

Review of Johnie Edwards' Article: "May Only the Church Teach the Gospel?"

by Tim Haile

The July, 2007 issue of Truth Magazine contained the above titled article by brother Johnie Edwards. The article cites five examples of various types of teaching practices in an effort to prove that the local church is not the only *evangelistic organization* that is authorized by God to preach the gospel. I respect brother Edwards, and I generally appreciate his writings, but I must say that this particular article of his misses the whole point of contention in this present controversy. The very title of brother Edwards' article asks, "May only the church teach the gospel?" The obvious answer is **NO**, and I know of no one who claims that "only the church can teach the gospel!" Then, in his opening paragraph he asks, "The question is, can others than the church teach the gospel or is preaching or teaching the gospel the exclusive work of the church?" The answer is yes, others than the church may teach the gospel, and no, gospel teaching is not the exclusive work of the church. Brother Edwards again misses the point. I know no one who claims that teaching the gospel "is the exclusive work of the church." Individuals may teach the gospel (Acts 8:4), and I know of no one in the present controversy who claims that they can't. The opening sentence of his first point (about "religious journals") begins with the words: "If only the church can teach the gospel..." Why the "if," brother Edwards? No one claims that "only the church can teach the gospel." Notice that brother Edwards provides no quotations to support his assertions. He uses a broad brushed description of a position (that no one holds) and attributes it to those who oppose human organizations conducting worship and evangelism.

In view of brother Edwards' obvious misdirection, you may be wondering why I have chosen to answer him. Why would I answer him when his comments seem to address a position that I do not hold? The answer is found in this statement: Brother Edwards wrote, "If it is OK to publish and write for a journal; what makes speaking those same words to a live audience all bad?" He is referring to those who oppose the practice of business Bible lectureships. His characterization of such people as believing that all non-church teaching is sinful is an assault upon my intelligence, and upon the intelligence of all those who share my convictions about the formation of worship and evangelistic societies. Whether intentionally, or unintentionally, brother Edwards has depicted certain of us as absolute morons. And indeed, it would be very ignorant of one to teach that "only the church can teach the gospel." Again, the problem is that brother Edwards has sorely misrepresented the position held by his *perceived* opponents. Incidentally, if

brother Edwards doesn't see any difference between *selling religious materials*, and "*speaking those same words*," then he must believe that the local church can function as a commercial business in the **selling** of religious materials! Like others who are making agenda-driven arguments, brother Edwards has failed to consider the implications and consequences of his argument. The teacher does not have the liberty of applying *only those principles with which he is comfortable*.

I want brother Edwards to tell us *who* is arguing that the church is the only means of teaching the gospel? Who is saying that teaching and preaching the gospel is "the exclusive work of the church?" Let brother Edwards provide proof of his charge. He has actually fabricated a straw man. This is a common tactic of those who cannot answer a scriptural argument. He makes up an easily-answered position and attributes it to his opponents. I don't know anyone who denies the right of individuals, acting either solely or concurrently with others, to teach the gospel. I do know several people, however, who object to using man-made organizations for the purpose of conducting worship, edification and evangelism. If brother Edwards wishes to discuss the real issue, let him affirm the Scriptures to teach that one may form and fund human organizations for the purpose of conducting worship, and engaging in edification and evangelism. This is the real issue.

A Look at Brother Edwards' Examples

Brother Edwards cited five examples of various types of action in order to prove that a business organization may "**teach**" the gospel. He cites *religious journals, family Bible study, home Bible studies, schools, and husbands and wives*. I say "various types" of action, for some of his examples are NOT examples of *organizations*, and the action of the one *organism* that he did cite, is not an example of *teaching* the gospel, but of *selling gospel materials*. None of brother Edwards' examples are relevant. Let us consider why they are not. In fairness to brother Edwards I wish to provide full quotes from his article:

1. Brother Edwards cited the example of "A Religious Journal." He wrote,

"If only the church can teach the gospel, then one could not have a journal where the gospel is taught. Yet there are journals that are incorporated, separate and apart from the church, teaching the Bible. These papers are another organization, different from the church, which have been set up to teach. Why would one write for such a paper, if he thought *only the church is to teach the gospel*? The paper, editor, and contributing writers are not the church, you know! If it is OK to publish and write for a journal; what makes speaking those same words to a live audience all bad?"

