

# INSTITUTIONALISM: ERROR IN A PRETTY PACKAGE

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## INTRODUCTION:

### **A. One of the great devices of the devil is to take something that is wrong and put it in a pretty package:**

1. Satan has done this from the beginning hasn't he? When he tempted Eve to disobey God by eating of the forbidden fruit he how eating it would make her wise like God and had Eve thinking she was missing out on something great by not eating it. (**Genesis 3:4-6**)
2. The devil is good at taking what is against God's will and making it look so appealing to man... He takes our passions and our wisdom & uses them to reason away what God has commanded

### **B. One of the more subtle ways this has taken place is in the development and practice of institutionalism**

1. Institutionalism has been placed in some very appealing packages → Caring for poor little starving orphans, taking care of widows who have no one else to love them, creating schools where our children can go and be free from the temptations of this world, & worldwide evangelism
2. But as we will see in this lesson, just because something seems good to man, that doesn't make it right in the sight of God! For something to be good, God has to approve of it (**2 Tim 3:16-17**)
3. We will also see that institutionalism takes various forms. Some we may be aware of, however, some are much more subtle. It is a danger we have to guard against in practice & attitude!

## INSTITUTIONALISM ON BOTH THE CONGREGATIONAL AND THE INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

### **A. Defining institutionalism and recognizing the various forms in which it has appeared:**

1. What is institutionalism? The creation or support of institutions to carry out the work of a local church. These institutions may be supported financially by local churches or overseen by the elders. In many ways you could consider the institution itself as an "arm" of the local church
2. During the mid 1800's in the United States there was an institution created to carry out the work of evangelism called The American Christian Missionary Society:
  - a. Alexander Campbell said, "It's not going to be possible for us to preach the gospel to the whole world unless we have a better organization" So he proposed the American Missionary Society in 1849. Alexander Campbell was the institutions first president
  - b. The idea was that we can't do the God-given work of evangelism without a better organization. A better organization than what? The organization God gave us!
  - c. As missionary societies came into existence a division started occurring among local churches. Those who accepted the societies & later instrumental music became known as "Christian Churches" and local churches of Christ stayed non-institutional
3. In more recent history there was a major division among local churches of Christ over the local church's support of orphan homes, widow homes (homes for aged & unwed mothers), & colleges:
  - a. 1957, B'ham Alabama, Philips High School – Roy Cogdill and Guy Woods engaged in a discussion over two issues: (1) Can churches to take their money & hand it over to institutions established by men; (2) Can one church take on a work far larger than it was able to achieve and call upon other local churches to send them money to do it
  - b. Division between brethren over these issues grew and things got very ugly. In time a clear cut division was seen leaving some churches institutional and some non-institutional
  - c. Examples: Herald of Truth, National Radio Program, World Bible School, Church of Christ Disaster Relief Fund, Lads to Leaders, TN Orphan Home, Abilene Christian Univ, etc.

- d. Even this church had to make a decision and some of you may remember that... It had to choose to accept or reject certain influences and programs... It wasn't any easy time!
4. Things didn't stop with missionary societies, but blossomed into the support of man-made institutions & colleges. Things didn't stop with benevolent institutions and colleges, but blossomed into recreational and social programs. So what's next? We must be prepared!

## **B. What is the big deal about institutionalism? Why is it wrong?**

1. One of the problems with institutionalism is its failure to distinguish between the responsibilities of the individual and the church **(Acts 5:4; Jas 1:27; Gal 6:10)**
  - a. A common defense by those with an institutional mindset is, "Whatever an individual can do, the church can do." They make no distinction between personal and collective responsibilities. So if God commands me to do something, the church can do it!
  - b. An individual can donate money to a benevolent institution or a college, but where does God give the church the right or the responsibility to do this? There's no authority! The verses people use to defend it speak of individual action, not collective action!
  - c. It started with colleges & benevolent institutions but has since grown. Now there are yoga classes, coffee shops, Halloween carnivals, fundraisers, movie night, kids camps, etc.
  - d. With all the extra stuff brought in and made a purpose of the church we need to have the mindset of Hezekiah & "carry out the rubbish from the Holy Place" **(2 Chron 29:5)**
2. The main problem is the absence of authority for local churches to create or support human institutions to carry out their work **(Acts 6:1-3; Philipians 4:15; 2 Cor 11:7-9)**
  - a. If the Lord wanted us to organize institutions or even use them to carry out the work of local churches, where did He speak of such a thing? There was certainly opportunity!
  - b. When Paul wrote to Timothy caring for a Christian widow he spoke about not letting the CHURCH be burdened... Why not say, "Don't let the widow's home be burdened?"
  - c. The point is this: If we are going to be a church like we read about in the NT, we have to throw aside any practice which does not find its authority there.
  - d. Someone may say, "But how can the church carry out the great commission without institutions to help do it?" Well, first of all that commission was given to individuals, but secondly, they accomplished it in the first century without them! **(Col 1:23)**
3. Not only is the local church's involvement in human institutions wrong, the work the institutions are doing is also often unauthorized for the local church **(Acts 6:1-3; Eph 4:11-16; I Cor 16:1)**
  - a. Caring for the sick and the poor of this world is certainly a noble task, but it is not a task the Lord has given to the local church. Church benevolence is always to saints.
  - b. Works like recreation & social programs never find their place in the God-given purpose of the church. The local church is about spiritual growth, not entertainment!
4. One of the big problems with institutionalism as it is commonly practiced is that it often violates the Biblical principle of local church autonomy **(I Peter 5:2; 1 Cor 16:1-2)**
  - a. Chart: Charts depicting churches supporting institutions & sponsoring church arrangement
  - b. There is simply no example of a sponsoring church nor is there an example of churches using institutions to do their work. But there are scriptures which show them doing their own work, being rule by their own elders, taking up their own collections.
  - b. Several years ago elders from the Sycamore church in Cookeville, TN took on a major work of this nature. They wanted to raise 17 million dollars and took on oversight of the

project. They said, "Christians deserve the opportunity to participate in something bigger than a budget, larger than the local work." – But God did not design this!

c. God's design for local churches to be autonomous is infinitely wise! Whenever one church is struggling with major problems, their problems don't take down other churches

**C. While we may not feel that this church has a problem with institutionalism, there is a more subtle form of institutionalism that is very dangerous to us all:**