

# Preaching the Gospel Versus Selling Gospel Materials

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The process of open Bible discussion and controversy has a tendency to highlight real and substantive differences, thus clarifying the issue. This is happening with regard to the question of business Bible lectureships. I have tried to answer the faulty arguments that some have put forth (the Jesus Group, the Tent-Maker Group, the Gaius Group, the Synagogue Group, the Areopagus Group, the school of Tyrannus Group...etc). And though these errors needed to be addressed, perhaps they have derailed us from what needed to be the real topic of discussion. That is, the difference between *merchandising* and *evangelizing*. Some people do not know the difference between the practice of *New Testament evangelism*, and that of *selling religious materials*. Consequently, they argue that a business organization has as much of a right to engage in evangelism as it does to engage in commerce. It is argued that any organization that can sell gospel materials can also preach the gospel (for free). They make no distinction between the two practices, yet a proper understanding of this distinction is germane to a proper understanding of the larger question about the role of colleges, bookstores and publishing companies in the work of evangelism.

## An Observation About The Above Title

Why didn't I title this article, "*The Difference Between Preaching The Gospel And Selling The Gospel*"? Could I have done so and fairly represented those with whom I differ? No. I know of no marketers of religious materials who represent their business as being a marketer of *the gospel*. They instead represent themselves as marketers of gospel *materials*. And why do they not claim to sell *the gospel*? **Because there is a difference between *selling Bible teaching materials*, and *teaching the Bible*, and they know this!** The problem with many is not a lack of understanding, but an inconsistency in practice and application. Incidentally, if some claim there to be no difference between *preaching* the gospel and *merchandising* gospel materials, then let them advertise their business as a *merchandiser of the gospel*, and see how people react.

As I said, the problem is *inconsistency*. For some reason, business organizations acknowledge this distinction when their purpose is to sell gospel materials, but they forget the distinction when their purpose is to evangelize. This is how such business organizations justify their evangelistic endeavors. They make the distinction only when it suits their purposes.

Let us consider the differences between *selling religious materials*, and *New Testament evangelism*:

### 1. There Is A Difference Based Upon The New Testament Definition of *Evangelism*:

New Testament evangelism was always **free**. Whether individuals acted *alone* (Acts 8:5), or *concurrently* with others (Acts 15:36-40), or *jointly* with others (through the *local church*, 1 Thess. 1:8), they taught the gospel without charge to the hearers. The “*water of life*” is offered, and may be taken “*without price*” (Rev. 22:17). There is no example of churches or individuals *charging a fee* for *evangelism*. There is no example of the gospel being preached for the purpose of advertising or selling religious goods or services (as do bookstores and colleges). Note this distinction carefully: **Teaching that is done for a fee does not classify as New Testament evangelism**. It must be classified some other way. When a business *sells* religious materials it is not doing the work evangelism: it is doing the work of a *business*. It is engaged in *commercial enterprise*, not evangelism.

“But, what about paying a preacher?” one might ask. Does the questioner intend to imply that by receiving financial support for preaching, a preacher is *selling the gospel*? And does the questioner also mean to imply that, by paying a preacher for his work, a church is *purchasing the gospel*? The New Testament authorizes the financial support of gospel preachers (1 Cor. 9:1-14; 2 Cor. 11:8). Such preachers *receive their living from the gospel* (1 Cor. 9:14). There is a difference between one being supported to preach, and one preaching for money. Jesus contrasted Himself with “hirelings.” The hireling flees when the wolf comes, because he does not care for the sheep (John 10:12,13). He is paid to watch the sheep. No genuine “gospel” preacher preaches for the money. He preaches because he cares for God’s Truth and for God’s sheep. His *livelihood* may be provided by others, or it may not be. A genuine gospel preacher will preach the truth whether he is paid or unpaid.

## **2. There Is A Difference Based Upon The Shift In Responsibility:**

If there is no difference between the *selling* of religious materials and the *teaching* of those materials, **then the owners of religious book stores commit sin every time they sell erroneous material!** This is an unavoidable conclusion. If selling religious material is no different than preaching that material, then it is a sin to sell religious material that contains error. The Bible requires religious teachers to “*speak as the oracles of God*” (1 Peter 4:11). Perverting the Scripture (by addition or subtraction) is strictly forbidden, and is expressly condemned by God (Gal. 1:8,9; Rev. 22:18,19). When religious material is sold, the rule of commerce applies, and the buyer assumes responsibility for what he buys. I will purchase a book containing false doctrine for the purpose of better equipping myself to answer that particular author’s errors. However, another man might purchase the same book because he *agrees* with the author, and he wants to sharpen his skills in promoting what he believes to be the “truth” on that author’s subject. Religious bookstores do not question every buyer’s motives in purchasing such books, nor do they *caution* every buyer against the errors in such books, nor do they have to! They are in business to sell books. The buyer assumes the responsibility when he purchases the book.

