

# Street Preaching — Compassionate, Confrontational and Christian

Union Square is a historic and lively outdoor space in Manhattan, known for its plethora of restaurants, live entertainment, farmers market, college students and — most infamously — skateboarders. It is a crossroads for all people; a place where the rich and poor, young and old, goth and suits meet for entertainment and leisure. Entrepreneurs, extreme sport enthusiasts and people watchers are not the only ones taking advantage of this unique space; street evangelists are too.



Shawn preaching in the Union Square subway station

They are part of the two percent of Christians who actively engage in evangelism, sharing their faith with others, according to statistics released by the evangelistic organization, Campus Crusade For Christ. These street preachers are spreading the love and message of Jesus Christ right in the middle of New York City, and adding religion to the mix at this outdoor Manhattan hotspot.

This sparks some questions. How do they have the guts to do what they do in such a city? Are they simply Jesus freaks who should be categorized with the other “crazies” that roam Manhattan? And, is anybody really listening?

I took several different approaches as I watched these street preachers on my biweekly visits to Union Square. As a Christian, I admired their willingness to spread the message and inquired about their motivation. As a minister, I admired their preaching boldness, analyzed their audiences’ responses, and learned some indirect yet valuable lessons about spreading the gospel. And at times, while I respected their mission, I had issues with the message they chose to share (particularly in regards to judgment, hell, and dogmatism) and questioned whether the best and most relevant methods were being used to reach their audience.

## Ministering With A Prayer

Youth With a Mission is an urban outreach ministry started in 1960 with the mission of

“sending and caring for individuals committed to world evangelization,” says Metro New York director Nick Savoca.

YWAM member Joost Nennie does what he calls “prayer stations” in Union Square. At these booths, there is no direct street preaching. Representatives of the organization simply offer to pray with individuals.

On this weekday afternoon, I see Joost and his fellow workers set up near the farmer’s market. They have red shirts to identify them, and work in groups of two. There is evangelical material at the prayer booth on topics such as how to start a relationship with Christ, and devotional support. There is no pushiness from the group. They are simply there, talking to people and available for prayer. This is what makes them intriguing to me. Instead of seeking to shove the gospel down people’s throats, they stand as a presence, offering to be available.

How did a young guy like Joost get connected to this type of street evangelism? While some people had a desire at a young age to come to New York to become a star, Joost had a different call. “I was 9 years old living in Holland when God spoke to me about going to New York City when I would turn 18,” he says. “So when I turned 18, I looked at mission-minded organizations and found out about Youth With A Mission.”



Joost Nennie's Prayer Station in Union Square

Through these prayer stations, Joost and others can meet people in the marketplace. “It is harder to do this type of ministry in the suburbs. People in NYC are upfront, and that is what this ministry is about as well”, says Joost. He acknowledges that some people will not go to a church, so the prayer station puts him where the people are.

How are the booths received by others? Joost cannot put it into numbers. Even the same location on different days can bring different responses. But what he does have are memories. “I have seen a drug addict who was fighting with another man over ten dollars turn his life around after one of our workers ministered to him. He crashed his crack pipe on the ground. We saw him a year later in the same spot; he testified of his life change which was obvious even in the way he looked and spoke.”

But there have been low times as well. “I remember setting up in London, England, in 2005 after the subway bombings,” Joost recalls. “I don’t think we got to talk and pray with more than a handful of people during that outreach.”

Joost has done all types of street ministries but says prayer stations are his favorite. “It’s obvious and not threatening to people,” he says.

And I agree. Out of all the types of street evangelism I have seen in the city, this is one of the most inviting. And while “not threatening” may sound like a passive type of ministry, I believe workers like Joost are simply being sensitive and strategic with their approach to people who may already perceive them in a certain light.

**These prayer stations are welcoming, and that is what people, particularly in these hard times, need to see: a welcoming, loving God.**

Joost appears very young yet attuned to his calling. When asked why he does what he does he says, “God is real... we believe in a God that wants to have relationship with us and we desperately need him, so we share that with people and allow the Holy Spirit to minister to them.”

And though Joost has good intentions, the fact remains that street ministries are not always well received. “The gospel, besides it being life-giving, is death to others because it confronts people,” Joost admits. “Therefore negative feedback is expected.” But Joost confronts an important fact as well. “There are many people that have had bad experiences with street ministry because they feel judged by Christians or by the Church in general, and I think a part of that is very understandable because Christians can be.”

