

The Work of the Church #6 (Institutionalism)

Introduction:

- I. As we continue our series of lessons on the work of the church, we now come to the issue of institutionalism. I said when we started this series that there is indeed division among the people of God today. That's a sad but true reality. Some local churches of Christ are what we call institutional churches and some, like this one, are non-institutional. For the most part, fellowship between individuals in these two different kinds of local churches have long since ceased and the truth is there has been much animosity between the two groups over the years. Those who have been opposed to institutionalism have been called every thing from antis to radicals in the body of Christ. Those who have supported institutionalism have been labeled liberals and have been described as those who are immature in the faith and who have a denominational concept of Christianity. Thus, division was inevitable among brethren regarding this issue of institutionalism. In the 50's and 60's many debates among brethren were held and many churches were divided. As early as 1954, the then editor of the *Gospel Advocate* suggested that antis should be tagged with the yellow tag of quarantine. Preachers who opposed institutions doing the work of the church had meetings canceled and were often asked to leave by the local church which was supporting them. Referring to the division experienced by brethren at this time, Bill Humble had the following to say:

“The most serious issue that churches of Christ have faced in this century is church cooperation and ‘institutionalism.’ Led by Roy Cogdill, Yater Tant, and the *Gospel Guardian*, a substantial number of churches have some to oppose such cooperative programs of evangelism as the Herald of Truth and the homes for orphans and aged, as they are presently organized. During the past 15 years many debates have been held, churches have divided, and fellowship has been broken. This is the most serious division, numbers-wise, that churches of Christ have suffered. Whether the division is final, or whether it can be healed, is yet to be determined” (*Story of Restoration*, p. 74, *Bill Humble*).

Well, the division has never be healed, and it is quite unlikely that it ever will be. For the truth is those who have supported institutions have over the years become more and more liberal minded so that there is now a division among them. There are now liberals and ultra liberals. The ultra liberals are those like Max Lacado, Rubel Shelly, Ed Fudge, and a host of others, who have simply taken the principles of liberal minded brethren to its predictable end. Listen to me: whenever you have an attitude that says, “There is no pattern,” there is going to raise up a generation that desires to do things that you may not want to do, but are basically defenseless to stop. As one brother said, “you can't open up the flood

gates with one hand and try to stem the tide with the other.” This is what some of our liberal brethren are finding out right now.

- II. But now, what is institutionalism exactly and why do we oppose it so vigorously? Why is it that we consider those who approved of and participate in institutionalism as digressive brethren? These are some of the questions we want to answer in this lesson.

Lesson:

I. What Is Institutionalism?

Institutionalism is the practice of building and financially maintaining or subsidizing different institutions to do the work of the local church. I want you to get this now. This is the problem of institutionalism. It is not the **work** that they do, it is **who** is doing the work. We will have more on this in just a minute. But institutionalism has to do with building and maintaining institutions to do the work of the church.

Now, let's remember what the work of the church is. The work of the church is to engage in evangelism, benevolence, and edification. Since that is the work of the church, brethren through the years have thought that it is okay for the church to build institutions as a matter of expediency to do that work. We are talking about missionary societies to do the work of evangelism. We are talking about orphan homes, widow homes and hospitals to do the work of benevolence. And we are talking about colleges to do the work of edification. These are the kind of institutions that we are talking about and that we oppose at this local church.

II. What Is The Issue Among Us?

The issue is not should the church do this work. Of course it should! The issue is not *“how”* the church should do the work. How the church does its work of evangelism, benevolence, and edification is a matter of expediency. Well, if the issue is not whether or not the church should do the work or how the church should do the work, what is the issue? The issue is *“who”* should do the work under consideration. This is what divides us. Not how the work should be done, but who should do. Institutional brethren believe that institutions like orphan homes and Christian colleges should do it. Thus, they build these institutions and put them in the church budget to maintain them. These institutions, in turn, do the work that God has given the local church to do. Non-institutional brethren believe that the only institution or organization that is authorized by the New Testament is the local church; thus, the local church should do its own work.

