

whatsoever city ye enter, and they receive you not, go your ways out into the streets of the same, and say, Even the very dust of your city, which cleaveth on us, we do wipe off against you: notwithstanding be ye sure of this, that the kingdom of God is come nigh unto you" (vv. 10,11). The Lord employs a different expression to that used when sending out the twelve, found only here within the New Testament and rendered "wipe off" in the Authorised Version. The Greek word, however, means 'scrape away', and recalls Leviticus 14, where, among the commands for dealing with the plague of leprosy in a house, we find:

"and he shall cause the house to be *scraped* within round about, and they shall pour out *the dust that they scrape off* without the city into an unclean place" (v. 41);

"And if the plague come again, and break out in the house, after that he hath taken away the stones, and after he hath *scraped* the house, and after it is plastered . . ." (v. 43).

The removal of the leprous house is a figure for the deconstruction of the house of Israel (compare, for example, Zechariah 5:4 with Leviticus 14:45), who in manifesting the mind of sin rejected the Lord Jesus Christ and experienced the destruction of A.D. 70. In referring to this passage, the consequence for Israel of their rejection of the gospel is once again highlighted. The lesson, of

course, does not end there, as a similar destruction awaits all those who refuse the Lord Jesus at his coming, when the kingdom of men is broken to pieces and becomes like the chaff of the summer threshing floor.

Conclusion

In reviewing the material, three lessons emerge for our own preaching. Firstly, we must not shake off the dust of our feet before an opportunity to respond has been provided; we should not use our separation as an excuse to refrain from delivering the message of gospel truth. Secondly, the act of shaking off the dust from their feet was aimed primarily at the Jews, who, having knowledge of the Scriptures, failed to appreciate their true import in rejecting the Son of God. The first-century followers of the Lord were required to mark their separation from them; similarly we are required to mark our separation from those who, having an interest in the Bible, fail to recognise the Truth. While we should continue to appeal, we cannot share fellowship with those who refuse the teaching of the Word of God. Finally, as heralds of the King, we are required to make clear what the consequences of ignoring his call will be, not with delight in the predicament of others, but rather in the faithful discharge of our responsibility to act as watchmen against the coming of the King.

Preaching from house to house

Trevor Hughes

Preaching in houses has a Scriptural basis. It is probably more profitable to use our own homes as a basis for preaching the gospel than calling 'cold' on other people's houses. In so doing, Scriptural principles should be followed in the way this preaching is conducted.

WE CAN FIND our Lord preaching in almost every place and circumstance during the period of his ministry. He was there in the temple and its precincts, in synagogues, city streets and thoroughfares, on mountainsides, in cornfields, in a boat on the Lake of Galilee, at a poolside, in open countryside and even in desert regions, where he was followed by a multitude. Yet some of his most sensitive and

touching incidents were those where he was found to be in people's homes. He healed Peter's mother-in-law in Peter's home, and healed a paralytic man let down through the roof of a crowded house in Capernaum, because there was no room even at the door. Gatherings of tax collectors and 'sinners' were brought together in a home, where they gladly received his forgiveness and grace. Simon the Pharisee invited Jesus to his house, but Jesus exposed his hardness of heart through his lack of hospitality and so he earned the rebuke, "he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Lk. 7:47).*

* Quotations from the ESV.

When Jesus sent out his twelve apostles to the lost sheep of the house of Israel they went in pairs into the towns and villages to preach the gospel of the Kingdom of God. They were to allow themselves no change of clothing and no reserves of cash funding for their journey. It was a call to faith. As Jesus said, 'The labourer deserves his food'. By God's grace, the habits of eastern hospitality to travellers would open homes for the apostles. They were to convey a message of peace. But if anyone would not receive the gospel the apostles were to 'shake off the dust from their feet' as they left, a Jewish practice more commonly invoked on hostile Gentiles.

