



Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

How to Preach in Prison

Gerard Crispin

General Director, DAYLIGHT Christian Prison Trust

1. Possibly the best opportunity to preach the gospel in the UK?

When we have laughed our way through the 'captive audience' and 'wish you were here' jokes, the stark fact remains that approximately 85,000 men and women are incarcerated in the UK's prisons each day. Typically, approximately 10% of those will attend the prison chapel – far fewer in some prisons and a lot more in others. DAYLIGHT's personnel minister to average Sunday morning congregations of 70 – again that varies – and often two or even more services are open to us. Weekday opportunities are usually limited to 30 people but with less time restrictions. As at a Cup Final the great need for Christ is not matched by an equal opportunity to present the gospel. Sometimes many are invited to the opportunity to hear the gospel, but few come. In prison the need and the opportunity meet. So many outside Christ – plus some converted or restored to faith in prison – come and listen attentively when the gospel is compellingly preached. This leads to the question: 'How should I preach in prison?'

2. Basic assumptions made

In writing this paper for Affinity here are my assumptions about you as the reader:

1. You are a true Christian – you have been soundly born again.
2. You accept the Bible as God's inspired, infallible, and complete word.
3. You are committed to preaching the simple but profound God-honouring gospel. You will concentrate on man's sinfulness, God's holiness (which means he must punish sin), the realities of an eternal hell of punishment to avoid and an eternal heaven of blessing to embrace, the need for practical sorrow for and repentance from sin, Jesus as fully God and fully man, the absolute essential priority to share the Lord Jesus Christ as the spotless and sinless sacrifice crucified as our penal substitute on the cross at Calvary, the bodily resurrection of Jesus and the proclamation of him as being alive today, salvation only by personal faith in our crucified and risen Lord of glory, and the urgency of the need to repent and trust in Christ as Lord and Saviour.
4. Mature and objective Christians consider that God has gifted you to preach the gospel and teach the Bible publicly in different situations.
5. You exercise flexibility, not doctrinally, but in the manner and timing of presenting the gospel. However well respected and established as a preacher, you are teachable and prepared to modify style – not basic content – to communicate well with a prison audience.
6. You control how long you preach, and are able as circumstances change to put into 5 minutes what might otherwise take 25 minutes, or conversely to suddenly take a whole service which you did not expect to take!

7. Dilution of churchy wording will not compromise your message. Neither will you sound as if you have swallowed Berkhof's *Systematic Theology* (or anyone else's!). You can communicate with ordinary people in ordinary words, without avoiding key biblical truths. You will use biblical words and concepts in your sermon ('talk' is a better word in prison) but explain them simply, in plain English.

8. You will keep in control if spontaneous questions are raised during your talk. You will not become side-tracked, angry or frustrated. You will deal with such occurrences graciously, but firmly and flexibly, decide whether to answer that question immediately, leave it to the end, deal with it personally later, or just let it die.

9. You will preach uncompromisingly yet winsomely, and clearly, yet not confrontationally. You can navigate the sometimes choppy waters of multi-faithism with a serene spirit but with a determination to share Christ as the only means of salvation.

10. You will not be offended because other denominations and faiths also have freedom to access the prison chapel where you preach. This chapel may be decorated with or be home to some icons and religious extras which you would not choose.

That list is by no means comprehensive, but it is a start. If you do not fit those minimum requirements please ask for grace to work on whatever aspects are missing, or leave prison preaching to others who are seeking that grace, despite failures!

3. Some practical suggestions

Again the following suggestions are not exhaustive. Every preacher differs in his exact style and manner of presentation. As a student I went into a large 'Category A' prison with a godly and very balanced 'lay' Pentecostal chaplain. He was not a gifted preacher. Yet such was his love for the Bible, the Gospel, and the men that he was very influential, under God, in helping lost prisoners turn to Christ. Prayer meant more to him than methodology, and he saw blessing. (I was not, and am not, Pentecostal and we could have spent time discussing our differences. Instead I learned from this dear older brother how to love those you preach to.) So the following list merely contains suggestions for you to consider:

1. Do not use notes – or if you do, use bullet point notes so no-one knows you are using them.

2. If you cannot use one already, learn to use a visual display board with evangelistic adult visual aids. You can prepare those yourself, or get someone else to prepare them for you. Alternatively ask for CDs of established visual aids (to print, laminate, attach Velcro and use) from such organisations as Open Air Mission or United Beach Missions. We at DAYLIGHT would be delighted to advise you about this. Sometimes I have my visual aided talks prepared on the board and then decide not to use them but to present the gospel from a question asked, or a theme that has come up in the service, or when perhaps a later start to the meeting than envisaged means time is too short to do what I had planned. As John MacArthur once said, there is no red light that flashes on my head when the Holy Spirit is guiding, and at times I just have to pray, assess and think out what to do next, relying on our gracious and sovereign God to guide and overrule. Never be frightened to 'borrow' someone else's talk, but do adapt it to your style and do seek to improve it! (Practical note – tell the chaplain who invites you to preach that you will be bringing a board – and any good evangelistic literature – so that he or she can advise the prison's security staff in advance.)

