

Some Thoughts On “Flash Mob” Singings

Andy Sochor and Tim Haile

Christians know the importance of teaching the gospel to others. They know that the gospel of Christ is *“the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”* (Romans 1:16). They know that people will “perish” if they fail or refuse to learn and obey the gospel of Christ (2 Corinthians 4:3-4; Romans 10:16; 2:8; 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9). They love their neighbors and, like God, they *“desire that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth”* (Matthew 22:39; 1 Timothy 2:4). They want others to share in the hope of heaven. These realities motivate Christians to both teach and exemplify the gospel to others (Acts 8:4; Matthew 5:16).

Sadly, the noble work of evangelism is sometimes negated by unscriptural evangelistic *methods*. In such cases, the zeal to preach the gospel overrides the New Testament pattern of approved methods. Errors range from the use of man-made evangelistic organizations to unscriptural church arrangements, such as the sponsoring church arrangement (Herald of Truth & World Radio...etc). Various forms of gimmickry, entertainment and recreational programs are often used as a pretext and platform for teaching the gospel to others. Bible authority can be found for none of these projects and programs.

The purpose of this article is not to dampen the evangelistic fervor of anyone, but to caution brethren against the use of unapproved methods.

Flash-Mob Singings

We recently learned of a new practice among brethren that is intended to reach out to people in a spiritual way. Christians from various places gather in some public place, such as a mall or train station, and sing spiritual songs to passersby, travelers, shoppers, workers and others.

On the surface, there may appear to be nothing wrong with this practice. Obviously, there is nothing wrong with Christians gathering somewhere to sing spiritual songs — Paul wrote, *“Speaking to one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord”* (Ephesians 5:19). Singing is not limited to local church assemblies, so what about the “flash-mob” arrangement?

Since spiritual activity is regulated by God (2 Peter 1:3), we must have scriptural authority for what we do in His name (Colossians 3:17; 2 Timothy 3:16-17). By invoking Bible passages for authority for some particular practice, one also invokes the definitions and regulations that such passages place upon that practice. By singing *psalms, hymns and spiritual songs* one places himself under the obligations of divine legislation that govern the use of such songs.

Singing Is Not “Evangelism”

The reason why brethren are conducting these “flash mobs” is to aid in the work of *evangelism*. But there is a problem with this — nowhere in the New Testament is singing used as evangelism. Instead, the New Testament describes the purpose of singing as two-fold: to praise God and to teach our brethren.

Some see Paul’s words to the Colossians as a defense of song evangelism. Paul wrote, *“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord”* (Colossians 3:16). It is argued that Paul’s use of the word “teaching” (Gr. *didasko*) proves singing to be an evangelistic method. While it is true that the word “didasko” is commonly used throughout the New Testament of all types of teaching situations, Paul here uses it in a context of mutual and reciprocal action. It is *saints* who *“teach and admonish one another.”* Neither in this passage, nor in Ephesians 5:19, nor in any other singing passage does the Bible suggest that Christians are to sing to sinners as a means of converting them. Singing obviously has a different purpose. As seen from several New Testament music passages, the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is to be done “to the Lord.” It is an *act of worship*. As noted, it is also done “to” and with “one another” as a means of mutual teaching and admonition (Col. 3:16; Eph. 5:19). The singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs is not a spectator event. *(Note: Invitation songs are not stand-alone evangelistic endeavors. The song is used in conjunction with Bible teaching, not in place of, or instead of Bible teaching. There is no parallel between invitation songs and flash-mob styled singing.)*

The Flash-Mob Is A Choir

Flash-mob singers sing to non-Christians in an effort to teach them and arouse their interest in spiritual things. There are two distinct groups of people: singers (saints) and listeners (sinners). The group of singers deliberately sings to the group of listeners. This is a choir arrangement by design, and it directly violates the pattern established in Ephesians

5:19 and Colossians 3:16. If the flash-mob singing arrangement is authorized in malls, train stations and other places, then choirs, solos, duets...etc are authorized in church assemblies. One group sings while another group listens and learns.

Besides the lack of Bible authority, there is another problem with using singing as a method of evangelism – it turns the singing of hymns, not just into a spectator event, but into a performance. Man-made denominations and other institutions commonly conduct vocal performances of hymns and religious songs. But this should not be done by Christians. Again, singing hymns is for *teaching*, not for *entertainment*. Many of those who witness these “flash mobs” will consider these to be *performances*, with some even clapping for each song.

