

A Response to Mike Willis’ Article: “*Must We Divide Over Every Issue?*”

By Tim Haile

The May 2008 issue of Truth Magazine contained an article by Mike Willis entitled, “*Must We Divide Over Every Issue?*” Brother Willis listed several issues over which different brethren have divided, but the main points of this article were directed against critics of the *Truth Magazine* lectures. In making these points brother Willis stated some things inaccurately, and other things only partially. Regardless of Mike’s intentions in this matter, his mischaracterization makes it appear that I am unwilling to openly study our differences relating to the question of business Bible lectureships. This is far from the truth, and I feel compelled to set the record straight.

Brother Willis wrote, “*Our good brother Tim Haile has also been a very vocal critic of the Truth Magazine lectures. Tim has been a friend through the years and he and I have never had an unkind word with each other. His wife formerly worked at the Truth Bookstore and we have previously invited Tim to participate in our lecture program. So, when Tim became a vocal critic of Truth Magazine having a lecture program, we invited him to participate in this open forum to discuss “must we divide over every issue?” Tim also refused to participate.*”

1. Brother Willis rightly states that I refused to participate in the Truth Magazine open forum, but he conveniently avoided telling his readers what I proposed as an alternative. In ***the very same reply*** in which I respectfully declined Mike’s offer to participate in the open forum, **I offered to debate him in public oral debate**. In fact, I included a proposition in that very response. I explained to him that a formal debate would be far more profitable than an open forum, since the debate would provide each disputant with the ability to fully develop and present his arguments, and to follow up on those of his opponent. The open forum format simply does not allow this to happen. The principle of fairness means that the leading proponents of the opposing positions are limited to the *same amount of time* as those who have barely even considered the issue. A debate would be far more productive, but brother Willis declined to debate, telling me that along with Dan King he had already produced a 400-page book on the subject. Incidentally, Mike must see a difference between writing a book and writing for the web. If co-producing a book justifies Mike in refusing to participate in a debate with me, then why wouldn’t my being “very vocal” in

web publishing justify me in refusing to participate in Mike’s open forum? (What’s that about “the legs of the lame”?)

2. My wife did work at the Truth Bookstore back when it functioned *as a bookstore* and not as an individually supported evangelistic organization. If I were to reminisce along with brother Willis about those days, I would fondly reminisce of the days before GOTF started usurping the God given role of local churches of Christ. I would think of how nice things were back in the good old days when Truth Bookstore was just a *bookstore* (or at least that is what I thought it was). Interestingly, my wife reminded me of the fact that three of her co-workers at the bookstore were not Christians. This is no problem for people working together in a *commercial business enterprise*. It only becomes a problem when the *business* leaves its authorized function of *selling* religious material and starts *preaching* and *conducting worship services*. You now have a spiritual organization with members whose doctrines and beliefs are contrary to those of the organization!

3. Brother Willis is critical of others and me for refusing to participate in the Truth Magazine open forum. In preparing to raise these criticisms Mike wrote:

“There are churches and individuals that are drawing lines of fellowship on several of these issues. So, Guardian of Truth Foundation decided it would be relevant to air our differences – to see how far apart or how close together we really are. We decided to invite some of those who have been vocal about some of these issues to participate in the open forum.”

This statement reflects one of the more egregious errors of the whole *business Bible lectureship* concept. Namely, that a human organization, such as the Guardian of Truth Foundation, sees its role as providing forums in order to solve “fellowship” problems among members of various churches of Christ. The audacity of Mike Willis and his supporters is disturbing. Brethren should be outraged at the notion that members of the GOTF organization think that they can just arbitrarily appoint a time and place to “air” these issues and brethren be expected to attend! Brother Willis said that “honest” brethren want to listen to each other, and that they would have their discussion even if others “want to stand on the sidelines and complain.” Brother Willis has so exalted the importance of the GOT open forum that only *dishonest complainers* refuse to attend. This is an arrogant charge, and the members of such organizations are both arrogant and presumptuous if they think they are

better equipped to handle such “issues” than are the churches where the affected individuals are members. Again, we find ourselves right back at the very heart of the problem. With absolutely no authorization from the Scriptures, Mike Willis and his supporters attempt to supplant the work of the church by establishing a non-church organization to address divisive issues. Those who cannot see the danger in this are simply looking the other way. God already has a mechanism in place for instructing and rebuking the wayward. Titus 1:9 charges local church elders with this task.

