

Business Bible Lectureships

Tim Haile

Some businesses that produce religious materials or that provide religious services sponsor Bible lectureships. The most common businesses to do so are religious schools, colleges, publishing companies and bookstores. By “*religious*” I mean that these businesses produce religious materials or provide religious services, *such as Bible instruction*. The practice of business Bible lectureships has been around for so long that many people have grown accustomed to them, and have never felt the need to question them. Most people defend these lectureships on the basis that the gospel is preached and it gives them an opportunity to renew past friendships. I have also heard people say that they enjoy the singing that is done in such large assemblies. Though there is nothing wrong with any of these reasons in themselves, there is a much larger issue at hand, which needs to be examined. Is it scriptural and right for business organizations to conduct Bible lectureships?

As with examinations of any other religious practice, there is first the question of divine authorization: *Do the Scriptures authorize the practice?* But before one can properly apply biblical principles to a particular practice he must be sure that he has clearly defined that practice. Due to the diversity of practice in different business Bible lectureships, and because of my lack of specific details regarding the methods and motives of various businesses in conducting these lectureships, I intend in this article to take an “if...then...” approach to addressing the subject. I will state certain possible scenarios and examine the consequences of each.

Some Words About *Motives*

The subject that I am addressing is an emotionally charged subject. People take great pride in their business institutions, and they are particularly protective of their business if it provides some *religious* product or service. I have often observed that any criticism of such businesses puts the business owners and supporters into an immediate defensive posture. My personal experience has been to have my motives questioned when I have questioned the practices of some of these institutions. This is a very common tactic of error. And though it is quite frustrating to have it used against us, we cannot allow ourselves to be silenced through such godless efforts of intimidation.

In order to make the points that need to be made and that men need to consider, I will use hypothetical cases any time my point involves motives. I will construct scenarios in which both the *purpose* and the *practice* are specified. I will

make no charges relating to the *motives* of any particular religious business that may be operating today. I will make observations about the *practices* of some businesses (Matt. 7:16; Jn. 7:24), but I will assign no motives to the owners, managers and supporters of these businesses.

In other articles I have demonstrated the unscripturalness of non-church evangelistic collectives ("*Human Religious Institutions,*" and "*A Review of the 'Jesus-Group' Argument*" – *biblebanner.com*). In this article I will show that it is possible for business Bible lectureships to actually denigrate both the gospel of Christ and His church.

How Business Bible Lectureships Denigrate the Gospel

1. The Gospel is denigrated when it is preached for the purpose of selling a product.

Surely, all will agree on this point. I have observed that people tend to be comfortable with business Bible lectureships provided that the hosting business produces some *religious* material or provides some *religious* service. However, most people tend not to be so accepting of the notion of a business-sponsored Bible lectureship if the obvious purpose of the gospel preaching is to merely *sell a product*. They are comfortable with items being sold provided that the selling is only a *by-product* of the preaching and not the very *purpose* for the preaching. Clearly, if the gospel is preached for the sole purpose of promoting some business or selling some product, then the gospel is denigrated. Such would constitute a clear adulteration of the precious gospel of Christ, and no sincere saint would be comfortable participating in that.

Some argue that the Bible lectureship is a demonstration of the kind of product or service that is offered by the business. They reason that the *lectureship* promotes the gospel in the same way that the *business* promotes the gospel. However, some of the businesses that host Bible lectureships also produce and provide products that are not religious *within* themselves. Would it then be right for a business to use the gospel as a means of attracting people to its *non-religious* product or service? For example, some companies manufacture church furniture, such as pews, baptistries, toddler tables, tract racks...etc. Some companies sell recording equipment and media. The economic survival of such companies depends upon Bible-believing/teaching people buying their products. Would it be right for such a company to host a Bible lectureship *for the purpose* of attracting biblically-minded people to its place of business? Pay careful attention to the question. Notice that, in this hypothetical scenario, I have stated the company's motive for conducting the lectureship. I am not assigning motives to any companies that may be actually providing these services. In this hypothetical case the gospel is used as an advertisement to sell items that may be used as

expedients by the church. The gospel becomes a gimmick to attract people to the products that are being advertised. The gospel is cheapened by this practice. All can see the wrong in this.

