

A Brief History of Gospel Meetings

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In the first century the apostles boldly preached to assemblies of men and women that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that his word is the power of God unto salvation to both Jew and Gentile (Romans 1:16-17). Preaching is essential to the salvation of those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21). "Gospel Meeting" refers to assemblies of people who have come together for the purpose of hearing the gospel of Christ preached unto them. *Gospel* is the "good news" of salvation in Christ. Philip, one of the seven chosen to minister to the needy widows (Acts 6:3-5), was sent by the Holy Spirit to the city of Samaria where he preached Christ in a gospel meeting. His preaching was very successful in that city in that "both men and women" were baptized, and it produced great joy in that city. Such meetings are recorded all through the New Testament where the apostles and inspired men led the way in preaching the gospel of Christ to multitudes of people who "gladly heard" them. Where the church existed, such efforts continued down through the ages by those who knew the mission of the church as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:15).

Churches of Christ have engaged in "meetings" where the gospel was preached on some regular basis since the middle of the last century. The nature, purpose and duration of these meetings have changed over the past one hundred years. Some of these changes are for good, and some are for bad.

Over the past few years, a number of young men who intend to devote their lives to preaching the gospel of Christ have asked me why churches of Christ are becoming more like the denominational world each day, and why it is so hard to convert people to Christ today. I do not have all the answers, but I know some reasons for the change in the church and the loss of interest in the pure gospel. Some of them are:

1. The inclination to appeal more to the social gospel.
2. Efforts to be more popular with denominationalism in this generation.
3. Professionalism among preachers.
4. Pushing women into the leadership and public activity of the church.
5. Lack of qualified elders and deacons, and the desire for majority rule.
6. The entertaining function of preachers in pulpit preaching.

Some History of Gospel Meetings

I do not have an abundance of recorded historical information of the early practice of "gospel meetings" among churches of Christ after New Testament times. The nature of this article must depend upon my own experience and the information I have gathered from some gospel preachers of the generation before me. As a young man I spent hours talking to older preachers about their experiences in preaching the gospel. That was the delight of my life. I have especially benefitted from talking with such men as Ben F. Taylor, H. Leo Boles, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., Roy E. Cogdill, Charles M. Pullias, C. E. W. Dorris, H. C. Shoulders, N. B. Hardeman, B. C. Goodpasture, and some others. I read history books on what is called the restoration period, and the work of preaching among churches of Christ. For more than fifty years I read the "news reports" in most of the religious journals among us. That should give a cross section of the general practice of "Gospel Meetings" through the years. From these sources I shall try to construct some historical information

regarding gospel meetings. I offer you my understanding of the information gleaned from these sources. You must judge whether this article is of any value to you.

Such meetings as I am discussing were not always known as "Gospel Meetings." They were sometimes referred to as "Protracted Meetings" because they continued over a period of time. They were sometimes designated "Evangelistic Meetings" because the main purpose was to reach denominational people and those who belonged to no church. They were sometimes called "Tent Meetings" in some localities because they were conducted under tents year after year.

After the Civil War and just before World War I, some "Meetings" were arranged by more than one church "cooperating" to provide the place and the preachers for the meeting. Most preachers of that time, including David Lipscomb, E. G. Sewell, and others associated with the Gospel Advocate, opposed this practice. Occasionally, a debate on doctrinal differences developed from gospel meetings. During the days of J. D. Tant, C. R. Nichol, J. Early Arceneaux, Foy E. Wallace, Jr., Roy E. Cogdill, Franklin T. Puckett, Yater Tant, W. Curtis Porter, and others, many debates with denominational preachers were conducted. Most of these debates developed from gospel meetings in those days. During the 1930s and 1940s some churches were established in communities where debates were conducted as the result of "gospel meetings."

Between World War I and World War II gospel meetings were conducted in school houses, court houses, barns, in brush arbors, tents and occasionally in denominational buildings. The purpose in those meetings was to convince and convert alien sinners to Jesus Christ. Usually large numbers were baptized during the course of each gospel meeting, because the preaching was true to the word and plainly spoken.

My experience in gospel meetings did not begin until near the end of World War II. Reflecting upon the gospel meetings at that time, I believe several factors merged to make them as successful as they were. Some of these factors were:

1. The war turned many to religion to seek God for a solution for their problems that grew out of divided families and the anxieties of war.
2. Opportunities were opened for the gospel in the countries where the military had been during the war.
3. The militant attitude of most churches of Christ during the years immediately following the war.
4. Gospel meetings began to increase in number and preachers began to devote their full time to preaching in meetings rather than in local work.

