

December 29, 2013

The Message for Sale: Church Merchandising

By Bryan Hodge

Brethren are now doing something that they did not do in times past. They are charging money for programs done in the name of, and as a work of the church. I never recall brethren doing this in times past. I recall brethren on TV and radio when offering tapes, CD's, tracts and books telling the listeners, "This is offered complimentary and without cost to you. It is paid for by the free-will offerings of members of the church of Christ." However, brethren now are charging for: (1) marriage enrichment programs done in the name of the local church; (2) Ladies days and men's retreats; (3) and even lectureships. Somehow, I do not think this is how Jesus or the apostles did this.

God's inspired word tells us where the money is to come from to conduct the work of the church. It comes from free-will offerings (Acts 4:34-5:4; 11:29-30; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:12; 9:7). Dave Miller once wrote, "All funds utilized in the work of the church are to be contributed by its members based upon their own inventory of personal finances. This means that bake sales, bingo games and on-the-air pleas for viewer contributions are unauthorized, inappropriate, and unacceptable to God" (Article: The Fund Raising Furor, Firm Foundation, July 28, 1987). Brother Miller wrote this in reaction to the practices of televangelists and denominations. However, the truth equally applies to the current practice of some brethren.

Do we truly love souls? Consider the example of Martin Luther. He translated the Bible into German in 1522. It may have been his greatest accomplishment. Philip Schaff, the historian, wrote, "Hereafter, the Reformation depended no longer on the works of the Reformers, but on the book of God, which everybody could read for himself as his daily guide in spiritual life (History of the Christian Church, Vol. 7, p. 341). What did he receive for his work? "It was from beginning to end, a labor of love and enthusiasm while publishers and printers made fortunes, Luther never asked a copper for this greatest work of his life" (ibid, p. 354). Now, I am not suggesting that it would have been wrong for Martin Luther to have received income for his work. "The laborer is worthy of his wages" (Luke 10: 7; 1 Timothy 5:18 cf. 1 Corinthians 9:7-11). However, he did what he did freely out of concern for others. He wanted the Bible in the hands of the people. Do we have such love? On the other hand, are we turning the message into just another opportunity for gain?

Let us point out that there is a big difference between a laborer charging for his labor and the church charging for its services. The church has three areas of work: evangelism, benevolence, and edification. Biblical authority comes from direct statements, accounts of action (examples), and implication. Please tell me where in the Biblical record the church has authority to charge for something that is within its area of work? There are no direct statements or accounts of action which authorize such. Is it implied? If so, how?

Here are some common attempts to justify the practice:

1. It is just a nominal fee to cover materials.

If the materials are so important, can the local church not provide it? What is the first day contribution for, if it is not to fund legitimate works of the church? Do those attending have the option of not purchasing the material from you? On the other hand, is this automatically a part of the cost of attending?

2. Bible students need Bibles.

Should the church start selling Bibles? How would such look? John spoke of missionaries going forth “for His name’s sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles” (3 John 7). “Gentiles” is referring to non-Christians. This does not imply that the church can charge Christians for its services. Personally, I have given away thousands of dollars of Bibles, books, CD’s and other materials over the years out of concern for others. Can local churches not do the same?

3. We offer scholarships.

Even so, the issue is still one of authority. Where do you find your authority to charge for a work of the local church? Moreover, are you really expecting one who cannot afford your nominal fee to humiliate himself by telling you that he cannot afford it? Give me a break.

4. We give back far more free material than we charge for.

Can a person attend for free without taking any of your “free material?” If you are not raising money, or selling material, what is the purpose of your fees? Give me a break.

5. It cost us something to rent this facility.

Okay. It cost us something to cool and heat the building each first day of the week. Should we charge for such? Can a church or multiple churches not work together to cover the expenses without charging the individual? How were things done during Hardeman’s Tabernacle Sermons at the Ryman Auditorium? Was admission charged? In Hardeman’s Tabernacles Sermons, Volume 1, we read, “The brethren were all agreed that if the work should be undertaken it should be done by local congregations’ cooperation with each other... The advertising campaign set a new precedent among the churches of Christ. ...About 100,000 blotters announcing it were distributed; 65,000 personal invitation cards were sent out; large illuminated signs were erected along the car lanes; a half-page ad appeared in both daily papers on the day before the meeting opened; and also a page or two of the city telephone directory was assigned to different ladies in various churches, who called everybody in Nashville that had a telephone and gave them a personal invitation to attend the meeting... On Tuesday night, March 28, the great Ryman Auditorium seating 6,000 to 8,000 people was packed, and it is estimated that 2,000 were turned away.” All of this was accomplished without admission fees!

6. We charge a nominal fee to cover refreshment cost.

Did Jesus or the apostles do this? I do not recall where they did. I understand that there might be some expense. Can the local members not absorb these expenses? Can you not provide the option of a person not eating your food? Must it be included in the cost of attending?

7. Charging for classes.

Charging for this course causes those who enroll to attend more regularly and take the class more seriously. This is probably true. The same would be true of Bible classes. Should we charge for Sunday morning Bible class? How about Biblical advice on marriage? How about Biblical information on money?

7. Universities charge for their classes.

True. However, is there not a major difference between a private university and the work of the church?

8. You buy books.

True. However, is there not a major difference between an individual and publisher, and the work of the church?

9. Times have changed.

Truth does not change. Where is the authority? We used to criticize the denominations for such practices.

10. The economy is bad.

This is an excuse. If you do not have it, you do not have it. Do not resort to unauthorized practices.

Brethren, please, let us not give the appearance that the church is just another moneymaking machine!