

Free! Take one!

That They all May Be One

John 17:21



Chapter eight Institutionalism

Clarence W. Fell

Chapter Eight

Institutionalism

“What in the world is institutionalism?” you ask. Institutionalism is one of those big words used mostly by preachers. It refers to the practice of using man-made institutions to do the work God assigned to the church. It also includes the practice of churches making donations to institutions.

This is a topic that many people would rather skip, because they think it is too complex. But, if we skip this topic, we are not being faithful to our restoration goal. If we really want to follow the Bible, topics such as this must receive attention. Actually, this topic is no more complicated than any of the previous chapters. We can easily manage this topic as we pursue New Testament Christianity.

Our conservative stand makes us look strict in comparison to most modern religious groups, but our members actually enjoy much liberty. They are free to send contributions privately to colleges, hospitals, and charity organizations. We openly acknowledge that many man-made organizations make positive contributions to our society. We are simply keeping the institutions separate from the church and out of the church treasury. Our goal is to follow the Bible and get to heaven. We won't take chances with our eternity, and we won't take any chances with your eternity, either.

One or the Other

The very essence of restoring New Testament Christianity

naturally opposes modern innovations such as institutionalism. It is just that simple. We can restore New Testament Christianity or be institutional, but not both. If we practice institutionalism and claim to be restoring New Testament Christianity, we are not consistent with our claim. In an effort to be consistent with our claim, and to stay on target with our goals, we reject the practice of institutionalism.

A Matter of Authority

Institutionalism is a symptom of a deeper problem. The deeper problem concerns respecting authority. The principles of authority that lead us to:

Sing a cappella.

Observe the Lord's Supper each Sunday.

Practice baptism unto the remission of sins.

Reject the modern day tongues movement.

Speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where the Bible is silent.

Use Bible words in Bible ways.

Do Bible things in Bible ways.

The same underlying principles also lead us to reject institutionalism.

We simply have no authority given in the Bible that authorizes a congregation to collect money and then donate it to other organizations. We are certain that congregations may help some people on a limited basis, but nowhere in the Scriptures do we find congregations supporting institutions. We do not have the right to change God's design to suit ourselves. John warned us about making changes when he wrote, *"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the book of Life, from*

the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book"
(Rev. 22:18,19. See also Prov. 30:5,6 and Gal. 3:15).

Respecting God's Design

Any change from the Bible pattern is a step down. Man is not smart enough to improve upon God's design. Jeremiah warned us, "*O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; It is not in man who walks to direct his own steps*" (Jer. 10:23). When men mix institutions with the church, they are trying to direct their own steps. They are trying to improve upon God's design. We must resist the temptation to make changes in God's design.

When men mix institutions into the church they also show disrespect for God. They show that they think they have found a better way than God's way. Paul warned us about trusting in our own wisdom, "*Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you seems to be wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God. For it is written, 'He catches the wise in their own craftiness'*" (I Cor. 3:18,19. See also I Cor. 1:18 - 31). The question of institutionalism can not be decided based upon what men think is best. This question must be answered based squarely upon God's word.

To God be Glory in the Church

Paul wrote, "*To Him [God] be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*" (Eph. 3:21). We think it is a shame when other organizations take anything away from the church. We oppose institutions doing the work of the church, taking the glory, and the church being placed in a back seat. We oppose congregations being looked down upon and demoted to fund-raising

farms that support man-made institutions. We realize that institutions appreciate and thank the congregations that support them, but the man-made institution is still positioned ahead of the church.

We want to guard the church from any and all that would detract from her the slightest bit. We are zealous for the name of Christ that is to be above every name (Phil. 2:9). We believe that the church must focus on being the church and sowing the seed, not raising funds to support other organizations in the pursuit of their goals.

Limited Benevolence

The primary focus of the church is on spiritual benevolence, not physical. Most people understand and accept the practice of limited benevolence. This is a common practice in our society. Some organizations focus on cancer research and benevolence needs related to cancer. Other organizations focus on kidney research and limit their benevolence to kidney-related needs. There are many organizations that practice limited benevolence in our society. Likewise, the church's limited focus is seeking the lost and building up members in the most holy faith.

