and post them online where over a million people have seen them. I get emails from people in various countries who have seen our videos and say they have been instrumental in their conversion to Christianity.

Secondly, it can challenge Islam and hold it to account. Muslims will always react, especially if you say something critical about Islam. But Christianity comes out on top on almost every issue of comparison between the two religions. We can't confront Islam in any other venue – not on a university campus or in a book, but I can at Speaker's Corner, because it's the bastion of freedom of speech.

Thirdly, it gives Christians confidence. Muslims tell me they think Christians are timid and can't defend what they believe. They want to hear someone with confidence, because their religious men are willing to die to defend what they believe. We've made Jesus look like a wimp. Look at the way Jesus confronted the Pharisees – that's a side of him that we don't emulate.

Fourthly, it provides an opportunity for 'territorial gain'. Islam practices territorial gain, not only in terms of geographical territory but replacing cultures – taking over the schools, the media and the social code. Christianity has nothing comparable. So how do we get territorial gain? We can do so in the public sphere by confronting Islam at its foundations (ie the Qur'an and Mohammed) and providing the alternative – the gospel, and Jesus Christ.

JAY SMITH is an American evangelist who has lived and worked in the UK since 1992. He has studied Islam and worked among Muslims since 1983

NO

I'm nervous about the 'gospel muggings' you see on the high street all the time. It's not that no one ever comes to faith through this, but I'm not sure it's the best way. Does it do more harm than good? It probably creates a worse image of the Church and the gospel.

If the alternative to relational evangelism is confrontational, then what is more consistent with the character and nature of God – relationship or confrontation? I'm unlikely to change my position because of an argument; in fact, I'm more likely to become more entrenched in my own opinion. On the other hand, if I saw your life and the kindness of your spirit I might be tempted to your position by who you are.

Fundamentally, we're called to be witnesses, not called to do witnessing. We ought to be able to differentiate ourselves from the Mormon Church or Jehovah's Witnesses who go door to door. The goal of evangelism is not to build your confidence but to share the good news of the gospel.

I'm not sure there's any precedent for street evangelism in the New Testament. Peter's sermon at Pentecost is not an invitation for someone to preach, but a demand for an explanation.

I'm not against every kind of public evangelism. I'm all for acts of service, music and street drama. A great example was during the Olympics when the Salvation Army gave out bottles of water; there was no sting to it, it was just an act of kindness. I think that has more resonance with people than screaming 'turn or burn' in a shopping centre. My question would be, who do you think is the most compelling evangelist – the person with the megaphone or Mother Teresa? There she sat on the streets of Calcutta just being Jesus. That kind of street evangelism works for me.

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