To call these *performances* is not an attempt to judge the hearts of the participants and condemn them for focusing too much on *sounding good* or trying to be *entertaining*. Their hearts may be either right or wrong in regard to those points. We cannot presume to know their hearts. However, it is obvious that these “flash mobs” are *performances* in the sense that ***they are meant to draw attention***. Singing does not have to be “good” or “entertaining” to draw attention. The purpose of these “flash mobs” is to *evangelize*. The singing is employed as a tactic to *draw attention*. The problem with this is that singing was never used this way by Christians in the first century. While Paul and Silas were in prison in Philippi, they sang and the prisoners listened to them [*more on this point in a moment*]. In addition to listening to them *sing*, the prisoners also listened to Paul and Silas *pray* (Acts 16:25). Does this authorize us to pray in public for the purpose of drawing attention? *No!* Jesus condemned the practice of praying in public for the purpose of drawing the attention of others (Matthew 6:5). If Paul and Silas were seeking to draw the attention of the prisoners through their *singing*, would they not be condemned for doing the same thing with their *praying*?

Acts 16 and the Philippian Jailor

Some have attempted to defend flash-mob singings by citing Paul and Silas’ singing in the Philippian jail. Luke recorded, “*But at midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them*” (Acts 16:25). Those who so use this passage then jump to verses 30-33, claiming that the “singing” led to the jailor’s conversion. There are some considerable problems with this argument:

1. Paul and Silas were singing hymns “*to God.*” Colossians 3:16 also says that spiritual songs are to be sung “*to God.*” Ephesians 5:19 says “*to the Lord.*” Hebrews

2:12 and Romans 15:9 both teach that singing is done to God. The *singing* by Paul and Silas was as much “to God” as was their *praying*. It is important to note that Paul and Silas did not sing “to” the prisoners — They sang “to” God and the prisoners “heard them.”

2. Acts 16:25 states that the “prisoners” were listening to Paul and Silas — nowhere does the text state that “the jailor” was listening.
3. The jailor was asleep until after the earthquake occurred. Luke recorded, “*When the jailor awoke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped*” (Acts 16:27). One might try to argue that the jailor fell asleep after Paul and Silas’ singing, then woke up after the earthquake, but no Scripture can be cited in defense of such an argument. Too, such an argument violates the natural flow of the narrative and is in no way implied by the text.
4. The jailor did not “believe” at the time of his discussion with Paul, which was clearly *after* the time that Paul and Silas were singing in the prison. Paul told the jailor that he could not be saved without belief, and verse 32 says that Paul and Silas “*spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in the house.*” We know from Romans 10:17 and Acts 15:7 that belief is produced by the teaching of God’s word.
5. If singing was an appropriate method of evangelism, then it is strange that the Holy Spirit would cite this as the *only* example of it being used. After all, the prisoners who listened are never said to have been converted while the one who was asleep and did not hear the singing was the only one at the jail who was converted. Contrast that with other examples in Acts when *preaching* was done and *many* were converted (Acts 2:40-41; 4:1-4; 8:4-5, 12; 11:20-21; 17:2-4).
6. As noted above, if Acts 16:25 constitutes authority for flash-mob styled *singings*, then it also constitutes authority for flash-mob *prayings*. And if the singings are “evangelistic,” then would the “prayings” be as well?

The Philippian jailer was converted, not by *singing*, but by *the preaching of the gospel* — just as every example in the New Testament.

Respect For The Property And Rights Of Others

The story of Ananias and Sapphira shows that God grants people the right of personal property ownership and control (Acts 5:4). Acts 4:34 described some Christians as be

“possessors of lands or houses.” Barnabas is specifically identified as one who sold his land.

The responsibility and act of teaching others neither requires nor allows Christians to violate these personal property rights, nor to invade their personal privacy. Christians sometimes canvass neighborhoods in efforts to invite people to study the Bible. Such efforts to teach the Bible are both noble and good. However, they do not authorize the teacher to invade someone’s house, or set up an unwanted display at the entrance to his place of business. Gospel teachers have no right to impose themselves upon other people or interfere in their lives. The gospel is designed to appeal to free agents. It is not to be forced upon them. This fact is made quite clear in the limited commission passage of Matthew 10. The apostles were not to force their message upon others (Matthew 10:13, 14). This principle is also plainly stated by Paul in Acts 13:46.

