

What Is An “Institutional” Church?

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, schools, seminaries, day-care centers, social action groups, orphanages, nursing homes, clinics, printing companies, hospitals, Sunday school societies, and youth organizations have been started and supported by churches. A large number of churches of Christ were led into institutionalism of the same type as that among our religious neighbors. It was a small beginning with an emotional appeal that the poor, starving orphans must be cared for. Hence, they began to build human institutions and demand church support. Then came institutions for the aged, youth camps, missionary arrangements (on the same order as the missionary societies in denominationalism), and colleges. To many, the church has become an organization 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 and fun.

Members of institutional churches 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 to support it. However, in 1 Timothy 5:16, there is a clear distinction between the church and the individual. Two mistakes that institutional members make is that they apply passages to the individual (Galatians 6:10; James 1:27) to the church, 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. But these two passages refer to the individual, as seen by the context. The disagreement is not over how the needy are to be relieved, but over who is going to do it.

The Jerusalem church was able to provide for its own needy (Acts 6:1-6). The disciples at Antioch sent a contribution 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).

The sufficiency of the church in evangelism can be seen by observing the spread of the truth. 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 was Philippi (Acts 16:31-33). Paul went on to Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-4) and Philippi supported him financially (Philippians 4:15-16). The Thessalonian church sounded forth the word throughout Macedonia and Achaia (1 Thessalonians 1:8).

They were sufficient to preach the gospel without forming missionary societies and 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, and 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 use several propaganda devices in order to further their cause: Name calling — using derogatory titles to those who resist them (“anti” or “orphan-hater”); tabloid thinking — using emotional or prejudicial slogans (“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, card stacking — using a distortion or perversion of fact. All these devices get away from the basic plea. We must have authority for everything we do. The wisdom of God manifests itself in the Bible.

For years, institutional members have not given one passage of scripture to support their claims! They say “the Bible does not give a command, apostolic example or necessary inference to forbid this practice.” This places a premium on the silence of the scriptures. That kind of 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 institutional members to establish their position from the scriptures, not to cry out for where the Bible says not do what they urge churches 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 institution. It is an unscriptural, division-causing danger in the church. Missionary societies, benevolent societies, and centralized elderships were not in existence 175 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.

The ultimate thrust of Christ’s gospel is spiritual (John 18:36). His purpose was to save man from being eternally lost (Luke 19:10; 1 Timothy 1:15). Our greatest need is redemption from sin. If social concerns, alleviating human discomfort, and temporal problems were Jesus’ main mission, then He failed. He had unlimited resources to stop all human suffering, yet He did not do so. He did not heal all the sick or feed all the hungry. His miraculous signs were not ends within themselves, but were confirming proof that validated His message.

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