

The Fallacy Of Institutionalism

In Acts 6, a group of Christians brought an accusation against another group because their widows were not being properly cared for. It was at news of this the apostles instructed the church to select certain men from among them to tend to the physical needs of those being neglected. Apparently, this inspired method was effective. The needy among them received the proper care, the word of God spread and the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem (vv. 1-7).

Several decades ago, faithful brethren fought diligently to maintain unity and doctrinal purity by opposing the establishment and support of human institutions from the collection of the saints. These institutions would become subservient to the work God gave His church. It was shown the scriptures plainly taught that it was an individual's responsibility to provide for the poor and fatherless of the world. It was error to "charge the church" for that which the Lord had placed upon the individual while practicing pure and undefiled religion (James 1:26-27).

Many disagreed, lines were drawn, and many small congregations that could hardly support their own work began to send "token" offerings to institutions to show what side of the fence they were on. Other churches that chose not to engage in this activity were castigated and brethren who opposed labeled them "anti." As one generation goes another arises and the issue is somewhat mute. Many children whose parents were forced out of congregations for refusing to "charge the church" move to new communities and fall in step with the institutional system of benevolence. In the mind of most it is a non-issue. However, does God consider charging the church for responsibilities He has given the individual a non-issue? When we examine the context of 1 Timothy 5:1-16 it is impossible for the honest observer to think that it makes no difference to God. The concept has developed that as long as it is considered a good work it makes no difference to God what we do or how we do it.

First, we notice the restriction and prohibition of certain individuals (1 Timothy 5:11). Second, those who are to be considered as the responsibility of the church must meet specified requirements (1 Timothy 5:9-11). Third, an individual who fails to make the distinction between individual and church responsibility, and charges the church for what God requires of him personally has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Timothy 5:8). The specific purpose in making this distinction is that the church may engage in the relief of those to whom he has given charge (1 Timothy 5:16).

The disagreement has never been should the elderly or orphans be cared for, but who is responsible for providing the necessary care?

Many who argued for putting institutions into the budget of the church professed their way was the way of efficiency. They said, "We can do so much more good by using this innovative method." Others claimed the work could not be accomplished without the institution. Harold Sharp, who fought gallantly to maintain truth and unity during the 50's and 60's, while engaged in a debate on this issue challenged those who deemed the institutions necessary: "Give me two weeks and I'll find Christians, real Christian homes (of individuals), for every child in the Southern Arkansas Children's Home." Of course, those whose livelihood depended upon such organizations dismissed the idea entirely.

Amazingly, 35 years later, I had a visit from the Director of Child Placement of the Southern Arkansas Children's Home. He was seeking individual Christian families who would be willing to provide foster homes to the children. The federal government had recognized this was a more desirable arrangement than the group care they received in the "home." The director then informed me that the "home" will pay the families that offer their parenting services. Needless to say, I could not believe what I was hearing. The benevolent institution had come full circle. The "home" was seeking Christian homes. Only now the institution was willing, ready, and able to pay individuals to practice pure and undefiled religion. Certainly, foster parenting is to be commended and supported, but consider the role of the Lord's church in this bureaucracy and inefficiency:

1. The local congregation sends funds to the institution to care for children.
2. The institution takes out its operational expenses.
3. The home sends the child back to the individual of a local congregation with some of the money that is left over to care for the child in need.

Is that really expedient or more efficient? Needless to say, the challenge of brother Sharp continues to ring loud and clear. However, expediency is not what is wrong with the institutional arrangement. It is wrong because this activity violates the divine pattern designed and ordained by God. This merely illustrates conclusively that God's will is best done in God's way (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

Dennis Carrow