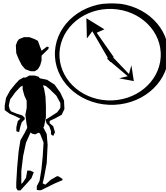


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Time of Assembly



Every other Sunday:

Bible Study	9:00 a.m.
Worship	10:00 a.m.

OR

Bible Study	4:00 p.m.
Worship	5:00 p.m.

Wednesday:

Bible Study	7:00 p. m.
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Institutionalism: A Virulent Cancer

By Harry W. Pickup, Jr.

Any error which touches either the nature of God or the nature of the Church is most fundamental and basic. Institutionalism is such an error because it touches the nature of the Church.

The supposed conversion of Emperor Constantine, resulting in the "Christianizing" of the Roman Empire, led to the reshaping of the religion of Christ. The religion of Christ places emphasis upon the individual and his personal responsibility to God and man. The "Constantine concept" revamped the Church into a religion greatly patterned after the concept, nature, and organization of the Roman Empire.

Most historians view the rise of the "Institutional Church" as the result of the Church's need to meet and defeat the many heresies which were cropping up. In order to prevent schisms and to effect and perpetuate universal solidarity, many Christians thought it necessary to "bring all Christians together into a 'visible body of Christ'." ["A History of Christianity," by Kenneth Scott Latourette, p. 130.] This shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Church. Acting upon this concept what, therefore, could be produced but a humanistic Church?

It is impossible in the space of this brief article to trace the course of institutionalism. Suffice it to say it has always been the most serious rival of true Christianity. Error is always most powerful when it comes closest to the original pattern.

Modern Christians recognize that this virulent evil persistently dwells among us. It is all the more evil because of the "good" it effects. About twenty years ago, one of the most influential gospel preachers considered institutionalism to be one of the gravest dangers the Church faced. Among other things, he said: "Institutionalism was the tap-root of digres-

sion. It has always been the fatal blow to congregational independence. It destroys the individuality of both the congregation and the Christian as Naziism and Fascism destroy the individuality of their citizens in Germany and Italy. Back of institutionalism is "party pride." And again, "The Church is about to become the unwitting and unwilling victim of institutionalism, and institutionalism is about to become a racket."

Many other brethren consider this ever-present evil and rival to true Christianity to be one of the most serious threats we face today. A most influential editor has recently written, "The most popular modern idol is institutionalism."

The insidiousness of institutionalism lies in these factors:

1. Its aim and end are good, — humanistically good. Therefore, those who oppose it appear to be fighting that which is "good."
2. At times this error seems to have a close resemblance to the Church of Jesus Christ.
3. It is impossible to oppose it while unconsciously practicing it.

Definition

What is institutionalism in terms of the Church? It is the conception that the Church of Christ is a religious organization, composed of individual congregations, being at the center of dependent and supplementary social organizations — such as schools, welfare agencies, hospitals, etc. — which necessarily aid it in fulfilling a collective social and spiritual mission.

Denominational churches fit this definition accurately. For example, the Methodist Church is a religious organization composed of Methodist Churches, with various humanitarian societies to aid her in fulfilling a socio-religious mission. Individual Methodist Churches are the units of the Methodist Church. This religious organization could not function independently of the units which compose the whole. And each part must work cooperatively through the whole. The extra-organizations of the Methodist Church are publishing houses, colleges and universities, hospitals, orphan homes, camps, retreats, and such like. At the center of all of these is the organization which organizes each part into the whole, directs each part, and sustains each part with the necessary life's blood, money.

Please ponder this: why is it institutionalism for Methodist Churches to have their schools, hospitals, and various homes but it is not institutionalism for Churches of Christ to have "our" schools, homes, etc.? If you think brethren don't think of these institutions as "ours" you simply are not listening!

From a human standpoint, being sympathetic to humanitarian needs, such a successful operation commands our respect and merits our commendation. As an "institutional Church" it deserves approval. But it is not what God intended His Church to be. It is a deviation from the divine pattern and we are obligated to make manifest its apostasy.

I would imagine most Christians are able to see that denominations are "institutional Churches." But far too many Christians fail to perceive that Churches of Christ are following the same road and are becoming the same thing. If institutionalism is "the most popular modern idol" then God's people must overthrow the altars of idolatry.

Errors of Institutionalism An Organization or a Relationship

The primary error is to view the Church of God as an organization rather than a relationship. Essentially the Church is the realm of redemption, the state of salvation. In this realm, men are related to God as the saved to the Savior. It is the state in which men enjoy peace with God, the forgiveness of sins, and are reconciled to God. Christ is the head and each member enjoys life and direction as each part severally "holds fast the head." God is "light" and He is "in the light." If we walk in the light then we enjoy fellowship with God and "fellow-heirs" with all other "fellow-worshippers" of God.

