
Words of Truth

Institutionalism – Is Not An Expedient

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The word “expedient” often becomes a discussion point when the subject matter of “Institutionalism” arises. Generally, when people use this term they are meaning that something is a tool to accomplish something. The term is sometimes defined: “suitable for achieving a particular end in a given circumstance” (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/expedient>).

In the Scriptures we find the term used in multiple contexts (John 11:50, John 16:7, John 18:14, I Corinthians 6:12, I Corinthians 10:23, II Corinthians 8:10, and II Corinthians 12:1). The Greek term from which the word is translated “expedient” in the aforementioned Scriptures is also used elsewhere in the New Testament but is translated differently in those Scriptures (Matthew 5:29, Matthew 5:30, Matthew 18:6, Matthew 19:10, Acts 19:19, Acts 20:20, I Corinthians 7:35, I Corinthians 10:33, I Corinthians 12:7, and Hebrews 12:10). The term, as used in the New Testament, is defined as: “to bear together (contribute), i.e. (literally) to collect, or (figuratively) to conduce; especially (neuter participle as a noun) advantage: — be better for, bring together, be expedient (for), be good, (be) profit(-able for)” (Strong’s # 4851).

The idea, in how the term “expedient” is used, is generally correct. If God has authorized us to do something, we are permitted to use certain authorized measures to carry out His instructions. For example, we are commanded and shown examples that authorize us to sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs in individual and collective worship to the Lord (Matthew 26:30, Mark 14:26, Acts 16:25, Romans 15:9, I Corinthians 14:15, Ephesians 5:19, Colossians 3:16, Hebrews 2:12, and James 5:13). We also see authority for written songs to be used to carry out that command (i.e. the book of Psalms).

We cannot, with one mouth (Romans 15:5-6), sing to the Lord without a song book or similar item to keep us speaking the same things. If everyone is singing something different you have chaos (I Corinthians 14:26) which is unlawful (I Corinthians 14:40). Thus, we cannot possibly carry out the command to sing without some tool to keep us in order. On the other hand, we have no authority in the New Testament to play music for God. Thus, a drum set is not authorized as an expedient because there is no authorized instruction that a drum set would necessarily help to fulfill. If we can all understand that, we should all also be able to understand how that Institutionalism is not an authorized expedient.

Consistently Applying Authority To Expedient Measures

In our previous study we discussed how that God did not authorize individual Christians or the church to start human institutions to carry out spiritual work. If you agree with the

previous four paragraphs consistency demands you understand how those same principles apply to Institutionalism. God has not instructed, in any way, us to organize beyond the home, church, or civil government in the carrying out of any of His instructions. If we begin saying that we can form an institution to carry out instructions of God wherein He has authorized nothing, we must also roll in the drum set, piano, orchestra, etc.

To show how simple this is, let's consider an instruction that often occurs under the heading of Institutionalism. Let's discuss the aid of poor saints. Let's consistently apply the truth regarding expedient measures we can take to fulfill God's word.

First, do we have authority from the Lord to aid poor saints? The answer is, yes (Romans 15:25-27). There are qualifiers. For example, we are not permitted to aid poor saints if they are lazy and refuse to work. In fact, we are commanded to withdraw from them and not help them at all monetarily (II Thessalonians 3:6-15). There are also restrictions on what truly needy saints the church can collectively help that do not apply to individual Christians (i.e. I Timothy 5:3-16).

So, to clarify our scenario of study, we are going to talk about a situation wherein the local church is going to help truly needy brethren. The situation we will consider is when Paul instructed the congregation in Corinth to take up a collection for poor brethren residing in Jerusalem (I Corinthians 16:1-4). We have to be somewhat careful here. This situation is not likely to be replicated today. Remember, the Christians in Jerusalem were poor for various reasons beyond their control. For one, three thousand souls from all over were added to the local church there instantly (Acts 2:5-41). Thus, brethren sold their possessions and they lived in a communistic manner (Acts 4:32-37). After that, they faced a great famine that required help be sent from abroad to their aid (Acts 11:27-30).

With all of those clarifiers, take some time to read how the church in Corinth was expected to carry out their authorized action of helping their poor brothers and sisters in Jerusalem (II Corinthians 8:1-9:13). What expedient measures were taken? There were messengers. There was a method of accounting through those approved messengers. There were letters sent. The local church was the sufficient institution to do God's work. Did they form the "Church of Christ Disaster Relief Effort, Inc."? NO! Did they establish orphan homes, widow homes, soup kitchens, etc. in Jerusalem? NO! There was not a single human institution formed. No institution was authorized. If we can follow the pattern written to the Corinthians regarding the Lord's Supper (I Corinthians 11:17-34), why is it difficult to follow this pattern?

Conclusion

This subject matter is just as simple as it was presented above. We are to hold to the pattern we read of in the Scriptures (II Timothy 1:13) without any thinking or actions beyond that (Jeremiah 7:30-31, Luke 11:28, and I Corinthians 4:6). Yet, human reasoning and human emotions have very often been used to err from God's way. Many will be lost because they have done "religious things" their way instead of God's way (Matthew 7:21-23). We have talked some in this series of studies about helping the needy. So, we will move on in our next study purposefully leaving some things on the table for a future study.