

# **INSTITUTIONALISM**

## **In churches of Christ**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

For over 40 years there have been differences among brethren in churches of Christ regarding the nature and work of the church in both the universal and local sense. These disagreements have resulted in the division of many local congregations and the separation of many long time friends and brethren.

[In this lesson then, we will briefly touch upon the need for authority,

### **I. THE HISTORY OF APOSTASY**

#### **A. The apostasy of the second and third centuries:**

1. In spite of many warnings against falling away, history tells us how Christians of the second and third centuries began to abandon God's pattern. Powerful bishops began to control large numbers of churches and pagan influences began to be seen in the worship. The apostasy accelerated when "Christianity" became the official religion of the Roman Empire and many Christians were prosperous. The Roman Catholic church is the final result of this gradual departure from God's principles.

#### **B. The apostasy of the 19<sup>th</sup> century:**

1. In the late 1800's, Christians whose parents and grandparents had been careful with Christ's pattern began to enjoy increasing prosperity. As they climbed the economic and social ladders they began to look around at the denominations and copy their practices. They became less careful with the scriptures and began to establish institutions to do the work of the local churches. New practices such as instrumental music became popular among the richer churches

#### **C. Developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> century:**

1. After the Second World War, the descendants of those who opposed the apostasy of the previous century began to enjoy prosperity. With that affluence came a change of attitude towards the authority of the scriptures. They weren't as strict as their parents and grandparents and began to want to copy projects they saw in the denominations. For example, they began to let large churches supervise some of the work of many smaller ones, promoted church supported orphan's homes, colleges and recreation programs.

### **II. POINTS OF CONTROVERSY**

#### **A. The different attitudes towards authority have produced differences such as the following points:**

1. What is the universal church?
  - a. It appears that most brethren who promote church support of human institutions consider the universal church to be an alliance of local churches. To put it more bluntly, they seem to consider the church of Christ universal to be represented by the list of local churches seen in various brotherhood directories of churches. (Unfortunately, some brethren who oppose church

supported human institutions seem to have that concept as well.) Expressions of this misconception abound:

- 1) A popular correspondence course in Spanish states, **"The universal church is divided into local churches"**. The Bible teaches, however, that the church is composed of saved individuals ([Acts 2:47](#), [Hebrews 12:23](#)) and not local churches
  
  - 2) Another tract regarding the church of Christ in its universal senses makes this appeal: **"become a member of a church that is bound by the authority of the New Testament"**. While, such encouragement could be given to a Christian regarding his need to become a member of a faithful local church, the Bible does not talk that way concerning the universal body of Christ. One does not become a member of the universal church in the sense of choosing it, but rather he is added to it by the Lord when he obeys the gospel and is saved ([Acts 2:47](#))
  
  - 3) The Spanish Hymnbook published by Star Bible Publishing company states on its title page, **"Published by the Church of Christ"** Of course it is impossible for all the saved people in the world to publish a hymnbook, but **"the body of saved people"** is not what these brethren have in mind when they say **"published by the Church of Christ"** They seem to mean that the songbook is published by those belonging to a religious alliance, which in their minds is "The Church of Christ." Thus the "Church of Christ" in their minds "publishes" the hymnbook.
2. The centralization of the work of many churches in institutions:
    - a. This error proceeds from an institutional concept of the church already mentioned. Many obviously feel that local congregations are incapable of doing the work and for that reason the churches of the "alliance" should support institutions like orphan's homes, homes for the elderly, clinics, colleges and publishing houses to do the work for them.
    - b. Of course there is nothing wrong in and of itself with businesses and institutions like schools, stores, clinics, bookstores, etc... Businesses or institutions can accomplish good and if individual Christians want to operate them, that is their choice. The problem comes when these businesses or institutions begin to try to work their way into the affairs of local churches, accepting contributions from them and even trying on some occasions to direct aspects of their work. When such happens, in a short period of time, people begin to consider these institutions as pertaining to the "alliance" and in that way sectarian concepts flourish.
      - 1) Bible teaching: In the Bible, local churches did not support institutions of human origin. They were capable of doing all the work, which God assigned to them. If we desire to stay within what is written ([I Corinthians 4:6](#)) we must be content with working local independent churches because there is no larger divine organization in the scriptures.
  
