

Dear Reader:

From @1992 through 2000 I was caught up in practices common amongst so-called “churches of Christ” that I will refer to as “Institutionalism” in this study. Not only did I follow some of these errors, but I taught them as well. In such a state I was lost as I had transgressed the doctrine of Christ (II John 1:9). I had to confess and repent of these errors and to this day I am sorrowful to have erred when God expects us not to (James 1:16).

Over the years I have put together many studies on these subjects. In June of 2022 my website had some problems and I lost some of those previous studies. As a result, I put this study together in this format. Below is a seven section study that I hope will be helpful to you. If you find yourself or someone you know involved in these errors I would, as long as I am alive and able, be willing to study with and help you or them.

Please, open your Bible and study carefully through what is written below. It took me way too long to realize the errors of my ways. Don't take too long as you have no promise of tomorrow to get these things right (Proverbs 27:1 and James 4:13-16). Also, don't think that your good intentions will make this or any other error right (Matthew 7:21-23). Thank you in advance for considering the following.

Sincerely,

Brian A. Yeager

## **Section One:** **Institutionalism – What Is It?**

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".

## Section Two: Institutionalism – Unauthorized

In our previous study we concluded with the fact that the Scriptures contain all the information we need to do every good work (II Timothy 3:15-17). The Scriptures contain all the information we need pertaining to life and godliness (II Peter 1:3-4). We are supposed to live by every Scripture recorded (Luke 4:4). Prior to Jesus ascending into Heaven, He told the eleven Apostles alive at that time this: *"And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen"* (Matthew 28:18-20).

To this very day, we are expected by the Lord to speak and do only those things which He has authorized us to say and do (Colossians 3:16-17, I Thessalonians 4:1-2, I Thessalonians 5:21, James 1:19-25, James 2:10-12, and I Peter 4:11). Going beyond what the Lord has authorized has always been wrong (Deuteronomy 4:2 and Proverbs 30:5-6) and will always be wrong (Galatians 1:6-9 and Revelation 22:18-19).

If you carefully study the written word of God you find no mention of the many human institutions that have been formed today to do "good works". There is no

mention of church schools, Christian colleges, Bible camps, preaching schools, religious publishing companies, orphan homes, widow homes, hospitals, daycares, adoption agencies, etc. in the Scriptures. If God wanted these things to be formed by Christians, He would have told us so.

Is God capable of a good idea? Is God capable of communicating His good ideas to us through His word? I know those two questions seem a bit dumb to most who will read this article. Yet, aren't those that reject God's thinking for their own ways telling God their ideas are better than His? The truth is, if God wants something to be done He would have told us. Let's consider that point for a moment.

### **When God Has Said Nothing**

Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, decided to burn incense before the Lord that God had not commanded them to do. The Lord consumed them in a fire for doing so (Leviticus 10:1-2). David and Nathan the prophet decided it would be good to build God a house of cedar. The Lord pointed out to them that He never asked them to do so and that their plans were contrary to His plans (II Samuel 7:1-17). The Jews had certain traditions that they formed and commanded others to follow them. Jesus rebuked them because they chose their traditions over following the will of the Lord (Mark 7:1-9). Certain Jews thought it was a good idea to create business ventures in the temple of the Lord. Jesus made a whip and drove them out from the temple (John 2:13-17). Can you see, from God's word, that when He hasn't authorized something He is displeased when people do those things?

Even after the clear Scriptures we have considered, there still will be those who argue that if it is a "good thing" it must be the right thing to do. People emotionally support "Christian education", "benevolent homes", and such because they feel that those things are good. God says: *"There is a way which seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof are the ways of death"* (Proverbs 14:12). What seems good to even the most well-intended person doesn't mean it is right to God. Let's illustrate this by thinking about "orphan homes" as an example.

### **Considering The Orphan Home**

In both the Old Testament and the New Testament there are instructions for God's people to care about the "fatherless" (Exodus 22:22, Deuteronomy 14:22-29, Deuteronomy 24:17, Deuteronomy 27:19, Psalms 82:3, Isaiah 1:17, and James 1:18-27). The New Testament instruction is to "visit" ["inspect"; Strong's # 3737] the fatherless. This is the role of every individual Christian. If you know of a fatherless child, look after he or she. Nowhere, in any of the instructions in either covenant, do we find that looking after a fatherless child is done through forming a human institution. We are not authorized, regardless of who funds it, to start an organization to look after the fatherless. Such is your job and my job when the opportunity presents itself and we are capable of doing so. Yet, the discussion rarely is made this simple.

## **It Has Been Complicated By Becoming A Money Discussion**

Instead of keeping the discussion of Institutionalism as simple as looking for authority in the Scriptures and not speaking or acting where there is none, the debates have caused confusion. The debates over the years have surrounded the usage of money. The debates have been about who pays for colleges, homes, etc. rather than whether or not they have God's permission to exist at all. If Christians want to start religious organizations the discussion MUST start with whether or not there is authority for those things at all. Whether the church is to fund them or individual Christians, they cannot even exist until we have authority from our Master in Heaven. What happened to "speak where the Bible speaks..." (I Peter 4:11)?