People do not condemn other organizations for practicing limited benevolence. Most people praise these organizations for focusing on the limited areas they have chosen. But, when we turn our attention to the church and say that it has a limited focus also, suddenly limited focus is cruel and mean spirited. But, the moment we turn our attention back to secular organizations, limited benevolence is once again acceptable and receives much praise.

Souls First

Various institutions in our society have good causes and do good work, but no cause is worthy enough to divert money from the soul saving work of the church. We do not deny colleges, hospitals, and charity organizations the right to exist. We do not deny the good that they do. We do oppose taking money that should be used to seek the lost and diverting it to other matters. The work of sowing the seed and leading lost souls to Christ is absolutely the most important work that a congregation can pursue. We dare not deviate from that mission.

Christians Working

Another danger of Institutionalism is that it causes some people to feel relieved of their individual duty. They contribute to the institutions that actually do the work and conclude that they have done their part. Some people forget that God wants each of us to work, not just make donations to people who do the work. Titus 2:14 teaches that we are to be, “...zealous for good works.” A Christian’s duty is not fully performed by just providing money for someone else to work. James taught us that, “*Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world*” (James 1:27). If a person wants to privately make a donation to a worthy institution, that is their own business, but they must not think that they have fulfilled all that God expects by making such donations.

Token Contributions

Another danger of institutionalism is that contributions made by a congregation are sometimes merely token contributions that average less than a dollar or two per member. Most people would be ashamed to write a check for just a dollar and mail it to their favorite charity. But, let them combine their dollar with several other people and they will

think that they have done a great and wonderful deed. It is not wrong to pool our money together to help another, but we must guard against the danger of deceiving ourselves. Tossing a couple of dollars into a pool is a kind thing to do, but it is not a great sacrifice.

Violating I Timothy 5:16

Paul taught, *“If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows”* (I Tim. 5:16). Another problem with institutionalism is that it violates this teaching. Donating the church's money to institutions donates money to cases contrary to Paul's instruction. How can a congregation rightly give money to institutions that disperse it contrary to Paul's teaching?

A Misappropriation of Funds

We oppose donations to institutions because such expenditures are a misappropriation of funds. The concept of authority involved here is simple. A congregation has been authorized to assemble for worship, to teach the Word, and practice limited benevolence. God has not authorized the church to collect money and give it away to man-made institutions. When people use the Lord's money in ways that He has not authorized, it is a misappropriation of funds. In other words, they are stealing from God. If such a thing were done in any other organization it would be recognized as illegal and punished according to the laws of our land. Tragically, many people will learn too late in the court of God that they have been stealing from God.

Double Overhead

When a church takes up the collection on Sunday, overhead

expenses come out of that contribution. When a portion of that money is sent to an institution, overhead expenses come out of the Lord's money a second time. If the elders directly manage the money themselves, double overhead is avoided. When money is sent directly to the person in need, 100% of the money goes to the need. In other words, institutions reduce the bang we get for our buck.

Autonomy and Oversight

Another problem with institutionalism is that the practice erodes the autonomy of local congregations. Institutions send their representatives to appeal for funds. These representatives put pressure on congregations and persuade them to take a certain course of action. While congregations have their own leadership and are technically free to make their own decisions, the elders know that if they buck the popular trend, trouble will soon follow.

Institutions exercise a degree of power and influence over the congregations to which they are connected. There is also a certain degree of peer pressure that exists among congregations and brethren. In the case of institutionalism, this peer pressure is used to manipulate congregations to the benefit of the institutions.

The institutions, however, are not accountable to any church or eldership. They have their own constitution, their own bylaws, and their own rules separate from the Bible. They pursue whatever course they choose according to their own wisdom, while being funded with the Lord's money.

