

Centralizing The Word Of God

Over the course of history, man has always wanted to band together. There is an old saying that goes, "There is strength in numbers," and humans have certainly proven that. The process of banding together under one person or for one cause is called centralization. This process has always been very popular but this article will examine where it has not been acceptable.

When God commands us to do something a certain way, we are expected to follow that command. However, humans often come in and alter the way they want to follow God's command. One of these ways is centralization. There are two good examples of this in the Old Testament.

We find the first example in the tower of Babel (Genesis 11:1-9). After the Flood, God gave the command to be fruitful and multiply the earth (Genesis 9:1), but man came in and altered that plan. They all wanted to band together so they would not be scattered. This was in direct defiance of God's plan. They were centralizing. For their punishment, God confused the languages of the people so that they were scattered throughout the earth.

The second example is Saul (1 Samuel 8:4-9, 19-22; 12:12). The children of Israel wanted to be like the nations around them, so they wanted to centralize their leadership under a king. They failed to realize that God was their true King. There is nothing wrong per se with a king ruling over a nation, but when it contradicts God's plan, it is wrong!

There is a movement that has been around for a long time and it is basically one of centralization. God's plan is not good enough, so men feel like they need to alter it. This plan is better known as institutionalism.

Around 150 years ago, denominational churches began what was called "missionary societies." These were human institutions started and supported by churches to "spread the gospel." Later on, schools, seminaries, day-care centers, social action groups, orphanages, clinics, printing companies, hospitals, Sunday school societies and youth organizations too numerous to mention have been started and supported by churches.

Several years ago, a large number of churches of Christ were led into the same type of institutionalism as our religious neighbors. It was a small beginning with an emotional appeal for the care of poor, starving orphans. Hence, they began to build human institutions and demand church support. Then came institutions for the aged, youth camps, missionary arrangements (just like the missionary societies in denominationalism) and colleges.

To many, the church has become an institution to provide money to enable other institutions to care for the young and old, provide an education for those who desire one, entertain and provide camps and recreation for youth and build banquet halls for eating, fun and frolic.

Our institutional brethren make no distinction between the work of the individual and the church. As long as the elders deem something as a "good work," it is appropriate for the church to send funds for its support. However, in 1 Timothy 5:16, a clear distinction between the church and the individual is made. The task of relieving widows is the responsibility of the individual. The church would relieve widows "indeed." Both should provide care, food, clothing and shelter.

Two mistakes that institutionalists make are that they apply passages addressing the individual to the church (James 1:27; Galatians 6:10), and then say that the church cannot do the work. The church then turns the responsibility over to a "benevolent society" to do the work God gave the individual. However, these two passages refer to the individual, and one can tell this from the context and the use of first person pronouns. The disagreement is not over HOW the needy are to be relieved, but over WHO is going to do it. Institutionalists would allow Noah to make monthly contributions to Ark Builders, Inc. so they could build the ark for him. This was not God's plan!

God gave gifts to the church for perfecting the saints unto the work of service unto the building up of the body (Ephesians 4:11-12). God's work includes benevolence, edification and evangelism.

Regarding benevolence, the Jerusalem church was able to provide for its own needy (Acts 6:1-6). The disciples at Antioch sent relief "*for the brethren which dwelt in Judea*" by the hands of Barnabas and Saul (Acts 11:27-30). The churches of Macedonia and Achaia sent a contribution for the poor among the saints of Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-26; 2 Corinthians 8-9).

Regarding edification, the church is built up by the development of its members (1 Thessalonians 5:11; 2 Corinthians 10:8; Romans 15:1-3). The objective of a congregation is not numerical growth alone but the development of spiritual strength. A church must grow into godliness and the ability to overcome temptation (1 Thessalonians 3:13; Jude 17-23).

Regarding evangelism, the sufficiency of the church can be seen by observing the spread of the gospel in the book of Acts. Disciples traveled from Jerusalem to Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch (Acts 11:22, 23). The Antioch church had prophets and teachers; they sent Barnabas and Saul away (Acts 13:1-14). Among the places they went were Philippi (Acts 16:31-33). Paul

went on to Thessalonica and Philippi supported him financially (Acts 17:1-4; Philippians 4:15-16). The church at Thessalonica sounded forth the word of the Lord throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

The early church was sufficient to do the work without nursing homes (benevolence), "Christian" schools and colleges (edification) and missionary societies (evangelism). It furthermore did its work without some of the congregations becoming sponsoring churches through which the others might work. A denial of the adequacy of the church to do the work God has assigned is an admission that the saints have not been perfected. This in turn argues that Christ did not give the necessary gifts to get the job done. This kind of thinking is a reflection on the wisdom of God.

The wisdom of men is foolishness to God (1 Corinthians 3:19). The wisdom of men uses several propaganda devices in order to further their cause: Name calling (using derogatory titles to those who resist them such as "anti" or "orphan-hater"), tabloid thinking (using emotional or prejudicial slogans but no scripture such as, "50 cents a day will buy a meal and feed a starving baby"), testimonials (using what men or churches having preached or practiced), association (using the connection between a man's opinions and the object he defends), band wagon (using an appeal to majority or tradition) and misrepresentation (using a distortion or perversion of fact). All these devices get away from our basic plea of book, chapter and verse for all we do!

The difference between divine authority and human wisdom can be seen in some examples. Divine authority says we need to relieve widows (1 Timothy 5:16). Human wisdom says, "Build a benevolent society." Divine authority tells us to assemble (Hebrews 10:25). Human wisdom says, "Start a church building society." Divine authority tells us to baptize (Matthew 28:19). Human wisdom says, "Start a baptizing society." Divine authority says we need to teach (Matthew 28:20). Human wisdom says, "Start a Sunday School society and a Christian college." Divine authority tells us to support preachers (1 Corinthians 9:14). Human wisdom says, "Start a preacher support society."

For years, institutionalists have said, "The Bible does not give a command, example or necessary inference to forbid this practice." However, this puts a premium on the silence of the scriptures and this reasoning opens the door for everything from baptizing infants to cake and ice cream on the Lord's table to instrumental music in worship. The burden of proof is on them to establish their position from the Bible, not to cry out for where the Bible says not do what they urge us to do (Acts 15:24; 1 Corinthians 4:6; 2 John 9)!

I am not against caring for orphans or the aged, but I am against the institutional racket. It is an unscriptural, division-causing danger in the church. Missionary societies, benevolent societies and centralized elderships were not in existence 200 years ago. But steadily, they have been introduced and congregations have been torn apart by the "wisdom of men." These practices were built and maintained on the basis of tradition, not scripture. We must have book, chapter and verse for everything we do!

-- *Kyle Campbell*