Brother Edwards here describes a publishing organization that "teaches" the gospel through its religious journals and its lectureships. Does his example include Guardian of Truth Foundation? If so, their book "*We Have a Right*," defends the right of such organizations to receive donations from members of the

universal church in order to fund their evangelistic missions. Will brother Edwards also defend the missionary society-styled role of such publishing companies? Of course, as I said before, the obvious difference between a publishing organization and a local church organization is in the fact that publishing organization operates in the realm of *commerce* and the church does not. Religious journals often contain advertisements of books containing soul-damning false doctrines. These organizations promote such materials under the auspices of commerce. The church does not promote such materials. Incidentally, I keep checking, and I find numerous examples of damnable materials being promoted by journals and their companies *without any attendant warnings about content*. A business may **sell** such materials with the understanding that the buyer assumes the moral responsibility for the material, but if anyone (business, or church) starts *teaching* such material it becomes guilty of teaching damnable heresy. There is a fundamental difference between "selling" and "teaching."

Given brother Edwards' personal experience with religious journals, I would think that he would know the difference between *selling* religious materials and teaching the gospel. **By simple New Testament definition, teaching is not selling.** In the case of *selling*, people must *buy* and *use* the teaching materials in order for them to be *taught*. Until and unless the material is sold, no teaching can occur. In the case of New Testament evangelism, people are taught directly. I have observed that those who make the *selling-is-teaching* argument are quite inconsistent in their applications. They need the argument in their effort to defend the right of their human organizations to practice New Testament *evangelism*, but they don't want their argument to defend the right of local churches to **sell** religious materials. They won't accept the logical consequence of their own argument! If there is no difference between *selling* religious teaching, and *giving away* that teaching, then local churches would be authorized to sell religious materials. After all, they are authorized to teach (Acts 13:1-4; 1 Thess. 1:8; 1 Tim. 3:15). If local churches were to use their funds and resources to publish and sell religious materials, they would soon put the religious bookstores completely out of business. By the way, if there is no difference between *selling* and *teaching*, is brother Edwards in the business of **selling the gospel** when he sells a magazine? According to his own argument, he is! (For further examination of the difference between *teaching* the gospel, and *selling* gospel materials, see my article at: <http://www.biblebanner.com/articles/general/preasell.pdf>.)

2. Brother Edwards cited the example of "A Family Bible Study." He wrote, "Lots of families have Bible study in their homes. A family acts independently and is a separate entity from the church. A father, mother, and children are not necessarily the church. Can a father "bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord" (Eph. 6:4) if *only the church is to preach the gospel*? A family cannot do any Bible teaching, since a family is not the

church! A family is a group of persons acting in concert and that's what a collectivity is. Any one opposed to this Bible teaching? A father, a mother, or a child is not the church. Maybe some have forgotten that "the body is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:14)."

I must remind myself, as I remind the reader, that brother Edwards had already demonstrated his lack of understanding of the real issue. I understand that he thinks that his point is proven by merely citing examples of teaching that is done by *someone* or *something* other than the local church. For an examination of the question of the home as an evangelistic organization, please see my article at: <http://www.biblebanner.com/articles/general/homeargu.pdf>. Notice that brother Edwards defined the family as containing "a father, mother and children." This is correct, and what brother Edwards has done is prove that the family is a **relationship: not an organization**. Each family member bears a particular relationship to the other members, and each one has duties that are peculiar to his role. In an organism (like the human body), all members function as one member. In the family, the wife and children do not function *through the father/husband*. When they teach their friends the Bible, they do not do so *through the father/husband*. Rather, the father teaches the children (Eph. 6:4). The wife may even teach the husband (1 Peter 3:1, 2). There may be times when husbands and wives act concurrently in the teaching of their children and in the teaching of others (see Acts 18:26). If the "family" (dad, mom, kids) is functioning as an organism, then the children are actually teaching themselves (through the father). And if the members of a family function jointly, as an organism, then, rather than the father providing for the family (1 Tim. 5:8), the children would provide for the family (through the father). Rather than the parents saving up for the children (2 Cor. 12:14), the children would save up for themselves (through their parents)! False positions make for faulty, even silly, interpretations.

Even if the home is an organism, it would be a divinely established organism; just as local church is a divinely established organism. It would not be a man-made organism. This would mean that the home is just as authorized as the church to engage in organized evangelism. The argument does not authorize the establishment of man-made organizations for such purposes. By the way, assuming the home to be an evangelistic organization, where is the authority for that evangelistic "organization" to solicit funds from others (members of other homes?) in order to fund the evangelizing of others (members of other homes?)? To ask such a question is to answer it. The *family-teaching* example does nothing to defend business Bible lectureships and human evangelistic missionaries.