4. Business Bible lectureships use religious services involving the singing of spiritual songs, prayers and preaching to provide a forum for a business to sell its products. This is both repulsive and unscriptural. Why would I want to participate in it in any way?

5. In his comments about brother Bob Dickey, brother Willis made repeated references to the Florida College lectures. He attempts to paint men as being inconsistent in this matter. Being that I have never attended the FC lectures, I have tried to be careful in my comments about it. There is a difference between FC and GOT with respect to their treatment of the business Bible lectureship question. To my knowledge, FC has not attempted to cite Bible passages in defense of their actions. I have seen no *Jesus-Group* or *Gaius-Group* arguments from them. I have seen no attempt to use the Jewish *Synagogue* or the *Areopagus* in their defense. I have seen no arguments from FC equating *concurrent* action with *organic* action. I have seen no attempt on the part of FC to turn Paul’s association with Aquila and Priscilla into an evangelistic *organization*. Whereas, Guardian of Truth Foundation has published (and republished) a 400-page book perverting dozens of Bible passages in a desperate attempt to justify their Bible lectureships. Had Florida College done something similar to this I would have responded to them with equal intensity and enthusiasm.

Based upon the reports that I have received from those who have attended the Florida College lectures, there does appear to be some similarities between the FC and GOT lectureships: Both organizations conduct worship services at their lectureships, and both organizations use their lectures to sell religious books and services. This means that both organizations are equally guilty of denigrating and adulterating the gospel of Christ. Both are equally wrong. The preaching of the gospel must never be used as a commercial advertisement campaign. The gospel should not be preached, nor should spiritual songs be sung for the purpose of promoting and selling products and services. The New Testament nowhere even hints of such a use of the gospel.

Conclusion

Bookstores and Colleges are free to *sell* their printed and oral instructions. The work of *selling* study materials is not the work of the New Testament church, thus bookstores and colleges do not supplant the work of the local church by their business actions. God did not specify the local church as the organization through which such commercial work is to be done. However, God did specify the local church as the organization for *worship, evangelism and edification* (1 Cor. 11:20, 33; 14:23, 26; 1 Tim. 3:15; Acts 13:1-4; Eph. 4:12-16).

I found it interesting that brother Willis closed his article with a quotation from Ephesians 4:1-7. I should point out that the Ephesian letter was addressed to the Ephesian *church*. Had brother Willis gone a little farther in the chapter (vs. 12-16) he would have seen that God has already specified the organization through which the seven-fold platform of unity is to be preached and protected – the organization known as the local church! Similarly, in his letter to the Corinthian and Philippian churches, Paul emphasized the rule of unity (1 Cor. 1:10; Phil. 3:16) and the importance of brethren working harmoniously in the local church organization (1 Cor. 1:10-13; Phil. 4:2, 3).

Bear in mind also that Paul addressed the Philippian church with its “*bishops and deacons*” (Phil. 1:1, *cp. Eph. 4:11* – “*pastors*”). It is local church bishops who have been divinely entrusted with the work of “*instructing*” and “*rebuking*” those who contradict the doctrine of God (Tit. 1:9). We must not entrust this work to the leaders of human institutions like Guardian of Truth Foundation. The local church is sufficient to accomplish all that God wants us to accomplish through organic action.

The title of brother Willis’ 400-page book is “*We Have a Right.*” I have decided to revise my debate proposition to incorporate the wording of Mike’s book title. Perhaps brother Willis will affirm this proposition: “*The Scriptures teach that men **have a right** to form and fund non-church religious organizations for the purpose of conducting worship, edification and evangelism.*” Or, perhaps he will persuade one of his fellow GOT supporters to take up my debate challenge.

I am sending a copy of this article to Mike Willis with the request that it be published in Truth Magazine.

Tim Haile