

February 2, 2014

How Many Heard?

By Bryan Hodge

We read in the Bible of Jesus and the apostles speaking before large crowds of people. Could so many really hear and understand what was said? This is a question asked by critics of the Bible. It is also joked about by some. “In Monte Python’s film, ‘Life of Brian,’ a large crowd showed up to hear Jesus’ sermon, but by the time Jesus’ words made it to the fringes of the crowd some clarity was lost (‘Blessed are the cheese-makers’)” (Fox News, Joel N. Shurkin, How Many People Heard the Sermon on the Mount? Or the Gettysburg Address? Dec. 10, 2013). Even sincere Bible students wonder, “How could so many hear?”

Some have suggested that miraculous amplification may have been involved. This is certainly possible. [God seems to have so spoken to the children of Israel at Mount Sinai. “(His) voice shook the earth” (Hebrews 12:6). “(They) begged that the word should not be spoken to them anymore” (Hebrews 12:18-19), “Then they said to Moses, “You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19). Moses said that God did this, “that His fear may be before you, so that you may not sin” (Exodus 20:20)]. However, there is no indication in the Biblical record that this is how Jesus or the apostles spoke to the multitudes.

Some have thought that the answer may be at least partially found in the acoustics of the chosen locations for their sermons. This seems reasonable. Some locations form natural amphitheatres. The hill where Jesus supposedly preached The Sermon on the Mount is one such place. Jesus spoke from a boat on more than one occasion (Luke 5:3; Matt. 13:2, 3). Sound is said to travel well over calm water. Paul once spoke on Mars Hill (or the Areopagus).

However, let us ask how many under good circumstances could hear a man speak without aid of a public address system? (1) Benjamin Franklin conducted an experiment. In the year 1739, he listened to George Whitefield address an audience of 6,000 people in Philadelphia. He then measured out an area in which one could hear with understanding, about 23,000 square meters. He concluded that, “More than 30,000” could hear (Fox News, Joel N. Shurkin, How Many People heard the Sermon on the Mount? Or the Gettysburg Address? Dec. 10, 2013). (2) Two researchers, Braxton Boren and Agnieszka Roginska, at the NYU’s Music and Audio Research Lab replicated the Franklin experiment. They concluded Whitefield could be heard by 20,000 – 30,000 on a good day, a perfectly still crowd, no wind, or carriage clattering” (ibid).

Let us not forget the style of the speaker. “The style of the speaker was different in the past... the speakers stood up straight and might have raised and stretched their arms so their diaphragms were extended. Speeches of the past also had an entirely different cadence. Orators often spoke in bursts of four or five words with considerable emphasis instead of long phrases” (ibid). Modern speakers have grown dependent on P.A. systems.

Joel N. Shurkin writes, “Have you ever wondered how many people in the audience actually heard the

Gettysburg Address? How about the Sermon on the Mount or Moses at Sinai? The answer to those questions, according to New York University researchers, is more than you think” (ibid).

Today, we have the benefits of a Public Address system. The question is, are we listening as we should? Clearly, the audience has a responsibility to discipline themselves to carefully listen, be attentive and engaged, and not be thoughtless or lazy in their hearing. Consider, “Speak, LORD, for your servant hears” (1 Samuel 3:9, 10). “The ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law” (Nehemiah 8:3). “All the people were very attentive to hear him” (Luke 19:18). “The common people heard him gladly” (Mark 12:37). “We are all present before God, to hear all the things commanded you by God” (Acts 10:33). “Take heed what you hear” (Mark 4:24). “Take heed how you hear” (Luke 8:18). “Let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath” (James 1:19). “The ear that hears the rebukes of life will abide among the wise” (Proverbs 15:31). “He who answers a matter before he hears it, it is folly and shame to him” (Proverbs 18:13).