

J.T. Smith and the Re-Birth of Sommerism by Mike Willis

The February 2006 issue of *Gospel Truths*, which is published by the Gospel Truths, Inc., printed “A Reply to a Response,” written by editor J.T. Smith. This is another editorial in the campaign to revive Sommerism among non-institutional brethren. Let brother Smith state clearly what is at stake:

I am opposed to an organization separate and apart from the church receiving contributions and organizing worship services aka Guardian of Truth Lectureship. God has set up an organization for that. It is called *the Church*.

Brother Smith closes his article by stating that no other human institution has the right “to receive monetary contributions and call an assembly for worship” because “that is God’s mission for His church and It alone.”

The Rebirth of Sommerism

There you have it. Neither Daniel Sommer, Leroy Garrett nor Carl Ketcherside could have said it better themselves. In Daniel Sommer’s debate with J.N. Armstrong entitled, *A Report of Skirmishes Between a Religious Journal and a Religio-Secular College*, Sommer argued:

“Fourth. Then, in the next place we oppose this institution and pronounce it unscriptural because of what the apostle Paul says in his first letter to Timothy, third chapter, 15th verse, where he says to Timothy: ‘But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.’ So then, my hearers, he says the Church of God is the house of the living God, and adds, which is ‘the pillar and ground of the truth.’ So, if the Church of God, without any such appendage as this, is the pillar and ground of the truth, we object to this institution, established for the purpose of teaching mankind in religion (13).

D. Austen Sommer made the following argument in his debate with J.C. McQuiddy entitled *The College Question Discussed* :

Now these things are true: 1. The “Bible colleges” are organizations. 2. They are teaching the Bible. . . . 3. Teaching the Bible is ‘the Lord’s work.’ 4. Therefore, the human organization of the “Bible college” to do “the Lord’s work” is “to say the least superfluous;” and inasmuch as it is a tradition of man, we may add in the words of Christ, “In vain do ye worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.”

The “Bible college” is a human organization established to do “work of the church” (6).

Later Sommer wrote,

Any human organization with its president, secretary, treasurer, laws, established by Christians to teach the Bible, help the poor or sick or do any other work of the Church is unscriptural, unnecessary and dangerous. The David Lipscomb School and the other “Bible” and “Christian” colleges are human organizations established to do work of the Church for which Christ died, and thus they are unscriptural (13).

These brethren were not discussing whether or not church support of these organizations was scriptural; they were discussing whether or not these organizations could exist separate and apart from church support.

In the first G.K. Wallace-Carl Ketcherside (1952) debate in Paragould, Arkansas on the subject of whether or not Bible colleges such as Florida College could teach the Bible, Ketcherside argued as follows:

I am here defending one body for the purpose of doing the work of the Lord, while he is here defending two bodies. The Book that I read says there is one body (187).

Comparing colleges such as Florida College to a missionary society, Ketcherside said,

If it is wrong to establish a missionary society to do that first teaching (evangelism to the lost, mw), what makes it right to establish an educational institution to do that second teaching (edification, mw)? (199).

It is not a question of whether it is right for you to send your child to this school or to that school, or whether it is right to teach the Bible in school, but the question tonight is whether it is right for Christians to organize another institution to teach the Bible. It is not right to send your child to any school that has no right to exist (200).

Carl Ketcherside affirmed the same principle in his St. Louis debate (1953) with G.K. Wallace:

The only thing I am interested in is whether it is a human organization doing the work that God intended for the church to do. I do not care where he puts it or what he calls it. It does not make any difference to me where you place a missionary society. It does not make any difference to me where you put a society like that. All I want to know is what it is doing. You may call it what you please, and put it in any category you wish, but let me tell you that when it does the work God ordained for His one body to do, brother Wallace himself says it is unscriptural and he will give it up (189).

Ketcherside claimed that the school was a “missionary society” (197). He continued,

So they have a human organization to preach the gospel. Brethren, listen, that is the kind of conglomerate mess you get into when you start establishing human organizations to do the work God gave the church to do (225).

Brother Wallace attacked the taproot of Ketcherside’s argument, the same taproot that brother Smith is teaching today, when he said,

He (Ketcherside, mw) *assumed a premise* that he never did try to prove. He *assumed* that teaching the Bible is the exclusive work of the church. He never did try to prove that teaching the Bible is the *exclusive* work of the church (240).

