

The Brown Street Beacon

"...Shine out among them like beacon lights,

holding out to them the Word of Life" (Phil 2:15-16)



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Who Has the Right to Preach the Gospel?

Perhaps the greatest failure of most children of God today is the neglect to preach the gospel to the lost. We produce a variety of excuses for not being more evangelistic minded. We say we don't have time. We say there is not enough interest. We sometimes even use our own lack of talent or ability as an excuse for not preaching to others. At the end of the day, though, there is no justifiable excuse for not fulfilling the command that we all have to preach the gospel to every creature (Matthew 28:19-20).

While preaching the gospel is a vital responsibility, we should note that not everyone has the right to preach the gospel of Christ. Preaching the gospel is a specific command, given to a specific people. The people who have received the command to preach the gospel are blood bought Christians who have been separated by the gospel of Christ to do the work of the Lord (Mark 16:15; Acts 8:4; Romans 10:13-14; Colossians 4:5; 1 Thessalonians 1:8). These people can fulfill this command through two avenues—a local church made up of a group of Christians who have decided to work together in a specific geographical location, or on an individual basis, working alone or concurrently (alongside) with other Christians. There is no other scriptural way for the people of God to engage in evangelistic work. Using other organizations, institutions or foundations to preach the gospel of Christ is unscriptural.

The question might be asked, "What makes something scriptural?" This is a simple enough question with a simple enough answer. Something is scriptural when it can be found in the scriptures. It might be found by way of a direct command or reference in the scriptures, or it might be found by way of an approved example or necessary inference, but it must be found in the scriptures.

In the scriptures we have commands and examples of both individuals and local churches preaching the gospel of Christ. The church located at Philippi was involved in evangelistic work by supporting Paul in the preaching of the gospel (Philippians 4:15-18). The church at Thessalonica sounded out the word of the Lord (1 Thessalonians 1:8). Philip, as an individual Christian, preached the gospel to the people of Samaria (Acts 8:5-12) and then later to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35). Paul spent most of his life as a Christian going from place to place and spreading the good news of Jesus Christ. It is easy to establish by the scriptures the authority that both individual Christians and local churches have in preaching the gospel of Christ. But it is impossible to establish the right of anyone or anything else doing this work.

Where is the authority for an organization other than the local church to spread the gospel of Christ? Do we need authority for all that we do? Paul said we do (Colossians 3:17). As Christians, we have long opposed the use of musical instruments in worshiping God. Why? We oppose it because there is no scripture authorizing them. Faithful Christians in faithful local churches have long

opposed the use of the Lord's money for recreation and entertainment, fun and folic. Why? We oppose these things because there is no scripture authorizing them. In both of these examples, God has specified what He wants. God has commanded us to sing (Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:17); thus, in the absence of a command to do otherwise, we oppose other kinds of music. God has commanded the local church to engage in evangelism, benevolence and edification (Ephesians 4:12); thus, in the absence of a command to use the Lord's money for other things, we oppose the social gospel and the use of the Lord's money for other kinds of work. Likewise, God has commanded the local church and the individual Christian to preach the gospel (Matthew 28:19-20; 1 Thessalonians 1:8); thus, in the absence of a command to any other person other than a Christian or any other organization other than the local church to preach the gospel, we oppose it.

In years gone by, brethren tried to shift the responsibility of preaching the gospel from local churches to a missionary society. In October of 1849, in Cincinnati Ohio, the American Missionary Society was established. Good brethren such as David Lipscomb, Benjamin Franklin and others opposed the establishment of an earthly organization to preach the gospel. A public statement was issued by the local church in Connellsville, Pennsylvania which set forth the prevailing position of many brethren:

"We consider the Church of Jesus Christ, in virtue of the commission given her by our blessed Lord, the only scriptural organization on earth for the conversion of sinners and sanctification of believers...We consider the introduction of all such societies as a dangerous precedent—a departure from the principles for which we have always contended...We also consider them necessarily heretical and schismatical, as much so as human creeds and confessions of faith..." (Homer Hailey, Attitudes and Consequences of the Restoration Movement, pp. 148-178).

In his monumental work, Search for the Ancient Order, Earl West reveals some of the objections that David Lipscomb had in regard to establishing an organization other than the local church to preach the gospel. Brother Lipscomb charged the Missionary Society with being a human invention without divine authority which was a substitute for the church and was usurping the rights of the church. Lipscomb said that societies were built on the assumption that the Lord's church could not or would not do the work assigned to it and that the founders must assume that their plan can do the job better than God's (Earl West. Search For the Ancient Order, Vol. 2, pp. 51-71).

Most brethren would agree with the words of David Lipscomb when it comes to organizations or societies which are supported by local churches. But what about organizations other than the local church preaching the gospel which are being supported by individuals? It should be noted that how an institution, foundation or organization is being sustained financially doesn't alter the fact that they do not have a scriptural right to enter into the field of evangelism. As we have seen, God gave the command to preach to local churches and individual Christians. Thus, Missionary societies, no matter how they are being sustained, have no right to exist.

Today we have other organizations such as publishing companies and colleges involved in the proclamation of the gospel by way of lectureships that involve singing, preaching and praying. While these organizations differ from missionary societies in that they have a right to exist, they don't have the right or authority to leave their human based functions of publishing and educating to enter into the spiritual work of preaching the gospel and worshipping God. And when they do so, they are guilty of doing the very thing that David Lipscomb charged the American Missionary Society with doing, and they are shifting the responsibility of preaching the gospel from the local church and individual Christians to a man-made institution. Again, how the institution is supported financially doesn't change this reality.

Some have argued that individual Christians operate under more generic authority than local

churches and thus, they have the right to preach the gospel through earthly institutions if they choose to do so. This, however, is not a valid argument. While it is true that we operate by way of generic authority as individual Christians much more than do local churches, not every thing that we do as individuals falls into that category. We don't have generic authority to preach the gospel as individual Christians, we have a direct command given by Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20). We do have some options in how we are going to carry out the command. We can go from house to house. We can preach on the radio. We can pass out bible based information on the job, etc. A group of Christians can even pool their resources together to engage in some kind of evangelistic function. But what we cannot do as Christians is shift our responsibility to a man made institution to do the work for us. From this standpoint, the arguments we have made in times past regarding the building and subsidizing of institutions by local churches to do the Lord's work would be just as applicable to individuals. In both cases it involves a shifting of responsibility from where God put it (local churches and individuals) to earthly organizations that have no right doing the work of the Lord.

Preaching the gospel is of the utmost importance. There is, in fact, no work more important. But, we must allow this work to be done by those assigned the work by God and no one else.

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