Undoubtedly, the customary hospitality greatly assisted the spread of the gospel. Yet the caution in Jesus' command provided a practical rule. Open hospitality was insufficient in itself. The gospel would only be received by the humble and those willing to receive the enduring treasure of heaven.

Both faith and hospitality are lessons for us today. No preaching should be engaged upon without first committing the work to our Father in prayer. Self-sufficiency and self-dependence are not compatible with the aims of calling men and women to the gospel.

It was at the home of Martha and Mary that we observe the special warmth to be associated with preaching in a family home. There Mary found the good portion which would not be taken away from her (Lk. 10:38-42). Seemingly oblivious to the bustle of her sister's domesticity, Mary sat at the Master's feet and opened her heart to receive his message of salvation.

So it is little wonder that, among the qualifications to be sought for overseers or elders in the ecclesias, Paul advised that they should be hospitable and able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). We can observe how the first-century ecclesias flourished upon these principles as the apostles "every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ" (Acts 5:42). It seems that the temple and Jewish synagogues were soon augmented and later displaced as principal places for Christian work and worship, as brothers and sisters opened their homes for preaching, breaking of bread and for prayers (Acts 2:46; 18:7; Rom. 16:5).

The message of the new covenant in Jesus Christ is a calling to rebirth into the family of God (Jno. 1:12,13). Ecclesias are therefore intended to develop on family principles that focus upon life within a godly home. The more we can infuse this ethos into our preaching, the warmer and more

inviting will be the message. For many, religion is set apart from daily life and is performed at set times and associated with temples, churches or mosques. The gospel Jesus taught is a way of life in itself, drawn into a fellowship with the Father and those of common faith. When our community was forged in the mid-nineteenth century, much effort was expended to avoid it becoming just another denomination within Christendom. It was meant to revive the apostolic teaching of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His own possession, that [we] may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called [us] out of darkness into His marvellous light" (1 Pet. 2:9).

It seems to me, therefore, that in the record of the Acts of the Apostles the terms 'breaking bread in their homes' and preaching 'from house to house' had more reference to the hospitality engendered in performing the work of the Lord than to the cold calling and canvassing techniques associated with our day. We also have to bear in mind that differing cultures and changing attitudes can and do impact in various ways on social interaction at or within people's homes. It would be naïve to impose an insensitive role to preaching 'house to house' just on the principle that the apostles did it. There is no Scriptural precedent for adopting some such house-to-house calling as a medium for preaching in every time and circumstance. In the first century there were also venues for riverside prayer meetings (Acts 16:13), but these places were particular to the time because it was common for people, especially the women, to gather at the riverside for the washing of clothes. Similarly, markets conveniently drew people together, giving rise to preaching to and teaching gatherings of people alongside their other normal work-a-day activities (17:17).

House-to-house preaching activities which have been conducted at campaigns in the UK have broadly been those of billing leaflets, delivering them through letter boxes, and doorstep canvassing. More recently, canvassing has become unacceptable and even considered disreputable by many. When I was a young man both methods of house-to-house calling were acceptable, though I recall how canvassing was very wisely done in pairs and the call was usually restricted to giving the household a more personal invitation to advertised meetings being held in the area. Only when discussion developed at the instigation of the householder did we engage in further preaching at the doorstep or within the home. I am aware that in some countries any form of

meeting at, or within, homes is unacceptable or even illegal. In some instances in Africa, culture forbids the use of the home for such purposes, yet gatherings often come together under trees, where preaching is welcomed as being socially invigorating.

So how might we best emulate the practice of first-century preaching in the home today? The love of God's Word and the desire to bring others to salvation through our hospitality must surely be the essential elements of its success. For me, some of the most homely and spiritually edifying preaching experiences have been with those who have progressed from attending the ecclesial seminars and have joined together in home Bible Classes. Here we read and pray together, seeking spiritual wisdom and understanding direct from God's Word. Brothers and sisters and group members have opened their homes for these meetings. That is preaching from house to house indeed.