In Leroy Garrett’s debate with Bill Humble on the Bible college issue, Humble asked Garrett to prove that teaching the Bible was the exclusive work of the church (112). Garrett replied,

Is preaching the Bible the exclusive work of the church? Well, he believes it is. Surely preaching is the exclusive work of the church, so how about the missionary society? Oh, but he says, “The church *as the church*, or is it also the work of individual Christians *as individuals*? Now here is the argument: It would be wrong for the church as such to start an organization, such as a Bible college; but it is right for individuals to do so. Well, now let us see if it will work on the missionary society that way. Now, brother Humble, would it be all right for some of us to gather a group of individuals and start a missionary society? (121)

Later, he said,

Is not this the church's work? Is not the church's obligation to teach the one Lord, the one faith, and to preach Christ? And yet here you have Florida Christian College preaching Christ? Who is featuring this lectureship? Florida Christian College is. Who is sponsoring these twenty-seven lectures? Florida Christian College. What is it? This is a gospel meeting. Conducted by a church? No, it is conducted by a college, under the supervision of that college (127).

I reproduce these quotations for you to put brother Smith's argument in context. Brother Smith is preaching Sommerism. Anyone who reads the above quotations can see that brethren Carl Ketcherside, Leroy Garrett, Gene Frost, and now J.T. Smith are making the same argument. These brethren protest the description of their doctrine as "Sommerism." They dislike this description because they are aware of the factional division Sommer's doctrine caused among Christians several decades ago. They dislike the description because Sommer and his colleagues applied their teaching to Bible colleges whereas the new Sommerites do not want to apply their teaching to Florida College because brethren widely believe that Florida College has a right to exist, many of them have spoken on the lecture programs at Florida College, and many of them attend the lectures joining in the collective singing, praying, and Bible teaching which occurs during the lectures. They cannot afford to allow brethren to recognize that the very arguments they are using against the Guardian of Truth Foundation were used by earlier Sommerites to prove that Florida College had no right to teach the Bible. Remember the adage: If it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it's a duck! These brethren are true Sommerites.

Other Collective Works Indicted

Let's be sure that we see what is at stake in this discussion about collectivities. The Guardian of Truth is not the only collectivity that has collective singing, praying, or teaches the Bible. Once the principle is established by the new Sommerites, the application will have to be consistently applied and when it is other works presently being done will be attacked as well, if these brethren abide by the Bible command to apply the faith of Jesus Christ without partiality (1 Tim. 5:20-21). Here is a partial list of examples in which I know other brethren are working collectively:

- Several brethren pooling their resources to conduct a tent meeting such as occurs at the tent meeting in Burkesville, KY each year or to conduct a radio program in Eastern Kentucky
- Several brethren pooling their resources to support a gospel preacher
- Several brethren getting together for prayer and singing such as occurs in home Bible studies in which a person invites several members into his home for singing, prayer, and teaching
- Brethren partaking of the Lord's supper while on a trip to an area in which there is no congregation
- Brethren pooling their resources to take care of the benevolent needs of any person to whom the church also bears responsibility
- The singing, prayer and teaching that occurs at a funeral home
- The prayer and teaching that occurs at a wedding
- Singing schools such as is operated by R.J. Stevens
- The chapel services at Florida College
- The devotions held at the various dorms at Florida College
- The lectures at Florida College
- College scholarships which give away Bible instruction
- The assemblies at Athens Bible School where the Bible is taught
- *Think* magazine which is supported by individual contributions and given away
- Biblical Insights, Inc. which receives donations
- Gospel Truths, Inc. which receives donations (at least of articles)

- *Preceptor Magazine* which receives donations (at least of articles)
- Web sites such as those operated by Mars List, Bible.ca.com, Don Martin, and Jeff Belknap because they receive donations (articles) and give away their product. Obviously they are collective arrangements and not individual activity
- Web magazines

In addition to those collective arrangements for teaching the Bible, offering worship (singing, prayer and teaching) operated by brethren, the following are some other collective activities that also would be sinful if the church is the only organization for worship, as brother Smith contends:

- Religion classes taught at public and private universities
- Hospital chaplains
- Police chaplains
- Military chaplains
- The prayer and preaching at a Baccalaureate service
- Prayer at a sports event
- Prayer to open government legislative houses
- School prayer