Now, what if the operators of that same religious bookstore were to start teaching and preaching the errors that are contained in that book? Would such be okay? Will God

approve of their actions? No. Those who distribute false doctrine will be condemned for their actions (Gal. 1:8,9; Titus 1:11; 3:10,11; 2 Jn. 10,11). What is different in this case? The difference is that by teaching the error, bookstore operators are themselves responsible for the error. There is no buyer to assume the responsibility. In teaching, God holds the teacher accountable for what he teaches. In selling, God holds the *buyer* responsible for what he does with the material. You see, there is a huge difference between *selling* religious materials and preaching them. And if there is no difference, then bookstores must quit selling materials that contain error. This would include books, commentaries, word studies and lexicons. There is no biblical basis upon which to object to a business marketing such materials. I object when an organization leaves the realm of business enterprise and engages in the work of New Testament evangelism.

### 3. There Is A Difference Based Upon The Application Of New Testament Fellowship Guidelines:

The principle of commerce allows a bookstore to sell material, even if it contains false doctrine. The bookstore compensates the writer for his material, and the bookstore then retails that material to others (as described above). New Testament fellowship laws explicitly forbid one to welcome or support those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ. Acceptance of such people amounts to participation in their error (2 Jn. 10,11). However, due to the principle of commerce that I described above, the bookstore business does not operate in this realm. It only enters this realm if it stops selling materials, and starts freely distributing them. There is no violation of New Testament fellowship rules when a commercial business buys and resells religious materials. **Incidentally, if buying and selling religious material is the same thing as giving it away in the form of teaching, then bookstores are “partakers in evil” when they sell erroneous materials!** This, too, is an unavoidable conclusion! Most agree that it would be sinful for a religious bookstore to freely disseminate or *teach* false doctrine (1 Tim. 6:3-5). Organizations are not exempt from this rule.

### Implications For Business Bible Lectureships

If there is no difference between selling religious materials and preaching those materials, then bookstores may invite false teachers to preach in their lectureships in the same way that they can sell their written materials in their bookstores! The obvious problem with this is that the bookstore that sponsors and organizes the lectureship welcomes and supports false teachers in violation of 2 John 10,11! Some brethren have suggested the use of such teachers in their lectureships on the basis that the errorist can be answered in that same forum. That is fine, but this argument proposes a practice that is not parallel to that of the bookstore. Bookstores do not sell false material on the condition that the buyer also purchases a *rebuttal* of that particular error. In fact, I know of no bookstore that even possesses material answering ALL of the errors that are sold in their bookstores. As I explained above, the principle of commerce and exchange does not require bookstores to provide such counter-teaching materials. But, bookstores do need to be consistent in their actions and applications.

#### **4. There Is A Difference From The Standpoint Of The Role Of Local Churches:**

Local churches often purchase teaching materials from bookstores. No sin is committed when they do so, for they are merely buying a service. If there is really no difference between *selling* religious materials and *teaching* those materials, then what would be wrong with local churches funding bookstores (or colleges) to evangelize? Some bookstores and colleges are already practicing evangelism, so the organizational machinery is already in place to accomplish the work. They would need only to expand their operations. Right? The money that these organizations receive from churches could be used to pay preachers, publish and disseminate gospel materials, operate preacher training schools and host evangelistic crusades. Right? Can you see that the defense that some are making actually recreates the missionary society arrangement? The only defense that some have made is that they “don’t go that far” with their argument. This is foolish. It is not a matter of “how far” they intend for their argument to go, but where it does actually and logically go! Whether or not this particular generation accepts the implications of their argument, the next generation will, and *“truth has fallen in the street”* (Isa. 59:14).

#### **Conclusion**

The truth is clear: there is a difference between “selling” and “teaching.” Those who don’t know the difference between the two do not need to practice either one. Failure to make the distinction between these two actions leads to sin and error. It is time for brethren to be objective; to free their minds from being affected by their affinity for these human organizations; to look beyond the sophistry and accept the truth. If business Bible lectureships can be defended, let it be done with Scripture, not with arguments that deny the very nature of evangelism and commerce.

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