### **Conclusion**

God's intelligence far outweighs the smartest of all of us (Romans 11:33-36). Christ has revealed His mind to us through the Scriptures (I Corinthians 2:9-16). In all of His thoughts, that He has revealed, we never once read of human institutions being formed to do His work on earth. That should solve every question about Institutionalism. We'd do well not to lean on our own understanding (Proverbs 3:5-7). We'd do well not to seek to justify what we want to do (Proverbs 21:2). Yet, many have chosen to seek ways to justify these unlawful organizations that erring members of churches of Christ have started. For example, the discussion often turns to how an institution is an expedient. This is where we will pick up in our next study.

## **Section Three: Institutionalism – Is Not An Expedient**

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.

## **Section Four: Institutionalism – Is A Mindset**

People who generally believe and practice Institutionalism have a noticeable mindset. Those individuals have a "we" instead of "me" mentality. What I mean by the previous statement is that those individuals that have an institutional way of thinking are those who are looking to pass on their individual responsibilities to a group of people.

An example of the institutional mindset is, instead of personally looking after a fatherless child or widow (James 1:26-27); send them to an orphan home with a check for others to do the work. Another example is, instead of being hospitable as an individual (Acts 16:13-15, Romans 12:13, Hebrews 13:1-2, and I Peter 4:8-11); expect the church to organize dinners, lunches, potlucks, etc. Another example is, instead of individual evangelists training others to teach the Gospel (II Timothy 2:2); have a preaching school do that work.

Notice, in the examples above, we are not even addressing whether or not the Lord's money collected on the first day of the week (I Corinthians 16:1-2) is being used to fund the mentioned works. What we are addressing, regardless of who funds it, is the passing off of individual responsibilities onto an organized body of people. Before we would even address where the funding comes from, we have to address this

mindset of turning over a person's individual responsibilities to a group of people. Let's get into how God wants us to do things when any of us might be presented with an opportunity to do His work.

### **When Given An Opportunity To Do Good**

Consider this Parable and the reason it was taught: *"And, behold, a certain lawyer stood up, and tempted him, saying, Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? He said unto him, What is written in the law? how readest thou? And he answering said, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbour as thyself. And he said unto him, Thou hast answered right: this do, and thou shalt live. But he, willing to justify himself, said unto Jesus, And who is my neighbour? And Jesus answering said, A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell among thieves, which stripped him of his raiment, and wounded him, and departed, leaving him half dead. And by chance there came down a certain priest that way: and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. And likewise a Levite, when he was at the place, came and looked on him, and passed by on the other side. But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was: and when he saw him, he had compassion on him, And went to him, and bound up his wounds, pouring in oil and wine, and set him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. And on the morrow when he departed, he took out two pence, and gave them to the host, and said unto him, Take care of him; and whatsoever thou spendest more, when I come again, I will repay thee. Which now of these three, thinkest thou, was neighbour unto him that fell among the thieves? And he said, He that shewed mercy on him. Then said Jesus unto him, Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:25-37).*

Now let's consider some applications to what we just read. Did the Samaritan, that we learned to follow the example of, call upon the "Church of Christ Disaster Relief Effort" to help the truly needy man? Did the Samaritan, that we learned to follow the example of, call for the treasurer of a religious body to send funds to help the truly needy man? Obviously, we can see that the Samaritan in the Parable, whom serves as an approved example to follow, took individual responsibility for the truly needy man in the account. When given the opportunity, we need to follow the "I" instead of "they, we, us, etc." thinking towards doing good works.

### **Much Of Our Responsibilities As Christians Are Individual Responsibilities**

Consider these inspired statements: *"For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works... For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad... Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth to his flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth to the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap life everlasting... And, behold, I come quickly; and my reward is with me, to give every man according as his work shall be" (Matthew 16:27, II Corinthians 5:10, Galatians 6:7-8, and Revelation 22:12).*

We, as individual Christians, are expected to be doers of God's will (James 1:18-25). Certainly, there are things we need each other for as a collective body (i.e. I Corinthians 11:23-33, Ephesians 5:19, I Thessalonians 5:11-14, Hebrews 3:13, Hebrews 10:22-25, James 5:16, etc.). However, the majority of what we do as Christians is outside of the assembly. It is in the world where we are to shine (Matthew 5:14-16 and Philippians 2:14-16). Our actions in this world from the home (Ephesians 5:22-6:4), to secular employment (I Thessalonians 4:10-12), to social affairs (I Corinthians 10:23-33), etc.; are all tasks we take on as individual Christians. We cannot look to others for them to do these things for us. As you read at the beginning of this section of this article, we will stand individually accountable before God for our actions as Christians.