Arguments in Defense of Institutionalism

In any religious issue there are always opposing points of view. This is not necessarily bad. We don't want people accepting the restoration movement on blind faith. The Bible encourages us to examine all teaching to make certain that what we accept is based on a solid Biblical foundation (See Acts 17:11). In the remainder of this chapter we will look at various arguments advanced on behalf of institutionalism.

Galatians 6:10

Paul wrote, *"Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith"* (Gal. 6:10). This verse has been used to justify everything that man judges to be "good." Few people pause to ask the important question, who defines good? Men simply labels their plans "good" and considers their plans authorized based on Galatians 6:10. They forget that they do not have the right to redefine Bible words in a self-serving manner. Man's duty is to use Bible words in Bible ways.

Paul taught us that the Scriptures equip us *"...for every good work"* (II Tim. 3:16,17). A work is not good merely because man has judged it to be good. A work is only good when God says it is good. Before we accept institutionalism as a good work, we need to first find the Scriptures that teach us that it is good. In the absence of proper authority, adding institutions to the church is not good.

But They Do Good Work

"Oh, but look at all the good they are doing," someone will say. We do not deny that colleges, hospitals, and charities do good works. But, the question of institutionalism cannot be decided based merely on

the fact that they do good things. We must first have a solid book, chapter, and verse foundation that authorizes congregations to add institutions to the church.

Paul taught, *“If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows”* (I Tim. 5:16). Paul makes it clear that

benevolence is to be regulated and not just given out to anyone anywhere (see also II Thess. 3:10). Just because men are excited and pleased with a project, that does not prove that God agrees. Men thought the church at Sardis was a good church doing good things, but God said it was dead (Rev. 3:1-3). The end does not justify the means, and good intentions don't magically make everything pleasing to God.

The Utilities Company Argument

Some people argue that since the church can buy gas, water, and electricity through local utility companies, it can also send contributions to colleges, hospitals, or charities. This argument mixes up two different things and thus blurs the issue.

Buying gas, water, and electricity, is not the same as making a donation to a college or charity. The difference is easy to illustrate. Go to your local department store and purchase some supplies. Did you make a donation to the department store? No, of course not. Anyone can easily see that making a purchase is not the same as making a donation. Next, go back to the store and make a donation. Don't purchase anything, just give them your money and leave. Do you see the difference? Of course you do. Making a purchase and making a donation are not the same thing.

The tragedy of this argument is that people are actually

following these teachers who will not or cannot make this simple distinction between purchasing and donating. There are people who will be forever lost because they blindly followed teachers such as these into eternity (Matt. 15:14).

Individual or Congregation

Some people argue that if an individual member can contribute to a college, hospital, or charity, congregations can, too. This argument fails to consider Paul's teaching. He taught, "*If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows*" (I Tim. 5:16). Paul makes a distinction between the individual and the church. We dare not deny this distinction. (Also see Matthew 18:15-17 where Jesus makes a distinction between the individual and the congregation.)

The No Treasury Argument

Some people argue that there is no authority for a congregation to have a treasury, therefore it does not matter how the money is spent. Advocates of this argument maintain that the distribution of local funds is entirely up to the discretion of the local leadership. This argument fails to consider Paul's teachings. Paul taught, "*If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows*" (I Tim. 5:16). How could Paul regulate the way churches spent money if churches did not have a treasury in the first place? Paul clearly gives instruction concerning how to manage the congregation's funds. Congregations are not free to spend money in whatever manner they think best.

Emotionalism

Some people craft arguments that tug at our hearts, but basing a position on an emotional appeal is a dangerous practice. Solomon warned us, “*There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death*” (Prov. 14:12). Again, he warns us, “*He who trusts in his own heart is a fool*” (Prov. 28:26). Emotions have a place in Christianity. This we gladly admit, but emotions must be built upon a solid book, chapter, and verse foundation. Emotions do not authorize changes or additions to God’s pattern.