  3. Centralization of the work though sponsoring churches:
    - a. Many brethren believe that smaller churches should make donations to larger ones, called sponsoring churches, so that these can supervise the work of many congregations in various projects such as "World Radio", "The Herald of Truth", "One Nation under God," etc.
      - 1) Bible teaching: The Bible authorizes the elders of each local church to be responsible for "the flock of God" comprising that congregation ([I Peter 5:2](#)). When elders take on the responsibility for the work of many flocks, they go beyond what is authorized in I Peter 5:2.
    - b. Response of promoters of institutionalism: In the Bible local congregations sent funds to others, for example [Acts 11:27-30](#); [II Corinthians 8,9](#), etc. According to defenders of institutionalism, this authorizes the sponsoring church arrangement.

- 1) Answer: In the Bible congregations sent alms ([Acts 24:17](#)) to needy congregations to help them in their own need. The sponsoring church system is much different. According to it, churches send contributions to large congregations to spend in some project. In no way do Bible examples authorize the sponsoring church arrangement.
4. **The social gospel:**
  - a. Many (perhaps most) brethren who defend institutionalism, have also been contaminated by what historians call the social gospel. The social gospel involves an emphasis on political, social and medical projects and by its very nature distracts congregations from spiritual and eternal concerns. For this reason, many "institutional" congregations divert congregational funds from purely spiritual needs to spend them on parties, recreational centers (called family life centers), hospitals, clinics, dining halls, and other purely social projects.
    - 1) Bible teaching: The Bible teaches that the local church is a purely spiritual entity. Although it should provide benevolence to needy saints, it offers non believers what they need most, the gospel of Christ.
    - 2) Although brethren should get together often to enjoy each other's company and recreation, such diversions are the responsibility of individuals and not the local churches. The position of local churches as purely spiritual entities must be carefully guarded.
5. Titles:
  - a. As a part of the tendency to imitate the denominations, more and more brethren are using high sounding titles to distinguish some brethren from others. For example, the term "minister" is used often in some congregations not as a simple description of a servant, but rather as a prideful title with a capital letter. Thus a simple song leader becomes a "Minister of Music." The brother who helps organize the Bible studies becomes the "Minister of Education." The "Pulpit Minister" is careful to distinguish himself from the "Youth Minister" and "Associate Minister" and even the "Involvement Minister". Such vanity would be laughable if it did not indicate that many of our beloved brethren are very far indeed from the humble Carpenter from Galilee.
    - 1) Bible teaching: Jesus condemned the use of such titles to elevate certain men over others in texts such as [Matthew 23](#).

[Certainly other categories illustrating differences could be cited but perhaps these five reveal some of the more visible points of disagreement.]

### III. WHAT CAN WE DO?

#### A. **We cannot ignore it, or act as if it did not exist...**

1. To ignore apostasy is to allow Satan to gradually turn brethren away from Christ's simple pattern of authority without a challenge.
2. If we or other brethren do not teach with love about the dangers of institutionalism, in 25, 50 and 75 years, congregations that may be partially down the road of apostasy (like Sardis, Thyatira, Pergamos in Revelation) will become completely enveloped in error and form a denomination just like the "Christian Church, Disciples of Christ"

#### B. **Although these problems hurt us, much can be done to fight apostasy with love:**

1. Keep all eyes on Christ:
  - a. All who follow Him and not human traditions will go to heaven.

2. Be careful with prosperity and with new ideas that accompany prosperity.
  - a. It is a biblical and historical fact that where prosperity abounds, there is more temptation to abandon God's principles.
3. Demand New Testament authority for every arrangement and practice (**1<sup>st</sup> Peter 4:11**)
4. Study, in the coming years the apostasy will grow and take on new forms and characteristics just like it did on the first and second centuries and the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Churches contaminated with institutionalism and liberalism will become more and more like denominations. It is essential that all who love the Lord and His people educate themselves with the word of God so that they can rescue the faithful remnant from unhealthy spiritual influences.

### **CONCLUSION:**

Jesus is Lord, which stresses the fact that He has the right to tell us what to do. Acting without His authority then, it is lawlessness and an assault to His Lordship. Today, many people may claim wonderful works in the name of Jesus or some may be twisting the scriptures to appeal to their own wrongful teachings. If we are really true disciples of Him then, we should abide in His word, and remain within the confines of the revealed word of God (**1 Corinthians 4:6**) To go beyond the Scriptures is to show disrespect of His authority and it will bring destruction upon us (**2 John 9; cf. Rev. 22:18-19**)

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