In certain circumstances, flash-mob singings might constitute such an imposition and inconvenience to other people. Mall vendors and shoppers did not go to the mall to be serenaded — they came to work or shop. While singing spiritual songs and preaching the gospel are authorized activities, the Christian must remember the rights of other people. We have all seen the obnoxious street preacher (usually preaching soul-damning error), who positions himself in some public place and loudly proclaims his “message” with little or no regard for those around him. He is more of a spectacle than a preacher. He takes advantage of other people by positioning himself in a path that people are forced to travel, thus forcing himself upon people who did not invite him and do not welcome him. He may feel good about himself, but he is ignoring the rights of other people. This is not gospel preaching.

Of course, a group of Christians might obtain permission from either a business or a municipality in order to sing (or teach) on their premises. In such cases, the property rights of others are honored and there would be no issue on this point.

One might disregard the above argument about privacy and property rights on the grounds that the New Testament contains examples of social disturbances that resulted from evangelistic efforts. While such cases can be cited, it should be observed that the disturbances were caused by the *opponents* of the gospel; not by its *proponents*. Notice the following examples:

- In Antioch of Pisidia, the preaching of Paul and Barnabas attracted the attention of “*nearly the whole city*” (Acts 13:44). The Jews were jealous and attempted to

contradict their teaching (Acts 13:45). When this failed and *“the word of the Lord was being spread through the whole region,”* the Jews *“instigated a persecution against Paul and Barnabas, and drove them out of their district”* (Acts 13:49-50).

- In Iconium, the preaching of Paul and Barnabas caused *“a large number of people”* to believe (Acts 14:1). *“But the Jews who disbelieved stirred up the minds of the Gentiles and embittered them against the brethren”* (Acts 14:2).
- In Lystra, after healing a lame man, Paul and Barnabas had difficulty in restraining the crowds from offering sacrifices to them as if they were gods (Acts 14:8-18). But the minds of the people were quickly changed when *“Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the crowds, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead”* (Acts 14:19).
- In Thessalonica, some believed Paul’s preaching (Acts 17:2-4). But trouble was soon to come: *“But the Jews, becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the market place, formed a mob and set the city in an uproar”* (Acts 17:5).
- In Berea, after Paul and Silas escaped the riots in Thessalonica, they preached and many believed (Acts 17:10-12). But the Jews from Thessalonica heard of it and came to Berea to stir up the crowds against them (Acts 17:13).
- In Corinth, while Paul was peaceably teaching, he was falsely accused by the Jews (Acts 18:11-13). When the Jews did not receive a favorable ruling from the proconsul, they *“took hold of Sosthenes, the leader of the synagogue, and began beating him in front of the judgment seat”* (Acts 18:17).
- In Ephesus, Paul preached in the synagogue until *“some were becoming hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the people,”* at which time he began preaching *“in the school of Tyrannus”* (Acts 19:8-10).
- Also in Ephesus, Luke tells us that there was *“no small disturbance concerning the Way”* (Acts 19:23). This was not because of Paul’s preaching, but because Demetrius the silversmith stirred up a crowd into an uproar because his idol-making business was threatened by the gospel (Acts 19:24-40).

First of all, notice that each example involves *preaching* and not *singing*. But besides that, it should be noted that the disruption was not caused by the preacher, but by some in the audience who opposed the gospel. When Paul was accused before Felix as being one *“who stirs up dissension among all the Jews”* (Acts 24:5), he defended his actions: ***“Neither in the temple, nor in the synagogues, nor in the city itself did they find me carrying on a discussion with anyone or causing a riot”*** (Acts 24:12). The preaching

of the gospel often led to public disturbances. But this was not because those preaching were trying to make a scene so that more people would pay attention. Rather, it was because those who did not believe — often motivated by jealousy over the crowds who were listening — stirred up the people and caused an uproar.

Conclusion

It is good that Christians enjoy the singing of psalms, hymns and spiritual songs, for such singing is divinely authorized by God (Matt. 26:30; Acts 16:25; Rom. 15:9; 1 Cor. 14:15, 26; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; Heb. 2:12; Jas. 5:13). Singing was designed by God as an act of worship and as a means of mutual edification among saints. We should respect this divinely given role of music and not assign to it other purposes. Singing is not evangelism. This is evident from the fact that the songs that are used by flash-mob singers do not instruct people as to how to be saved. The plan of salvation is not sung. Too, the flash-mob operates as a choir, with some people singing and other people listening. This is not God's design for singing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). Obedient faith is acquired, not by singing, but by preaching (Romans 10:14, 17). *“Now to him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ... according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith”* (Romans 16:25-26).

Co-written by Tim Haile and Andy Sochor