If emotions could make the addition of institutionalism acceptable, why stop at institutionalism? Why not stir up emotions in favor of every issue and thus make everything an acceptable change in Christianity? That would obviously be an absurd practice. Just because

God’s Plan of Salvation

Hear the Gospel: Romans 10:14-17

Believe: John 3:16; Hebrews 11:6

Repent: Luke 13:3, Acts 17:30,31

Confess: Romans 10:9,10; Matthew 10:32,33

Be united with Christ in baptism: Romans 6:3-5

None of the above steps save in and of themselves. It is the grace of God that appointed these as steps leading to the saving blood of Jesus. To get to the saving blood each step must be taken just as it is presented in the Bible. These steps only have value because God’s grace has so granted. Without God’s grace these steps would be worthless. Have you followed these steps to the saving blood of Jesus?

men feel that they are right that does not make them right. Jesus' teaching in Matthew 7:21-23 clarifies this point. Jesus taught, "*Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'*"

Relying upon what feels right without a solid book, chapter, and verse foundation is a dangerous practice (see also II John 6 and Rev. 3:1-3).

Ministering to the Whole Man

Some justify institutionalism by claiming it is a necessary step that leads to further teaching opportunities. Advocates of this argument reason that you can't teach someone until you have fed them. As long as someone is thinking about their physical hunger, they won't pay attention to their spiritual hunger. This line of thought seems reasonable enough until we pause to consider that Jesus let people go hungry for three days before He decided to provide food (Matt. 15:32). He did not follow the "feed first and teach later" philosophy. We must make a decision, are we going to follow the wisdom of Christ or man? Who will our leader be?

But the Elders Approve

Paul warned us, "*But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed*" (Gal. 1:8,9). The elders do not have legislative power to

make changes in the New Testament pattern. Just because the elders and members of a congregation agree to make donations to a college or charity, that does not make it right. Man does not have legislative power. We are regulated by the Word of God and have been clearly warned about making or accepting any changes (Rev. 22:18,19).

While it is certainly commendable to follow the leadership of the elders (Heb. 13:17), we must not forget to be like the Bereans and verify the things we are taught (Acts 17:11). Our first duty, our first responsibility, and our accountability is to God (Acts 5:29). If we blindly follow an erring eldership, we will not be excused in the day of judgment (Matt. 15:14).

Appealing to Tradition

The practice of congregations donating funds to institutions has been around for many years. In some groups the practice has become an accepted tradition handed down from one generation to the next. But, we must remember that the traditions of man do not carry authority in the court of God. Jesus warned, *“And in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrine the commandments of men”* (Matt. 15:9). If mere tradition could justify a practice, eventually every practice imaginable would be justified if it could just hang on long enough to become a tradition.

Arguing Over Methods

Some say that institutionalism is a matter of methods. They claim that the disagreement is merely over the method a congregation uses to accomplish its work. Unfortunately, this argument misstates the issue. When a congregation makes a donation to a college, the college

then does its own work. The church did not do any of its own work. If God had assigned the work of supporting man-made institutions to the church, churches could rightfully claim that they were doing their own work by making donations to institutions. But, God never assigned congregations the work of supporting man-made institutions.

Donating money to institutions is not a question of methods. The institutions are not a method that churches use to accomplish their own work. In institutionalism congregations merely support other institutions as those institutions go about their own work, according to

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their own plans, pursuing their own goals, under their own leadership, separate and apart from the church.

But the Bible Doesn't Say that You Can't

It is true that the New Testament does not specifically state *Thou shall not add institutional programs to the work of the church*. But, the New Testament **does specifically state** that we are not to add to or take away from the Word. The Bible is undeniably clear on this point.

Paul wrote, *"Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it"* (Galatians 3:15).

John wrote, *"For I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds to these things, God will add to him the plagues that are written in this book; and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part from the Book of Life, from the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book"* (Rev. 22:18,19).

