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# Words of Truth

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## Institutionalism – What Is It?

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For over one hundred years, churches of Christ have been divided over what is often called “Institutionalism”. I have, in the past, been a partaker of some errors often associated with Institutionalism. I have confessed and repented of those transgressions as God requires of any and all sins (Proverbs 28:13, Matthew 3:8, Luke 13:1-5, Acts 26:18-20, and I John 1:9). I understand and have been on both sides of this issue.

Let me say that, for the most part, those who are “Non-Institutional” and those whom are “Pro-Institutional” are both wrong on a number of issues. Furthermore, both sides generally are very ignorant of the real issues and are nothing more than members of certain sects amongst churches of Christ. It is sinful to be amongst such divisions and to be of a “party spirit” mentality (Romans 16:17-18, I Corinthians 1:10-13, I Corinthians 11:16-19, Galatians 2:11-17, and Galatians 5:19-21). Thus, as you read through the articles that will make up a series on this issue, please understand that I am not defending a “side” or a “party”. I refuse to be part of either side. I am on the Lord’s side!

Many in churches of Christ are just like people in the denominational world. They are members of the local church of Christ in their area because mom, dad, grandpa, grandma, husband, wife, or some other relation are. Many in churches of Christ are like the denominational world in that they cannot, for the most part, fully explain from the Scriptures why they believe, teach, or practice the things they do. They merely follow human traditions. This is sinful (Mark 7:1-9 and Colossians 2:6-23). I know those statements might strike some nerves. Regardless, I have seen thousands upon thousands of examples that prove this. I have seen it amongst “liberals”, “conservatives”, “main streamers”, etc. Just the fact that there are so many labels that apply to churches of Christ today proves my point.

Jesus did not die for the church to be so divided (John 17:20-23). He died to establish His church (Matthew 16:18 and Ephesians 1:22-23) that follows His rules (Ephesians 5:22-33 and Hebrews 3:1-6). The church is not a physical structure. The church is His body of saved people (Acts 2:47 and I Corinthians 12:27). From the first century until this day, our Lord has not had His desire fulfilled. The church then and now has many false doctrines, practices, etc. This cannot be missed when you study the book of Acts through the book of Revelation (i.e. Acts 15:1-35, I Corinthians 15:12-34, Galatians 1:6-12, I Timothy 1:19-20, etc.).

The errors of “Institutionalism” are one of the errors that divides our Lord’s body today. Thus, it is good for us to study the matter so it does not creep in amongst us as error can so easily do (Jude 1:3-4). Let’s start by defining what “Institutionalism” is.

## **Institutionalism Is...**

The term "institution" means: "a society or organization founded for a religious, educational, social, or similar purpose" (New Oxford American Dictionary). Thus, "Institutionalism" is the practice of forming a society or organization founded for a religious, educational, social, or similar purpose. An "organization" is: "an organized body of people with a particular purpose, especially a business, society, association, etc." (New Oxford American Dictionary).

In the Scriptures, we only read of three bodies of people that God authorized to be organized in any way. First, from the beginning, we find the formation of the family [the home]. It begins when an eligible man marries an eligible woman (Matthew 19:4-6). That man and woman may have children. There are many Scriptures which teach how the man, woman, and children are to behave within the godly authorized institution of the home (Ephesians 5:22-6:4, Colossians 3:18-21, I Peter 3:1-7, etc.). The Lord has even instructed how the family is to be funded (II Thessalonians 3:6-10 and I Timothy 5:8) with certain uncommon exceptions (i.e. Romans 15:25-27).

The Lord also authorized the formation of civil governments. God handed over the non-spiritual affairs of this life into the hands of governments to do things such as punish evildoers. He even authorized their funding through taxes. He tells us as Christians, unless they would seek to cause us to err from the faith (Acts 5:17-42), that we are to submit in carnal things to those whom are in civil government. All of this is clearly stated in the New Testament (Mark 12:13-17, Romans 13:1-7, and I Peter 2:13-17).

Finally, the organized institution that exists with God's authority for our spiritual affairs is the local church [assembly of Christians]. The church was purchased with the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28). He is the head of the church (Colossians 1:18). The church is authorized to have certain offices (i.e. I Timothy 3:1-15, II Timothy 2:2, and Titus 1:5-9). The church is told how to fund the work the Lord has appointed us to do as His church too (I Corinthians 16:1-2).

Each of the points above are very brief and certainly more could have been written. Yet, we can see that when God wants an organized body He tells us how to form it, fund it, govern it, etc. The home, government, and the church are divine institutions. Man has not been happy with those though. Thus, members of churches of Christ have formed their own institutions. For many years erring members of churches of Christ have organized grade schools, high schools, colleges, Bible camps, preaching schools, publishing companies, orphan homes, widow homes, hospitals, daycares, adoption agencies, and a number of other organizations we read nothing of in the Scriptures. Institutionalism is wide-spread amongst churches of Christ today.

## **Conclusion**

The Scriptures contain everything we need to know to do every good work (II Timothy 3:15-17). God knows how to do good works better than we do (Isaiah 55:7-9). Our next study will pick up from here as we continue to examine the errors of "Institutionalism".