The main benefit is that of a relaxed atmosphere in which God's Word predominates to influence the hearts and minds of all present. Those involved in such home Bible reading groups are more disposed to pursue the true meaning of Scripture within its context, and less inclined to argue from preconceived ideas. It is important, of course, that we, too, avoid implanting doctrinal bias on passages, allowing the context to direct the intended message.

A well-known brother in a nearby ecclesia ran a weekly Bible Class for many years. He opened his home to all who would attend. Many benefited from these classes, and some who attended obeyed the call of the Truth by baptism into Christ. If each ecclesia were able to replicate the work of that brother, what a witness would go forth worldwide! The main difficulty, perhaps, is in making the initial contacts to form a group dedicated to the purpose. Ecclesias have made various efforts to do this, with contacts being drawn initially through hospitality extended at coffee mornings, children's groups, retired person's gatherings and the like. Some years ago, the ecclesia to which I belong arranged home basic Bible study classes for young people. Those from the Youth Group attended, and friends were invited, with some success. Similar means of bringing people together can be the open home after ecclesial meetings on Sunday evenings, or such other times as our brothers, sisters and friends may gather together. This can lead to useful opportunity to preach the gospel and discuss those problems that arise when people are searching for Truth and need

more informal interaction than is usual in our public meetings.

It has been many years since our ecclesia advertised home Bible reading classes, but this can meet with some success. In such instances it is, again, important to stress that the class is open to receive and include discussion from all present, with no one person being allowed to dominate in any particular persuasion. We would wish to ensure that a suitable brother leads the meetings. He needs to be even-handed yet skilful in making sure that distorted interpretations are avoided and that serious digression does not occur. He will endeavour to instil a sincere and reverent approach to God's Word and a godly respect for all who participate.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries among the Western English-speaking communities, people tended to have some Biblical knowledge and a religious background. This could lead to vigorous debate on doctrinal topics, such as the nature of man, heaven and hell, and differing concepts of the Godhead. Often, in our twenty-first-century experience, few have any knowledge of Scripture and little idea of theological matters at all. Therefore, our first appeal to men and women must be to redirect their values from the hopelessness on offer in the world to a first appreciation of the supreme God.

Many can see a degeneration in the political and moral fabric of society, and do have a fear of where this may lead. It also impinges on personal experience, bringing broken families, unhappiness, lack of fulfilment and impotence to face the realities of life. By God's grace, we have the answers to these problems through His Word. But our message must be directed to their need. God offers personal salvation through Jesus Christ, His Son, and redemption of the world when Jesus comes again as King. Can we see our preaching as a means of *helping* those in such need? Surprisingly, in a recent survey it was discovered that the subject of prayer was one that attracted people who otherwise showed little interest in religion. Could it be that such people are seeking help and comfort in this disturbed and hostile world? A listening ear and sympathetic attitude to people's personal problems in a homely atmosphere may lead to the opportunity to offer the hope of the gospel. Our preaching should address these issues as relevant to our time and circumstance.

Recently, my daughter has been in discussion with an elderly gentleman she meets in her neighbourhood. He has been an Anglican all

his life, but has been disillusioned with the way the church has moved from its traditions, and is disappointed that it does not give the lead he considers appropriate to combat the evils of the world today. She has spoken of our understanding of the signs of the times and of Christ's imminent return to the earth to establish righteousness and peace. This has led to interest in the things we believe. She considers that the time is right for him to be invited home so that she and her husband can explain more fully the gospel message with open Bible. It remains to be seen if he takes

up the invitation, but this is, perhaps, the sort of opportunity we should all seek. He is much more likely to be encouraged to attend our meetings after a homely discussion than by an advertisement or a cold call at his doorstep.

So, preaching in our homes should be modelled so far as is possible on the principles we are given in Scripture, but it should be directed to suit the needs of today. Its success will be found, not in self-dependence and human endeavour, but through faith in the strength which God supplies through His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.