3. We find that the best preparation in prison is to meet every inmate at the door and shake his/her hand, offer a friendly word, and give a reassuring (not too 'gooey') smile. That establishes some form of relationship with each listener. It also makes it more natural to shake hands on their way out at the end, and to offer each person some good and appropriate gospel literature (previously approved by the chaplain). The prisoners will 'read you' long before they listen to you.

4. Remember the officers. (Do not call them 'warders', 'guards', or 'screws' – they are 'officers'.) Be friendly and courteous to them. When speaking at two or more meetings on the same day

at a prison, I go prepared to give different talks (same gospel!) at each meeting. I take a few visual-aided talks with me. Some officers have to sit through two or more services and I want them to listen well to the gospel too. A number have expressed their appreciation. Often officers ask for, or accept, literature afterwards.

5. Think about how you put things! Some words have double-meanings anyhow, and some have another set of prison meanings. You will not avoid them all, but be street wise about the obvious ones: you will learn the rest in time! Also some phrases just don't work 'inside'. In my informal opening words to one prison congregation, I said (publicly) to one man whom I recognised from a previous visit: 'Hi, Mike. Good to see you. Doesn't time fly?' Stupid comment to make in prison! He replied with disdain, 'Not quick enough, mate!'

6. Whilst keeping control of a meeting (as discussed earlier) don't be frightened to pause and relax for a laugh if appropriate and if you feel happy with it. But don't overdo the humour.

7. If I see someone continually talking to another or causing a distraction, I simply stop and look at the 'offender' (or 'offenders') impassively. Soon the person(s) concerned realise that the world around has stopped. I then look him/them in the eye (non-provocatively) and simply say 'Thank you, sir' or 'Thank you, gentlemen'. That does not happen often – and it has never yet happened in a women's prison! If someone 'kicks off' in a service or becomes a real problem, it is for the officers to deal with that situation – it can involve someone being taken to the dreaded 'Seg' (segregation unit).

8. Don't take the moral 'high ground' personally. There seem to be fewer things that impress the reality of sin more on the men and women in prison than for the preacher to identify himself with them as a guilty sinner, to own up to it, and to admit that we are all in the same sinking boat without Christ. A good approach is to say something like the following: 'Gentlemen, I want you to know that the Bible says there is no difference in the fact of guilt between any of us here today – whether we are from inside or outside this prison. I'll grant you that some people's wrongdoings have a far more serious result than others and a worse impact on other people and society, but the fact is we have all offended God by the way we have behaved and we have all hurt other people. Naturally, some have caused more harm than others, but we are all guilty and we all need Jesus Christ to be our Saviour. Whoever you are, you need to turn from that sin and ask Jesus Christ to save you, and see that he bore your sin on the cross. Without trusting him personally each of us is lost.'

9. Remember to thank publicly the chaplain for inviting you and the inmates for listening so well and for being so courteous (if they were, of course!). They do not get much praise, and when they deserve it we should give it. It also makes them sympathetically inclined to considering what we tell them.

10. Do not be controversial for the sake of it, or to shock. We are there to present Christ primarily, not to campaign for anti-anything. In some question times I have been asked straight questions on difficult topics (e.g. 'What do you think about homosexuality?'). I seek to reply by saying that I will give my personal view, but it is a view based on my own understanding of the Bible, which is God's word. I then tell them what I think the Bible says about the subject and (in the case of a homosexuality question) point out that all sinners will be judged unless they turn from their wrongdoing to Christ, and that Jesus can forgive and save any sinner who comes to him, whether he is homosexual or heterosexual. But I never introduce a controversial subject for its own sake. We preach 'Christ crucified'.

4. How to get into prison?

The best answer is to contact DAYLIGHT (www.daylightcpt.org or gerard@daylightcpt.org or DAYLIGHT CPT, Box 3173, Swindon, SN6 7WN) to discuss it. We can also advise about taking in literature. DAYLIGHT is constantly on the lookout for volunteers who are committed to and gifted in sharing the gospel publicly in prison. They are our Prison Ministry Associates (or PMAs). Our Prison Ministry Visitors (PMVs) are not public speakers. They come to support and chat one-on-one with prisoners. But we will advise anyone serving Christ about getting into prison!

Discussion questions:

1. In what way is a prison congregation similar to a church congregation?
2. In what way is a prison congregation different from a church congregation?
3. How can we preach undiluted truth in such a way that 'ordinary people' (prisoners – some illiterate) will hear and understand?
4. Discuss the merits and demerits of using adult visual aids in the prison setting. How do they stay an 'aid' without becoming a 'master'?
5. How can a convinced conservative evangelical preach the gospel in a multi-faith prison setting without compromising the gospel?
6. How open about our own sinfulness should we be when we preach the gospel? Relate your answer to a prison set-up.