But one might argue that though the above products are not spiritual or religious *in themselves*, they still *facilitate* in various religious exercises, and, as such, are indirectly connected to the Bible, being authorized by the Bible. This is true, but many non-religious things fall into this category. The Bible authorizes people to *eat food* (1 Tim. 4:3-5). Does this authorize *restaurants* to conduct Bible lectureships in order to advertise their services? The Bible authorizes people to *take shelter* (Acts 28:30). Does this authorize *residential contractors* to conduct Bible lectureships in order to advertise their services? The Bible authorizes people to *clothe themselves* (1 Tim. 2:9). Does this authorize *clothing stores* to conduct Bible lectureships in order to advertise their services? There is no more Bible authority for the one than there is for the other.

Please observe that I am judging the motives of no one. I cite the above scenarios to make a point. I do not question the motives of business sponsors of Bible lectureships. Some may hold lectureships for no other purpose than to teach Bible truths.

2. The Gospel is denigrated when it is used as an advertisement for some product or service.

I have heard several people defend college and bookstore Bible lectureships as “advertisements” for their products and services. Some of the bookstores that I know sell other products in addition to Bible teaching materials (communion trays, communion cups, communion bread, Bible covers, bookmarks, attendance and song number display boards, baptismal garments...etc). Most bookstores also sell books and materials containing soul-damning error. Is their Bible lectureship an “advertisement” for these things as well? I hope not. Brethren have obviously not considered the difference between the *preaching* of the gospel and the *selling* of religious materials. If a bookstore *sells* a book containing soul-damning error, it is understood that the buyer assumes responsibility for the material in the book. If the bookstore invites the author of the same book to come and *preach* his soul-damning error, the bookstore becomes partaker in the evil deeds of the false teacher and stands in clear violation of 2 John 10, 11!

Bible colleges teach subjects other than just the Bible. Does the college’s “Bible” lectureship serve the purpose of also advertising their *secular* instruction? The “advertisement” argument is faulty to the core. The only way that a true Bible lectureship could be an “advertisement” for a bookstore or college would be if the bookstore sold only accurate Bible teaching and nothing else, and the

college taught only the Bible and nothing else! Of course, there remains a big problem. Though there is nothing wrong with *advertising* a product, there is certainly something wrong with using the gospel of Christ as an advertisement to promote the business's product or service. Such action cheapens and degrades the gospel of Christ. It is a misuse of the gospel. The New Testament records many instances of gospel preaching, and it was always for the purpose of instructing either saints or sinners. The gospel was never preached as a means of advertising some other product, service or activity.

It is important to note that businesses conduct their Bible lectureships in their business's *name*. Why is this done? I cannot say why any particular college or bookstore conducts its Bible lectureships in its own name, but what if we did know? What if we were told by business owners and operators that they were conducting the Bible lectureship in their own name in order to advertise and promote their business products and services? What does this do to the gospel? It denigrates the gospel! One might argue that local churches also function through their *name*. This is true. The rule of autonomy implies distinct local church identity, hence an identifying and distinguishing name. The churches of Asia were distinguished by their geographical location (Rev. 2, 3, *see also* 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1). However, churches are not authorized to use their name to promote *their own* products and services. Scriptural churches do not even have *their own* peculiar business products or services to promote. Thus, they do not preach the gospel in order to promote any products or services. They promote and exalt the words and ways of Christ. "*Unto Him be glory in the church...*" (Eph. 3:21). Christ is the only reason for the scriptural church to exist. Unlike "religious" *business* enterprises, the existence of the local church does not depend upon money. Like the religious bookstore, the religious school is a *business*. Its fiscal survival depends upon the financial support of those who buy its products or services. Is it possible that these businesses hold their Bible lectureships in their own name and at, or very near their place of business because they are trying to promote their products and services? I don't know. But I do know that it would be sinful if they were! At the last business Bible lectureship that I attended I personally witnessed repeated pleas for lectureship attendees to visit the business's bookstore. This may have been deliberately *planned*, it may have been *accidental*, and it may have been *incidental*. Without being told I have no way of knowing for sure, but I do know this: the business's Bible lectureship was used to advertise and promote business products and services. I find this repulsive and wrong.