Let's make clear where brother Smith's doctrine logically leads (if he believes this is not the logical conclusion to what he is teaching, let him show us why one of these is wrong and the others are right):

- Those who send contributions to Florida College are sinning
- Those who attend Florida College are sinning
- Those who speak at the Florida College lectures are sinning (is it right in Tampa but wrong in Bowling Green?)
- Those who attend the Florida College lectures and participate in worship (singing, teaching and prayer) are sinning
- Those who attend the R.J. Stevens singing school are sinning
- Those who invite a group of teenagers into their home for teaching, singing, and prayer are sinning

Brethren, are you ready to follow these new Sommerites down this road of factionalism and division?

Review of the Article

Having made clear what the issues are, let us now examine the latest article by brother Smith to see what Bible justification he presents to sustain his argument. He used Matthew 18:15-17 to distinguish individual from collective action. With this I agree. He uses Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:18; 14 to show that there are local church assemblies for worship. No one disagrees with any of these verses.

What is missing? Brother Smith's argument is like that of the Baptist preacher who quotes a hundred passages on faith to prove that man is saved by "faith only." He uses passages to show that the church assembled for worship and concludes that *only* the church may offer worship. But the word "only" is not in any of the passages he quotes! Furthermore, the Bible shows other groups of brethren offering worship together outside the church assembly of the local church. Acts 12:12 describes many who had gathered together for prayer (this is distinct from what the church was doing in 12:5). Jesus assembled with the Twelve in the upper room for teaching (see John 14-17), prayer (Matt. 26:28), and singing (Matt. 26:30). After the church had begun, Paul taught the Bible in the synagogue (Acts 17:1-3). If the church is the only collectivity which can have worship or teach the Bible, what was Paul doing in the synagogue? Yet, Acts 17:2 says that this was his custom or manner. The synagogue had prayer and Bible reading. This was going on after the church was established and an inspired apostle participated in it. Did he sin? Can I follow an apostle's example (1 Cor.

11:1; Phil. 4:9)? These verses of Scripture suffice to demonstrate that brother Smith's premise is false: "I am opposed to an organization separate and apart from the church receiving contributions and organizing worship services aka Guardian of Truth Lectureship. God has set up an organization for that. It is called *the Church*." Will he give up his premise or does he hate the Guardian of Truth Foundation so much that he will cling to his premise rather than the Scriptures?

Willful Disobedience to the Command to Be Impartial

Brother Smith has another problem. He violates the Scriptures by showing partiality in the practice of what he believes. Paul wrote, "Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear. *I charge thee before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, and the elect angels, that thou observe these things without preferring one before another, doing nothing by partiality*" (1 Tim. 5:20-21). This is not the first time brother Smith's attention has been called to the selective application of the premise he believes. When I asked this question last time, brother Smith responded, "Brother Willis wonders why we are singling them out from all the other institutions that are doing the same thing they are doing. Let's stick with the subject." Apparently brother Smith believes himself to be exempt from obedience to the Lord's charge to observe these things without "partiality" (ASV). He refused to address the issue and did not deny that he is "singling out" the Guardian of Truth Foundation. His persistence in showing partiality demonstrates that he is not interested in impartially applying the truth as the Holy Spirit commanded; rather, he is interested in attacking the Foundation. If that is not the case, let him treat all collectivities which teach the Bible, have prayer, and singing the same way. He will not do it! At least he has not done it up until now! He is only interested in attacking the Guardian of Truth Foundation. I challenge him to show me that I am wrong. Every time he says a word about the Guardian of Truth Foundation, let him say the same word about these other organizations. If he doesn't, ask yourself, "Why?" So long as he does not, he is willfully disobeying God's commandment to apply the faith of Jesus Christ without partiality.