3. Brother Edwards cited the example of "Home Bible Studies." He wrote:

"We baptized thirty people last year, as individual Christians taught the Bible in home Bible studies. We thought we were just doing what the Lord said do: "Take heed unto thyself, and

unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:16). If *only the church is to preach the gospel*, we will have to stop teaching the Bible in home Bible studies, since these individual teachers are not the church!"

I doubt seriously that brother Edwards intends for the "We" of this paragraph to represent a religious *organism* operating with a common identity, under common oversight and out of a common treasury! I also doubt that he is here using the word "home" to refer to some organism. In fact, he cited 1 Timothy 4:16 in order to make his point. Paul is speaking of the actions of one man towards others. Brother Edwards admits that this is "individual" action. He must think that there are brethren out there who oppose one man teaching others the gospel. As I said before, where are these brethren? If such people do actually exist, I join brother Edwards in opposition to their error. However, based upon all that I have read, seen and heard throughout this controversy, it appears that brother Edwards is merely beating the stuffings out of a straw man: a fictitious and ignorant enemy. I wish brother Edwards would turn his attention towards those of us who are speaking to the actual issue. We are not operating in the world of make-believe. Our arguments are visible and quite real.

4. Brother Edwards cited the example of "Schools Teaching Bible." He

wrote: "A number of schools teach religious courses and these schools are human organizations. If *only the church is to preach or teach the gospel*, a school could not do so, and it would be sinful to attend such an institution. There are those who say *only the church can teach the Bible*, yet they have or are attending such schools that teach the Bible and even speak on their lecture-ships! Where has consistency gone?"

Rather, brother Edwards, where has gone the fair and accurate representation of another brother's position! No one that I know opposes the right of an organization to **SELL** religious teaching (whether written or oral). Florida College and Athens Bible school **sell admission** into their teaching programs. God did not name the local church as "the pillar and ground of truth material **sales!**" He did name the local church as "the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). An organization may sell Bible instruction. The problem comes when such organizations leave that function, and begin to perform the function of New Testament *evangelism*. An additional problem comes when such organizations become either a church supported, or an individually supported missionary society. For the record, certain arguments in the GOTF book, "*We Have a Right*," boldly defend the concept of a missionary organization funded by individual members of the universal church.

5. Brother Edwards cited the example of a "Husband/Wife Teaching." He wrote:

"In Acts 18:24-28, we find a husband and wife, Aquila and Priscilla, taking Apollos "unto then,

and expounded unto him the way of God more perfectly." Who is ready to condemn this couple, who are not necessarily the church, for teaching the Bible?"

Not I, brother Edwards! I am certainly not ready to condemn Aquila and Priscilla, for they committed no sin. Again, this example by Johnie Edwards misses the whole issue. No one argues that individuals are not authorized to teach the gospel. The problem comes when men subvert the revealed way of God by forming an organization other than the local church to do the work that God has assigned to the local church. Fortunately, brother Edwards does not appear to be making the strained argument that others have made, that alleges that Aquila and Priscilla formed some "evangelistic organization." He appears to cite Aquila and Priscilla merely to show that someone other than a local church taught the gospel. I agree that this can be done. The Bible describes Aquila and Priscilla as "a Jew" and "his wife" (Acts 18:2), not as an evangelistic organism. Each person was credited for his own efforts in the teaching of Apollos. They were not credited as an organization.

Conclusion

I regret that this article by Johnie Edwards was published in Truth Magazine. Such misguided articles mislead the readers into thinking that some of us actually believe that the church is the only means of teaching the gospel. This misrepresentation makes the opponents of human worship, edification and evangelistic societies look incompetent and foolish. It distracts attention away from the real issue. The article actually discourages any real consideration of the issue by making it look like a non-issue. Perhaps brother Edwards has not taken the time to carefully consider the arguments. Hopefully, brother Edwards has simply *misunderstood* the arguments. But what about the editor of Truth Magazine? Does **Mike Willis** really believe brother Edwards' assessment of the opposition view? From what Mike has written on this subject I would think that he knew better. So, why publish brother Edwards' article without some rebuttal, explanation or clarification? I will leave the answering of that question to brother Willis.

Tim Haile