The Denigration of the Local Church

As I said before, men love their religious institutions, and they take great pride in them. Some supporters of some such institutions claim to provide a *spiritual* service to individuals and churches. Some Bible colleges claim to

provide a *spiritual atmosphere* for their students. I realize that such schools are trying to show the difference between themselves and non-religious schools, but they claim far too much. Are they suggesting that a “spiritual atmosphere” does not exist elsewhere? Do young people need to come to *their college* in order to be a part of a “spiritual atmosphere”? Is it not possible that young people could be a part of a “spiritual atmosphere” in their relations with members of the local church where they are? Couldn’t young people work to establish a “spiritual atmosphere” through their example in exerting a good influence over others *wherever they are*? And at *whatever college they attend*? Is it possible that the supporters of some human institutions see their institutions as actually being *spiritual* in their nature? I certainly hope not, for Christ built the only one to exist – His *church*. There is a way for those who are close to these institutions to test themselves to see whether or not they have overestimated the value of their institutions. Such people should ask themselves if they have ever wondered how brethren and churches would survive and function without the products and services that they provide. Those who believe that churches would not survive, or would be weaker without them, obviously think far too highly of their “religious” organizations. They over value their institutions, and devalue God’s institution.

The local church is the only evangelistic organism known to the New Testament. It is also self-edifying (Eph. 4:16), which is particularly interesting considering the nature of the Bible material that is presented at bookstore and college lectureships. Their material is usually tailored more for *saints* than for sinners. This classifies their teaching under the heading of *edification*, not evangelism. The New Testament is very plain with regard to which organism is entrusted with that work. Using the analogy of the organism of the human body Paul ascribed the work of corporate edification to the *local church*. Paul mentioned “pastors” as one of the gifts that equips the church to do the works of *ministry* and *edification* (Eph. 4:11, 12). The extent of the pastors’ oversight is limited to the local church (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Thus, we know that Paul’s instructions in Ephesians 4:12-16 apply to the *local church*. Verse 16 describes every member of the local church working in such a way so as to “*make increase of the body to the edifying of itself in love.*” The local church is specified by God as being a *self-edifying organism*. Individual saints should “*give diligence to show themselves approved to God*” (2 Tim. 2:15), but *organized* edification is the work of the local church, not of humanly devised edification agencies. No passage can be produced that authorizes the formation and support of a separate edification organism than the local church. There is no more authority for the use of these non-church evangelistic and edification organisms than there is for the use of instrumental music in worship to God.

Some Thoughts on “Lectureships”

Why do businesses call their Bible instruction series “Bible lectureships” and not “gospel meetings?” Is there a reason for using terminology that is different from what most local churches use to describe their Bible teaching series? I do know for a fact that many, if not *most* of the “lectures” that are preached in business Bible lectureships are also preached in the pulpits of local churches. However, for some reason they are magically transformed from “lectures” into “gospel sermons” when preached in those church pulpits. Why does the description change? People will sometimes refer to a Bible series as a “lectureship” due to the use of multiple speakers. Others will call it a “gospel meeting” whether it is one speaker or many. Some call a sermon a “lecture” because it is scripted. But I know several preachers whose sermons are done from manuscript. I admit that I do not know why businesses call their gospel meetings “lectureships,” but I do know that many people would be offended if the business were to call its “lectureship” a “gospel meeting.” Gospel meetings are generally seen as being *a work of the local church*, and not of some human religious organization.

In reality, this is a matter of *sound over substance*. The gospel message is the same either way, whether it is called a “lecture” or a “sermon”. Many of us have heard business Bible “lectures” preached in church building *pulpits*. If it is right for the business organism to preach the gospel, then it is right for that business to refer to a gospel series as a “gospel meeting.” After all, the same activities occur at the one that do at the other – *preaching/teaching, singing and prayer*. Of course, it would also be right for them to call these sermons “lectures.” I do not object to the language. Words are subject to definition. I wish merely to draw attention to the possible reason why certain language is used, and other language is not used.

Conclusion

A brand new institutionalism is on the horizon. Brethren are looking past God’s simple design in the New Testament church, and they are having visions of glory and grandeur at the prospects of what their own minds have conceived, and what their own hands might accomplish through their own human religious institutions. Looking back, I believe I was taught well by brother Roy Cogdill when he reached forth one of those long swooping arms, placed a large hand on my shoulder and proceeded to instruct me with regard to the self-sufficiency and the all-sufficiency of the New Testament church. Now, after all of these years, my own brethren have resurrected some of the very arguments that he and others so decisively cast down. Let us not fear. Those arguments were answered once and they will be answered again.

Tim Haile