During the 1930s and 1940s gospel meetings would often span three Sundays, and sometimes go through the third Wednesday evening. These long meetings resulted from increasing interest as they continued. I remember several meetings in which I preached during the middle 1940s and through the 1950s that would continue a week or more beyond the date advertised to close. The interest continued to mount and both the churches and preachers were eager to continue. How could one stop an effort when from one to twelve came to be baptized every night, and several were restored to the Lord each night?

During this period gospel meetings nearly always had day (morning or afternoon) services and evening services every day of the meeting. The preaching was distinctive and forceful. Sermon subjects expressed Bible matters. Doctrinal error was exposed and immorality was condemned without apology. Obedience was emphasized in clear language with Bible examples. Every member was interested in his relative and neighbor to hear the gospel of Christ, and they brought them to meetings night after night.

During the first half of this century the "pay" for gospel meetings was not what it is today. Often preachers traveled many miles and preached two full weeks or more, and received less than enough to pay for their travel expenses. That was almost the rule rather than the exception. That happened to me several times during my first twenty years of preaching. I remember talking with brother H. C. Shoulders in my home in the 1940s about his experiences in gospel meetings. He was in his 80s at the time. He told me that on one occasion he traveled over one hundred miles for a meeting, which lasted two weeks. On the last Sunday the brethren "took up a collection for the preacher" and brother Shoulders said he received \$6.29. He put in \$2.00 of that amount. He had to travel by train to his next meeting, and borrowed \$10.00 from a brother to buy the train ticket. After two weeks in the second meeting, he received \$8.50 for his labors. His total income for preaching in two gospel meetings for four weeks was \$14.79. I think he said his expenses were about \$39.00 for those meetings. That was not an isolated incident! I have preached in a few meetings that cost me up to \$50.00 out of pocket to pay my travel expenses above what I received for the meetings. Most every gospel preacher of my generation had this same experience. Later churches began to pay preachers more for assisting them in gospel meetings.

During the 1950s gospel meetings were used by some preachers and churches to promote certain doctrinal issues that later divided churches across the land. The liberal ideas of the social gospel, institutional agencies through which churches should pool their financial resources in evangelism and benevolence, cooperation of churches through one eldership became the central theme in many gospel meetings across the land. This led to division. During the 1950s and 1960s I had many gospel meetings canceled because of the influence of the promoters of church supported human institutions. Efforts to talk to them often failed, and relationships became worse. In the 1960s gospel meetings began to be for shorter periods of time. The six day annual meeting became the pattern. During this period of time many churches requested preachers to deal with a specific subject during these six days. Usually that subject concerned the issues of that time.

During the 1970s and 1980s the three day meeting became popular. More television, ball games and social functions left no time for attending gospel meetings. Some churches decided to have one full week (six days, Sunday through Friday) meeting and a three-day meeting (Friday, Saturday and Sunday) during the year. The three day meeting generally was directed toward some special subjects.

Today serious concern plagues churches in general over the country regarding gospel meetings. It is becoming more difficult to get people to attend a gospel meeting. Even the members will not faithfully attend a gospel meeting. Forty or fifty years ago the buildings were filled from the first night with denominational people and those who were not members of any religious body. The members were able to bring their neighbors and family members. The members of the church where the meeting was conducted came regularly every day and night to the preaching. They did not

depend upon faithful members of neighboring churches of Christ to have a decent audience. Interest increased during the meeting and many were obedient to the gospel. But now it is difficult to get the members of the church having the gospel meeting to attend more than Sunday morning and Wednesday night. We must depend upon other churches of Christ in the area to provide an audience, and that is not as easy as it was a few years ago. There are exceptions, of course. One of the major causes of this problem is the soft, denominational, weak preaching that is done in these meetings. The preachers are more interested in having people praise and exalt them than in pleasing God with the plain, pure gospel of Christ that will call one to repentance and a more obedient life.

Over the past two decades efforts have been made to stimulate gospel meetings by having "lectureships" in which two or more gospel preachers preach in three or four services each day on special subjects. These efforts expect to attract the attention of several churches in an area and rely upon their attendance to provide a good audience. The problem is that it does not attract alien sinners and denominational people, who really need good gospel preaching. The more mature and faithful Christians enjoy these lessons, but the ones who need them are not there.

Gospel meetings provide a good way to edify a local church and reach some few who come a time or two, but they are not presently reaching the majority of lost people who need the gospel. We must work harder to encourage people to attend meetings where the simple gospel of Christ is preached. We must secure men who will earnestly preach Christ unto the people, and preach "the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 8:12).

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