

Words of Truth

Institutionalism – The Church Is Sufficient For Collective Work

By: Brian A. Yeager

Prior to Jesus' death He promised that He would build His church (Matthew 16:13-18). We later read this regarding the Lord's church confirming that His promise was fulfilled: "*Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; Who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end*" (Hebrews 3:1-6).

Thus, we know that the Lord's church is not a building, but a people (I Corinthians 12:27). We know that those people that make up the Lord's church are those who have obeyed the Gospel (Acts 2:36-47). The Lord's church also includes the spirits of just men made perfect and the angels of Heaven (Hebrews 12:22-23).

When talking about the Lord's church we have to make some distinctions. You have just read how broadly we can discuss the Lord's church (the saved, angels, etc.). Yet, when talking about the Lord's church we also have to discuss such on a local level (Romans 16:16). For example, there was the church of Christ in Antioch (Acts 11:26 and Acts 14:26-28), Jerusalem (Acts 8:1, Acts 11:22, and Acts 15:4-30), Ephesus (Acts 20:17), Cenchrea (Romans 16:1), Corinth (I Corinthians 1:2), etc. While Christ is the head of His body the church (Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:12-18); each local church has their own work (which we will be discussing here shortly) and leadership (Acts 14:23).

There is certainly more that could be said, but I will assume that most reading these series of articles already know the basic information concerning the church of Christ. From here, let's be honest in considering the work the Lord has assigned to His body the church. Then, let's consider what we are saying about the church if we decide to build other institutions to do her work.

The Authorized Works Of The Church Of Christ

We can see that the church has an authorized responsibility concerning teaching the Gospel of Christ (I Thessalonians 1:1-8). We cannot collectively, as one body, go out and preach to the lost. Yet, the work is still needed to be done. How that is done is also defined in the

Scriptures. For one, teaching occurs when the church assembles (Acts 20:7, I Corinthians 4:17, Colossians 3:16, and Colossians 4:16). We see in the New Testament that the local church, with conditions that do not exist today [the direct involvement of the Holy Spirit] sent men to preach the Gospel (Acts 13:1-4). Another way the church, as a collective body, participates in the work of teaching the Gospel is through supporting faithful evangelists and qualified elders financially (II Corinthians 11:8-9, Philippians 4:10-18, and I Timothy 5:17-18; cf. I Corinthians 9:1-14).

In addition to teaching the Gospel, the church is to do the work of helping truly needy saints. Many of the conditions that existed in the first century, from which we study to get our authority, are not conditions that exist today. For example, there is not a congregation such as Jerusalem that has taken in people from all over the earth (Acts 2:41-4:37) and then had to face a "great dearth" (Acts 11:27-30). So, we need to be careful in using the approved examples of helping needy saints and not stretching them beyond what we can truly discern from an honest study of the Scriptures. For example, no congregation ever helped someone pay their electric bill because they spent too much on their Disney vacation! What we can learn from careful study is that the local church is to help faithful, truly needy saints, when conditions necessitate such (Romans 15:25-27, I Corinthians 16:1-4, and II Corinthians 8:1-9:14). As we addressed in a previous study in this series is that there are restrictions on this subject matter such as applies to the local body of Christ helping widows (I Timothy 5:3-16). In each case presented to the local church, we must carefully and honestly study (II Timothy 2:14-18 and II Peter 3:15-18) as to whether or not the Scriptural authority exists to help in that situation from the Lord's money.

We also read that the church has the collective work of edification and is to provide spiritual comfort locally (I Thessalonians 5:11-14). This work is spiritual (I Timothy 1:3-4), includes teaching (Acts 20:32), and is to be accomplished when we come together (Ephesians 4:16). Some have erred in thinking edification should be done through social functions. The word of God explicitly tells us that such are not a work of the church (Romans 14:17 and I Corinthians 11:17-34). Now consider what message Institutionalism sends to God.

Institutionalism Denies The Church Is Sufficient For Authorized Collective Work

What are people telling the Lord when they are members of churches of Christ, but they go and form organizations to do the work of the church? They are saying, through actions, that the Lord's plan for the church to be the collective body that teaches isn't good enough. They feel the need for religious colleges, Bible Institutes, foundations, publishing companies, organizations to support preachers, etc. are needed. They are saying the church isn't good enough for edification so we need Brotherhood Publications, Camps, etc. They are saying the church isn't good enough to help needy saints so we need disaster organizations, benevolent homes, etc. The people who practice Institutionalism are telling the Lord that they can form organizations that work better than His church. Are men really capable of more than the Lord (Jeremiah 32:17)?

Conclusion

Don't allow men and women to rob the church of the work she is to do to God's glory (Ephesians 3:21). Institutionalism is man's idea, not God's! That says it all (Galatians 1:6-10).