Even after years of missionary work, Joost notes that he still gets nervous every time he goes out. “A part of me doesn’t want to get rejected, but when you see God use you because of his purposes, you can’t believe you were scared to begin with.”

Joost’s method of evangelizing is one that I fully embrace. Even as a layperson — doing street evangelism and missionary work as a teen — I never believed in pushing the gospel down people’s throats. And now, as an ordained minister, I still feel the same. I think the gospel should be presented as a “useful” and not a “punitive” option.

These prayer booths remind me of the need to reach people needs as opposed to getting on a soapbox full of convicting and guilty rhetoric. If we do this, then the people will be

drawn to our love and open up to the God that we preach about. These prayer stations are welcoming, and that is what people, particularly in these hard times, need to see: a welcoming, loving God.

Joost and his group at the prayer booth inspire me in my private life and in my ministry to be more inviting and less closed in my faith; more prayerful and less preachy; more available and less reserved.

## **Ministering With A Sign**

Forty-three-year-old Shawn carries a sign across his body in the Union Square subway. From one side it reads “Turn to Jesus, Turn from Your Sins” and from the other, “Jesus Saves from Hell”. His message and means are quite different from Joost and the prayer station. At the Times Square subway station, Shawn’s numerous evangelistic signs are laid out on the ground and on tables, but today in Union Square, he carries a modest two, on his body. When asked why he evangelizes on the streets he responds, “When you become born again, you got to work for Jesus and tell them that God is not willing that anyone should perish... I got a job to do.”

**I respect his passion and consistency and I’m somewhat inspired by it. However, I can’t help but think about the message itself. Deep down, I wish he were selling “Heaven” instead of “Hell”.**

Shawn is delivering his message not only on his body but through a tract entitled, “What Must I Do To Go To Hell”. Though his method may look like he is just distributing material, he says that it is still powerful. “The message gets in them,” he says.

Shawn is very dedicated to this type of work and it shows in his schedule. He distributes tracts and wears signs in the subways from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. So how did Shawn end up a Manhattan street preacher? “I had a kidney problem for 14 years and even four kidney rejections and after that I have been on fire for the Lord... I was in a need of a new kidney for 14 years... I got it. Now, I got a second chance to live for Jesus.” As he tells me this, he shows me the marks on his left arm from years of being on a dialysis machine.

It’s easy to mistake his zeal and “fire and brimstone” message as crazy. When asked if he was worried about how people would perceive him, he quickly stated no: “I was

worried about them going to hell.” So what do Shawn’s friends think about his ministry? “They think I’m gonna snap out of it... it’s been three years... they see I’m not snapping out of it, they know its true,” he says.

Doing what Shawn does on a consistent basis is not easy. He has encountered several obstacles since being a street evangelist. He has had people spit on him — to which, he says, he responded with an “I Love You” — and although it is legal for him to do what he does in the subways, he says the police sometimes bother him.

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### **The Author : Myisha Cherry**

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As we talk, Shawn’s passion and conviction is obvious as he boldly and knowledgeably speaks about Christology and quotes from the Bible. I respect his passion and consistency and I’m somewhat inspired by it. However, I can’t help but think about the message itself.

Deep down, I wish he were selling “Heaven” instead of “Hell”. So I ask him about the message. He references the “fear of God”. This fear he speaks of really means “respect” for God rather than being “afraid” of God, but it is the literal meaning of this scripture and several Revelations passages that give him unequivocal purpose.

As people continue to pass by, he stands there wearing his sign and passing out tracts. There are no conversations with and no smiles shown to the busy people that pass by — just a man with a purpose spreading his message.

Though Shawn’s signs may spark fear in some and conviction in others, his passion and dedication should be applauded. It is his boldness and dedication that I admire. I am not always as bold in my Christianity as I should be; I only wish I could be as fearless as



A member of YMBBA Ministries preaching in Union Square

Shawn. However, I leave him wishing that there were less fear and consequences, and more love and incentives in his message.

Although I truly understand his zeal, I wish he would preach his miracle: that God can heal and give you life. That is what he experienced through his kidney ordeal. I believe everyone has a message that is based on the miracle performed in their life.