The Gospel Truths, Inc. Foundation

Brother Smith says "*Gospel Truths* was founded for the purpose of giving me a medium through which evangelistic work can be done." Gospel Truths, Inc. owns and operates the paper *Gospel Truths*. Gospel Truths, Inc. is not the local church and it is not J.T. Smith. *Gospel Truths* is not a local church bulletin and it is not a paper written by and published by one man. The latest issue had nine different men and women contribute articles for publication, it was overseen by an editor, and the cost of printing and postage was paid for by Gospel Truths, Inc. according to what is published in the masthead. Now, if brother Smith is right that the church is the *only* organization which has a right to teach the Bible, what reason can he give for Gospel Truths, Inc. teaching the Bible? Brother Smith could have produced a paper without forming a corporation to do so. He could have done his evangelistic work without creating a tax-exempt corporation to do so. So, why did he create this human organization? Why ask other brethren to pool their resources under the oversight of an editor if there can be only one collective organization for the teaching of the Bible?

Contributions to Gospel Truths, Inc.

Lastly, brother Smith chided me for saying that those who contribute an article in *Gospel Truths*, which is published by Gospel Truths, Inc., are making a donation to this human organization. In this particular issue, brother Smith published an article which I had written and without my permission for it to be published in *Gospel Truths* which he in turn sold in the public market. He didn't just give it away, like someone illegally copying a CD of a song and giving it to a friend; he sold it! Indeed, according to the premises he espouses, he would be guilty of sin had he given it away! Publishing material without the author's permission is a violation of United States copyright law. Copyright law is designed to protect the intellectual property of the author, whether that be a song, a computer program, an article, or a book. The web site <http://whatiscopyright.org/> helps define copyright law and the web saying:

The general (and incorrect) notion is that anything that is on the internet is public domain

and may be taken without permission from the creator/owner. Some people actually think (incorrectly) that just because bits of web pages may be stored in one's cache, or because certain browsers allow one to do "file save as" moves or anything similar one may use such material as one wishes. **This is false.**

Brother Smith violated U.S. copyright law when he reprinted my article without my permission. I am not writing this to threaten him with a lawsuit; I have no intention to pursue my legal rights. What I am emphasizing is that even the government recognizes that intellectual property has financial value. When a person "contributes" (note the word, just like one contributes to the treasury of the local church) an article to a paper, he is making a contribution. He is releasing his legal rights to his intellectual property and giving it to the foundation, Gospel Truths, Inc. In my case, my intellectual property was taken without my permission and the civil government defines that as a criminal act. Therefore, I did not contribute anything to Gospel Truths, Inc., but the president of this corporation utilized my property without my permission, though I am willing to overlook the matter.

Brother Smith is stretching to make his point that contributing an article is not a contribution. He says that churches send reports to *Truth Magazine* and asks if these churches have made a donation to *Truth Magazine*. If they have, they have also made donations to Gospel Truths, Inc. in the same manner. First, I don't remember getting reports from churches; most everything I get is from individuals. But, if a church wanted to make an announcement, for example that it is sponsoring a debate, it is doing the same thing in *Truth Magazine* as it is when it turns in an announcement of a gospel meeting to the local newspaper. The newspaper prints what is newsworthy. If the newspaper does not judge the announcement to be newsworthy, will charge the church for running that announcement. Second, what *Truth Magazine* gets from churches is requests to advertise that they are looking for a preacher. Brother Smith has the situation reversed. The donation is not going from the church to *Truth Magazine* but from the *Truth Magazine* to the church. *Truth Magazine* donates advertising to the church in such cases.

Furthermore, intent and purpose are involved in the nature of any action. A Christian cannot scripturally donate money to a denomination, but he may give money to such an organization in a business transaction (such as buying goods, services, or property). A faithful preacher cannot scripturally donate articles to a denominational publication in order to support and spread its errors, but he can submit an article designed to teach the truth and refute denominational error in an effort to convert denominational people to the truth. Now, the end does not justify the means, and therefore it is wrong to take even this step if it is sinful for a publishing organization other than the church to teach the truth, as J.T. claims (through his publishing organization).

Conclusion

Brother Smith seems determined to continue his pursuit of Sommerism and couples it with his persistent disobedience in applying what he understands to be the faith of Christ with impartiality. There will be some who hate the Guardian of Truth Foundation enough to appreciate what he is doing. There will be many others who shake their head in disbelief that brother Smith chooses to go down this road. He will continue to marginalize himself and destroy his influence for good during the last years of his earthly life. I regret that he has chosen this course for himself. I do not intend to engage in endless harangues with him. Should some new argument based on the Scriptures be made, I may choose to examine it but I do not intend to continue to analyze every article he writes.