

Witnessing for Christ in Public Schools

By Nathan Street



Countless Christian children attend U.S. public schools, and many Church of God members, like myself, work in those schools. Our dilemma: Jesus commands us to evangelize the world, but promoting religion in public schools is prohibited.

As Spirit-filled believers, must we shed our faith, traditions, and principles at the door of the public school despite the guilt we feel?

Or, even more disconcerting, have we been so indoctrinated by the premise that school is no place for our beliefs that we leave them at the school door without a second thought?

While my role as the director of fine arts for a large urban school district no longer involves my direct contact with the classroom, I am often reminded of my struggles with Jesus' commandment and the expectations of the state. While overt evangelism is generally unacceptable in public schools, there are other methods for fulfilling the Great Commission.

In the early years of my career, I was the choral director in a small rural school. As I worked to build a program, I called upon my experiences growing up in the Church of God with its

excellent music legacy. At the time, I was also new in music ministry leadership at my church. These factors coupled with the pugnacity of youth led me to initiate an after-school gospel choir.

The gospel choir expanded that year to the point where I was asked by school administration if I desired to include the ensemble in the regular course offerings. The next year, Gospel Choir became a course within the regular curriculum and met during school hours. Over the years, that ensemble grew to well over 100 students encompassing two class periods and forcing me to move out of the classroom and into the auditorium. The ensemble performed for many local churches and civic organizations, and in competitions across the country.

Many lives were changed for the glory of God through this ensemble. I was even blessed to lead two self-professed atheists to the Lord who, in turn, led their parents to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

What happened that allowed this kind of evangelism to occur within the walls of a public school? The answer is simple: “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).

While I refrained from overt evangelism, I knew the immense power of the Word of God whether preached, read, spoken, or sung. I knew His Word, even in musical form, would accomplish what God intended. One cannot sing about the wondrous works of Christ, the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and the supernatural power of God on a daily basis without those words stirring the soul.

Whenever the Lord blesses as He was blessing in those years, one can be assured Satan will intervene. When that happens, will we quit and flee, or will let the Holy Spirit empower us to “lift up a standard” against him (Is. 59:19)?

When word began to spread about the gospel choir, newspapers began to take interest. Through these articles, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) learned about the choir and its Church of God director. This is when Satan attacked. Early in the fall semester that year, the ACLU issued a cease-and-desist letter questioning the mission of the ensemble and my potential evangelism in the classroom. When threatened with a potential lawsuit and job loss, it would have been easy to comply; however, we chose take a stand.

I am thankful to God that I had a principal who saw the benefits the choir had produced for the school. Prior to this class, the school had been embroiled in some significant racial issues. The cafeteria and hallways were remarkably self-segregated. It was within this ensemble that the majority of the school’s African-American students and the most notorious “rednecks” came into contact. Consequently, many of those students began to desegregate the school and even attend church with one another. The principal and superintendent acknowledged the significant role the choir was playing in improving the school culture and decided to support my fight against the ACLU.

I responded to the cease-and-desist letter with an account of the activities of the choir. I acknowledged I was indeed a minister and a teacher, but explained I had not proselytized the students. And I took it one step further: I invited members of the ACLU to our next concert.

Having heard of the ACLU's opposition, the local community and churches filled the auditorium for the concert, which came and went without incident. The ACLU dropped their demands, and we never heard from them again.

Later that year we hosted the Lee University Campus Choir, which was then under the director of the late David Horton. My, how Dr. Horton stood unashamed and uninhibited on the stage in the school auditorium of that school and preached the Word of God! In fact, he even gave an altar call at 2:00 p.m. during the school day with the principal in the room. Several students answered the call.

After the Campus Choir left, I asked the principal, "Should I pack up my things and turn in my resignation now?"

He looked at me as seriously as he could and responded, "When can they come back?"

Now, as a district administrator, I am often asked about topics of study in the classroom and how far can teachers go. Let me be clear: God expects us as Christians to obey the laws of the land as long as those laws do not conflict with the laws of God (see Rom. 13:1-7). Because it is an expectation of government that teachers not evangelize in their classrooms, we should abide by it; however, there are ways in which we can still fulfill the Great Commission and remain within the guidelines set by the government.

First, never underestimate the power of a demonstrable Christian walk. Jesus said, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). Living your life out loud is your responsibility and your right. This also includes, as my pastor Troy Wilhelm recently preached, being the best employee possible as a Christian should be.

Second, it is a teacher's right to pray and read the Bible at school as long as it is not done during class time. If a student catches a teacher praying during non-class time, that is icing on the cake. However, the First Amendment's Establishment Clause restricts teachers, when acting in their official capacity, from actively encouraging or discouraging prayer or engaging with students in that activity. The law can get vague, depending on the state, regarding displaying the Bible openly on the desk.

Third, students have the right to pray at school, hold Bible studies, talk to their peers about Christ, and lead others in prayer so long as it does not disrupt the normal proceedings of the school. In other words, disrupting class to lead prayer is not allowed; however, there are many other situations where students may engage in religious activities. Teachers may volunteer to sponsor a religiously themed club where such activities may occur.

Fourth, when questioned about personal faith, teachers may honestly respond. This is not, however, a license to abuse the moment and preach. Teachers should be smart and interweave Scripture into their response.

Fifth, generally speaking, music classes can involve Christian music. This should be considered on a school-by-school basis, however. Ninety percent of choral literature is religious in nature. Studying the classical masters requires a study of religious music. Bach, for example, composed exclusively for the church.

There are many resources available for Christian teachers and students who work and learn in our nation's public schools. One such resource is *www.teacherswhoprayer.org*. Teachers should know their rights and not simply assume all faith-based activity is prohibited.

Our modern public schools are mission fields that are "white unto harvest" (John 4:35). Our children are yearning for truth, and we who are Bible-believing, Spirit-baptized teachers and students have a tremendous responsibility to be the salt and light God has called us to be.

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