The institutional concept of the Church is that of an organization; as a corporation is an organization; as our Government is an organization. It views the individual only in relationship to the organization. Loyalty is determined by the individual's loyalty to the organization. The Church becomes the means to life and direction. It thus usurps the place of Christ, the Head.

The word "Church" is a descriptive collective noun. When modified by such prepositional phrases as, "of God," "of Christ," it describes:

- all Christians;
- Christians in a given locality physically assembled;
- Christians in a given community not physically assembled.

It always denotes people in the right relationship with God; "called-out" people; "peculiar" (people for God's own possession") people.

But there are some differences between the universal and local church. The universal Church never physically assembles; has no collective function; consequently, it has no human government. The local Church does physically assemble; has a collective function; has human government. Governmentally speaking a local Church is independent of any other Church.

That some Churches of Christ are guilty of this institutional error, it seems to me, is clear with only a minimum of objective observation and thought. Influential men, who are biblically and historically imperceptive students, are consistently speaking about "churches pooling their funds;" "brotherhood work;" "the Lord's Church working through a certain church." Just this week, in a much-read religious paper we are informed that a certain Church was taken "the responsibility of fundraising in this area" for a work of national scope, which program is under the oversight of another certain

church. More than a few Christians are carelessly speaking of the one body being composed of churches — rather than individual Christians. Then, the need for functional unity is pressed and justified from the figure of the human body.

Fellow-Christian, the conclusion is inescapable; some Christians are thinking of and participating in inter-congregational functions. Though the office is called by other names it is still an offense of institutionalism.

The Error of Misconceived Missions

The mission of Christ's Church is spiritual. The "institutional Church's" mission is essentially material. The former aims at the soul of man; the latter the physical man. God's people "show forth the excellencies" of God who has called each one "out of darkness into his marvelous light."

Humanitarian distresses are not ignored by Christians. They are forthrightly met, according to ability, by men who are more keenly aware of humanitarian obligations because they are Christians. On the contrary, when churches become concerned about their "community image" and begin to engage in community social work they are guilty of this error. For the Church to directly serve social purposes is to engage in something she was not created for and is not equipped to perform.

Mandatory Supplemental Extra Organizations

The institutional concept of the Church makes mandatory supplementary extra organizations. The Church of God, in fulfilling its divine mission, is absolutely adequate. But when the institutional concept forms Her mission into something other than divine, then other than divine means are needed. For example, general education by Christians is good, but it is not indispensable to the propagation of "The Faith." No human society on earth is necessary for the fulfillment of the Church's mission.

Institutions are necessary to the "institutional Church." And the "institutional Church" is necessary to the institution. An institutional school, for example, which aids the Church, of which it is an adjunct, by making the Church's causes its causes, by propagating the Church's message, by training its personnel, in all fairness has every right to expect support from the Church. From what I read, institutional school men believe, and are now openly advocating, that the Church has had a "free-ride" long enough. They believe it is time for churches to pay their part of the bill. And, in all honor and justice, they have every right to this demand.

There are at least three recent publications which have frankly espoused again the doctrine of churches supporting schools. Their justification for it has been that other extra-organizations are being supported by churches. They contend if churches can support benevolent institutions they can also support schools.

Objections to this revived institutional error are coming from quarters which heretofore have castigated those who have seriously questioned the Church support of benevolent societies. Regardless, the present awareness of error and opposition to it is

welcome.

The Purpose of Salvation or the By-Product of Salvation?

Institutionalism makes the natural results of being a Christian become the purpose of salvation rather than the by-product of it. While Jesus did not die to make better human relations when men are "in Christ," this is the result. Every facet of life is touched; every relationship is improved.

The "institutional Church" sets up "marriage and parental societies." Organizes "good citizens groups," religiously orientated, to help legislate morality. The Church of God teaches each man his human responsibility from the Gospel. Exercising no authority of its own it has no weapons with which to punish the violator. It can only be pointed out to a failing Christian that he is wrong with God and must suffer the consequences taught in the Word of God.

Destroys the Individualistic Concept of Christianity

Institutionalism destroys the individualistic concept of Christianity. It promotes the party spirit. The saving faith of each Christian is in God; not faith in a party of faithful men. Hierarchism is a part of the "institutional Church," not the True Church. Philemon "refreshed the hearts of saints;" Paul was a "preacher and a teacher." Each faithfully served God as each ministered, 'according as each (had) received a gift.' So, God is glorified. The heart and soul of salvation is for each Christian to be personally involved in the "good works" for which we have been "treated in Christ Jesus" and "which God afore prepared that we should walk in them."

In the Church of God, the individual Christian's duty is not performed merely by supplying the means for others to actually do the work. God is pleased with each of us only when we personally and individually minister our "gift."

The religious party, composed of those whom we "think" are Christians, is not what we must spare no sacrifice for and die to see preserved. We must serve God, sacrifice for the spread of the Word, and personally "contend for the faith once for all delivered."

