

Why We Do Not Support Institutions 11-18-13

When it comes to issues that divide churches or denominations, it seems like more and more the world says: “What’s the Big Deal”. They say this towards the differences in when we take communion, or the music we make in worship, or even living a Christian life; things like not cursing or using vulgarity, not drinking or modesty and morality.

But God says “Obeying is the Big Deal”. He tells us that one can lose their soul by improper observation of communion (1 Corinthians 11:27). He says that we are held accountable for every word from our mouth (Matthew 12:36). Remember Moses and the rock? He was told to speak to the rock and instead struck it; it seems like a little difference, but God rejected Moses’ plea to enter the promised land over it. Nadab and Abihu died because they did not bring the right fire; the Man of God in I Kings 13 died for simply eating lunch on a journey.

We know that we must be different; but it is HARD being different. It is hard enough separating from denominations. We are rejected as insignificant in their eyes; we are called a cult or simply ignored. But the hardest differences are perhaps those we are closest too: other churches of Christ with whom we are separate because of error. To be called an “antis” or “legalist” by people who believe the same plan of salvation, who claim to love authority as we do, is difficult. One of the main separations that is present between us and these more “liberal” churches is the practice of **Institutionalism**.

What is “Institutionalism”? An Institution is an established organization of people with a specific (benevolent) purpose. It could be anything; a coffee club, Rotary Club, or the like. In spiritual terms, it is usually a group with a beneficial purpose. Institutionalism is the term we use to describe, within a church, the direct support of an established organization with work given or appropriated by that church. Within congregations in the United States that identify themselves as churches of Christ, 85% identify themselves as institutional in practice, and 15% identify themselves as non-institutional¹.

To discuss this issue, we could describe it as an agency that seeks to do the work of the church. The church is charged with very limited work according to Scripture. We are to care for brethren (Benevolence); we are to educate brethren for spiritual works (Edification); we are to teach the lost about the Gospel (Evangelism). Institutionalism seeks to insert a agency into this work; to accomplish the work of benevolence, it creates agencies such as orphanages or old folks homes to accomplish this work. To the work of edification, it creates schools and preacher schools. For the work of evangelism, it sponsors newspapers, tv shows, or radio programs.

Many brethren see great benefit in this methodology. Some benefits are financial; a pooling of resources for greater ability. There are also the social benefits of engaging with more brethren.

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_churches_of_Christ_\(non-institutional\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_churches_of_Christ_(non-institutional))

With regards to structure, smaller congregations can participate in works they could not do on their own. Ultimately, all goals could be achieved at greater levels

In the 1950s and 1960s, churches of Christ in the United States divided over this issue. Because of this division, the Sunset church of Christ identifies itself as a “Non-Institutional” congregation on our website. This means, not only do we not use agency to fulfill the work of the church, we teach that it is an error to do so. We do so for three reasons:

Scriptural – God’s permission

Historical – Looking at the end results

Practical – Is it really successful

God has made it clear that obedience is more important than results. Jesus built the church to do the work of evangelism, edification and benevolence. He did not build any of the other agencies that men have created to do these works. We can instantly see what His desire is in how we should conduct ourselves. In Acts 11:27-29 and again in I Corinthians 16:1-4, we find that churches of Christ in the New Testament took care of needy saints by a collection from brethren. I Corinthians 16 reveals that this is a command to all churches as to how they ought to conduct themselves. The pattern of the New Testament church was that they used NO organizations to fulfill their obligations.

Authority is sufficient reason for us to reject institutionalism. However, Jesus told us that you can also know something by its fruit. Institutionalism is nothing new. 1800 years ago churches of Christ took a work given to the church - oversight through the eldership – and made it into an institution of its own. They did this for the same reasons we mentioned benefited churches today seeking institutions. This oversight of multiple churches eventually was called the Papal system, the heart of the Catholic Church. Historically, the Catholic Church’s apostasy is rooted in institutionalism. Simply stated, Liberalism lead to other errors, including denominationalization of churches.

Finally, the irony is that the institutional arrangement simply does not work. It may perform immediately, but the problem is that when institutions do the work of the church, they do so without oversight by elders or Scriptural pattern. Thus, they act as a bureaucracy, seeking not to accomplish a single task, but to self-perpetuate. As these organizations have grown, they have fiscally drained the churches that once created and supported them. Because these organizations have taken away from churches their duties to work, members are deprived of the growing experiences of being responsible for these works. Simply put, churches on the institutional path are hurting.

Following the NT pattern means being different from other churches (1 Peter 2:9, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18). God’s people have always been unique, a peculiar people. Being unique has never been popular. It will cause strife with those who seek more worldly means of success. But Jehovah is not a God of numbers; He does not measure our success by the numbers of people or monies we raise, He counts success by our obedience. Obedience is the big deal to God.