I am not one to say that his efforts are in vain, but I believe that it would be more powerful if he truly told his testimony, instead of believing that to be a preacher “on fire” one must warn against eternal fire. As long as people think this, we will miss out on passionate laborers with misdirected motivation; they will always be seen as loony because they have not fully realized that the Gospel is about something very important: Good News. Shawn teaches me to be fearless, but also shows me why Heaven is a greater selling point than Hell.

## **Ministering with a Microphone**

A crowd is forming around a young man with a microphone where the skateboarders usually do their tricks in Union Square. At first glance, it is clear that this is no music performance, but traditional street preaching. About 75 people are noticeably agreeing and disagreeing with the message. The man on the microphone is saying, “There is no love outside of God; true riches are those that don’t perish.” He begins to explain how we will be judged on the last day. Ten people surround him, hollering and debating, others circle around and watch, some even comment to each other. The scene is very confrontational, yet engaging and intriguing. A man who is part of the silent crowd admits to me, “This is passionate... this is the reason I moved to New York.” I respond by saying, “Me too!”

The man on the microphone and about four others with him are missionaries from Texas, part of an organization called YMBBA Ministries – the acronym stands for “You Must Be Born Again.” The young preacher doesn’t have it easy here in Union Square. It is an in-your-face debate with people who disagree with him, yet he remains poised and gentle. He speaks and then allows an audience member to ask a question or comment. The missionaries use apologetics as their method of evangelizing, and they and the crowd engage each other on homosexuality, baptism and the question of pagan influence on Christianity. These

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young preachers are not concerned about sounding or looking crazy to these New Yorkers. Ryan Ringnald, one of the missionaries, notes, “A true Christian is taught by the Bible not to fear man nor live for man’s approval, but to Fear God and live before him.”

Mark Thrope, a 28-year-old Bronx resident standing on the outskirts of the circle, says about the preacher facing the challenging group: “If Jesus went through [opposition], he’ll go through it.” And he does go through a lot. The ten or so people who outwardly disagree with him are passionate and wild. One guy continues to shout “God is a homosexual” right beside the preacher as he ministers.

Twenty-one-year-old onlooker, Natalie Daniel, says, “He shouldn’t do it; it’s disrespectful.” (Later he would admit his motivation was that the missionaries’ right to free speech with a microphone in Union Square was annoying.)

The mic is unplugged because the scene becomes too chaotic. The missionaries believe it has gone too far, but the ministering does not stop. It is then that mini-discussions begin to take place among the crowd.

In a circle of six, one of the missionaries begins to tell his testimony. In a group of three, people begin to discuss theological issues, but this time the volume on both sides is turned down and, perhaps, listening is going on.

I decide to talk to people about the missionaries’ dialogue-preaching technique and ask if it is working.

Frank, a 32 year old from Queens, believes it is not. “There is nothing they can do here... People are not open and they are not welcoming the message. To do it, you got to be willing to respect other people’s views and philosophies.” Twenty-six-year-old Brandon disagrees: “This form of evangelism is making a difference. The people who were out here a couple of days ago are back, so their ears are open. Love is taking place; they are coming closer and they are starting to listen.”

**In a church world where sermons are becoming “tell the people what they want to hear” messages, these missionaries showed me that with the gospel, it’s about the message, not about being popular.**

I don’t know if the missionaries learned anything from the onlookers, or the onlookers from the missionaries, but there is no doubt that something was exchanged. And

although deep inside I hoped that they would preach the gospel without adding a piece of the “ traditional street preaching judgment sermon,” they stood firm on issues and themes with positions largely different from those debating them. And that is bold. In a church world where sermons are becoming “tell the people what they want to hear” messages, these missionaries showed me that with the gospel, it’s about the message, not about being popular.

But what will stick with me most was the young missionaries’ ability to maintain their cool, patience and meekness in the midst of adversity. I saw firsthand how this can gain the attention and respect of your audience and convert the ear of those who disagree with you. Maybe that was the main message God wanted them to share and show that day in Union Square. At least, it was the lesson I learned.

In church as I minister, I am used to people listening to me and taking what I say at face value, without disrespectful disapproval. What those missionaries showed me that day was that even if people try to disrupt the message that you seek to share, you should show love and patience, no matter how purpose driven you are. Just as I strive to be revelatory and articulate when spreading the gospel, I am now seeking to be stronger in patience and love, like those young men from Texas with a microphone.

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