Now, many accusations have been made about those who oppose man-made institutions over the years. It has been implied, or at times stated directly, that we have our priorities mixed up. Often a preacher making such an accusation would hold up a bag of fertilizer from behind a pulpit and say that we believe we can fertilize the grass but not take care of orphans. A ploy to work on the emotions of people. That is not the issue! We have been accused of not believing in mission work. I cannot speak of all churches that oppose institutionalism, but here we have supported preachers on foreign fields in the past and I'm sure we will do it in the future. That is not the issue! We have been accused of not believing in preaching the gospel on TV or radio. That again is not true with us. We have preached on the radio for the last year. Again, that is not the issue. The issue is now and always has been, *who is going to do the work God has assigned the church to do*. We say it must be the local church.

What is the local church? It is a group of people who have decided to work together in a specific geographical location. It is a unit composed of elders, deacons, and saints (**Phil. 1:1**). It is a group that has Jesus as its head (**Eph. 1:22, 23**). The church is blood bought (**Acts 20:28**). The church is governed by the New Testament and the New Testament only (**Acts 2:42**). The local church is overseen by a plurality of elders (**14:23; 1 Pet. 5:2**). This is the only organization of God's people one reads about in the New Testament.

III. Is The Local Church Sufficient To Do Its Work?

The real question is "can the church do the work that God has given it to do? Institutional brethren say no. This has always been the case going back to the Missionary Society. Before the Society was established, while Campbell was trying to solicit support for a brotherhood wide cooperative effort in evangelism, his thinking was that an individual must preach the gospel, but a local church can do what an individual cannot. And a group of congregations can do what one congregation cannot. Here is what he wrote: ***"A church can do what an individual disciple cannot, and so can a district of churches do what a single congregation cannot"*** (Millennial Harbinger, Vol. II, No. 5 (May 1831), pg. 237).

On Oct. 23, 1849 there was a convention held in Cincinnati concerning the Missionary Society. Alexander Campbell could not attend and W.K. Pendleton came in his stead. Later Pendleton wrote: ***"We met, not for the purpose of enacting ecclesiastic laws, not to interfere with the true and scriptural independence of the churches, but to consult about the best ways for giving efficiency to our power, and to devise such methods of cooperation, in the great work of converting and sanctifying the world, as our combined counsels, under the guidance of Providence, might suggest and approve. There are some duties of***

the church which a single congregation cannot, by her unaided strength, discharge. . ." (Millennial Harbinger, Third Series, Vol. VI, o. 12 (Dec., 1849), pp. 689, 690). These statements clearly show that some restoration leaders felt that a missionary society was necessary because the local church was too limited. It was insufficient. Nothing has changed. Those who advocate institutions to do the work of the church today are indicating by their actions the same thing, though they deny it. Again, I remind you of what the work of the church is — evangelism, edification, and benevolence. The local church can do all these things without help from an institution (**charts on the sufficiency of the local church & wisdom of God vs. wisdom of man**).

IV. The Church Is Not A Home

It has been argued that the church has the responsibility to take care of widows and orphans. The passage that is used is **Jas. 1:27**. The word *visit* here means "*to look upon or to look after; to relieve.*" Institutional brethren conclude that since the church has this responsibility, and since the church is not a home, it must provide a home. Well, it is agreed that the church can provide a home for the needy of the church. For example, the church can use an existing nursing home to care for its needy widows if the situation calls for it. The church can, in other words, buy a service from a nursing home. But that, as we have seen, is greatly different from building and subsidizing a nursing home. To do that one must establish an institution with a board of directors as overseers who in return will provide a place of residency (**chart**). Another thing that is interesting about our brethren's use of Jas. 1:27 is how they shift the responsibility of the text. We have seen in a previous lesson that they try to shift the responsibility of the text from the individual to the church. But they go even further. Once they shift responsibility to the church, they then in turn try to shift responsibility to an institution (**chart**).

Conclusion:

Institutionalism --what is the issue? It is not whether the church should preach the gospel, help the needy, or edify the saints. It should, in fact we should say we must. The issue is not whether or not the church can buy services from institutions such as hospital, nursing homes, or even orphan homes in certain situations. It can! The issue is this. Can the church build institutions and then subsidize that institution by making contributions to it out of the treasury? Can the church pay another organization to do the work that God gave it to do? That is the issue! Our liberal institutional brethren say yes, but they can give no authority for such. We say no. The church must do its own work.