The absence of a specific prohibition against institutional programs does not automatically authorize institutions. God has told us what He desires. Our duty is to respect His will without assuming that He also desires other things in addition to what He said. (See II Sam. 7:7)

Those people who insist that a specific prohibition must be given before something is wrong turn the Bible into an impossible monstrosity. Can you imagine how many volumes it would take to specifically list everything that is allowed and everything that is not allowed? Can you imagine the depth of detail that would be required to assure that someone did not presume to find a loophole? Fortunately, God did not pursue such an overwhelming course. He simply told us what He wanted and then told us not to add to or take away from His word.

Next, consider that if everything that is not specifically forbidden is allowable, then Galatians 3:15 and Revelation 22:18,19 are virtually meaningless. Consider the Lord's Supper as an example. We observe it using unleavened bread and grape juice. This is our practice as taught in Matthew 26:26-30. There is never a specific statement in the Bible that says we can't use something else in the Lord's Supper. There is not a prohibition against using cookies and soda pop or burgers and fries in the Lord's Supper. According to the *But It Doesn't Say That You Can't* argument we must conclude that such changes are acceptable because there is no verse that specifically states *Thou shalt not change the Lord's Supper*. Once this way of thinking is accepted, the door is open to almost any change that men desire, and Revelation 22:18,19 and Galatians 3:15 mean nothing. Most people will reject the *But It Doesn't Say That You Can't* argument in connection with the Lord's Supper and other changes that they don't approve of, but they will turn around and accept it as their authority for adding institutional programs to the church.

Intimidation

Some people will attempt to intimidate others into accepting institutionalism, "If you don't support colleges and charities, then what do you do?" they demand. The fact is that what we are doing is irrelevant. If we do absolutely nothing at all, that does not prove institutionalism is right. A person does not prove himself right by proving another person wrong. They might both be wrong! What we need is a solid book, chapter, and verse foundation authorizing institutionalism. Intimidation and bully tactics have no place in a serious study of God's word.

People who use bully and intimidation tactics to manipulate others often do little, if any, work themselves. These are often the same people who toss a dollar or two into a pool with others and send their sad little contribution off to help the needy. They haven't adopted an orphan, or taken in foster children, or given a college student a place to

live, or donated their time to charity, or sat with a family in a time of trial, or held the hand of the dying, or helped the elderly, and only rarely do they make it to the hospital to visit the sick. But, because they toss a dollar or two into a pool that goes to a college or charity, they think they have the right to push other people around.

Extreme Cases

Some people appeal to extreme cases to justify the common practice of institutionalism. They forget that the restoration of New Testament

Christianity is not built on extreme cases, but rather upon a solid book, chapter, and verse foundation. It is a mistake to create extreme cases and then reason backwards from these to establish daily practice. This is often done in the baptism debate. A story is told about a man in a desert who hears the gospel for the first time, but dies before finding water to be baptized. The debater argues that this man was saved without baptism, and concludes that no one needs to be baptized. This conclusion is not based on scripture, but rather upon a hypothetical case. Restoring New Testament Christianity requires a book, chapter, and verse foundation, not hypothetical stories. Institutionalism must stand upon the Bible, or be excluded from our restoration efforts.

Closing Thoughts

Institutionalism is a topic that many people would rather skip, but if we skip this topic, we are not being faithful to our restoration goal. Topics such as this must receive attention if we really want to follow the Bible. The topic of institutionalism can actually be simple. All we have to remember is that restoring New Testament Christianity naturally opposes modern innovations. It can be just that simple if we will let it.

We can restore New Testament Christianity or be institutional, but not both. If we practice institutionalism then we fall short of the restoration goal. We end up practicing something that is close to the Bible, but isn't really in the Bible.

We believe that the church is completely capable of doing all God wants it to do. We trust God's design completely and resist the temptation to change it. We believe that if God wanted the church to function as a fund raiser for colleges and charities, then He would have made that known.

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COMING NEXT CHAPTER

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May
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One

John 17:21



Chapter nine

**Are only members of the church of
Christ going to heaven?**

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