## Conclusion

There is much more that could be said, but I am trying to simplify some of these things to produce thinking that will get people away from the errors of Institutionalism. The world promotes the institutional mindset heavily. Think of statements such as one that often applies to raising a child. That statement is, "it takes a village". WRONG! Statements like that are intended to drive people to a collective way of action in all things instead of personal accountability. The world is not our standard of thinking (Romans 12:1-2). Now there is another way of thinking that somewhat applies to some of what we have discussed in this study. That is, the idea that if an individual Christian can do something, the church can too. That is what we will discuss next.

## Section Five:

### Institutionalism – Individual, Concurrent, And Collective Action

In our last article we made some applications from what is commonly known as the "Parable of the Good Samaritan" (Luke 10:25-37). Very often, someone with an institutional mindset will read such Scriptures and equally conclude that what the "Good Samaritan" can do the church can do too. Many with the institutional mindset simply cannot see a difference between the work of one Christian, multiple Christians, and the church collectively. Thus, they often confuse Scriptures that apply to Christians as though they apply to the whole congregation.

When you study the Scriptures you have to be reasonable. You know that all New Testament Scriptures do not apply to everyone. The fact is, no single Scripture written was ever directly written to anyone alive today. That doesn't mean we shouldn't study those Scriptures (Romans 15:4, I Corinthians 10:1-12, and Colossians 4:16). That doesn't make them completely inapplicable (II Timothy 3:15-17). What we have to cautiously understand is, we are making applications to our lives from things written to different people under different circumstances. Thus, we must handle the Scriptures aright (II Timothy 2:14-18). There are many things written that never applied to everyone.

What directly applied to the Apostles in some cases applied or applies to no one else (i.e. Matthew 10:5-20, Luke 24:45-49, John 14:26, etc.). Also, things written specifically regarding a husband is an instruction that doesn't apply to everyone else (i.e. Ephesians 5:23). There are some different instructions that apply to wives and not to husbands (i.e. Titus 2:3-5). If you are neither a slave or a master certain Scriptures do not apply directly to you (i.e. Ephesians 6:5-9). If you earn no income and have not prospered certain Scriptures cannot be directly applied to you (i.e. I Corinthians 16:1-2). If you are a Eunuch certain Scriptures do not apply to you directly (i.e. I Corinthians 6:18-7:5). While we are to follow the example of Jesus (I Peter 2:21), there are things He did that we cannot. For example, we cannot observe the Passover (Luke 22:7-8), partake of the Lord's Supper on Thursday [the night in which He was betrayed] (I Corinthians 11:23-26), forgive sins as deity (Luke 5:17-26), or accept worship (Matthew 28:9 and Matthew 28:17).

I trust that anyone with a brain and an ability to reason beyond that of a ten year old child can understand the things above. Thus, we should all be able to reason and conclude that not all Scriptures apply to everyone equally. There are many more points that could be made, but I do not want to take us too far from the subject matter at hand. What we are setting out to accomplish in this study is to realize how that what is written regarding one Christian, plural Christians, and the church as a collective body are often different. Let's prove this now as we ought to (I Thessalonians 5:21).

### **The Difference Between Authorized Individual, Concurrent, And Collective Actions**

Consider this text: *"Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican"* (Matthew 18:15-17). When you read through the quoted Scriptures here, you should have noticed the difference between individual, concurrent, and collective action. First, a Christian who has been sinned against is supposed to go alone to the brother in error which is individual action. If that does not work, he is to take one or two more as witnesses which is multiple individuals acting at the same time [concurrent action]. It is not until these two things fail that the whole congregation assembles to deal with the matter which is collective action. Thus, when one or more members of the same congregation are involved, that does not put the church into action nor does it authorize the church to be in action.

Here is another example: *"Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God. Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth. And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless. But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel. Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, Well reported of for good works; if she have brought*

*up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work. But the younger widows refuse: for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry; Having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith. And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not. I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some are already turned aside after Satan. If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed" (I Timothy 5:3-16). In the above Scriptures, you see the same thing as you did in Matthew 18:15-17. There is a difference between what one, more than one, and the church collectively are authorized to do. Even though plural pronouns might be used [i.e. "them"], that does not authorize collective action.*

### **Conclusion**

If anyone can study the two inspired examples above and not see the difference between authorized individual, concurrent, and collective spiritual works; I cannot say any more to help. Thus, from here, I want to move on in our study of Institutionalism to cover the actual work of the church as a collective body. What we will do next is examine what the church is authorized to do and how the church is sufficient for those works.

## **Section Six:**

### **Institutionalism – The Church Is Sufficient For Collective Work**

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).

## **Section Seven: Institutionalism – The Lines Are Not Clearly Drawn**

The institutional mindset exists in nearly every church of Christ that exists today to one degree or another. While all of those congregations may not be in favor of using the Lord's money to support human institutions to do the Lord's work, they still have their ties to some sort of human institution that is unscripturally doing the Lord's work. Amongst those claiming to be "Non-Institutional" churches of Christ, you find many who tie themselves to Florida College, One Stone Biblical Resources, the Guardian of Truth Foundation, and other affiliated institutions. These things are often subtle. While some churches of Christ clearly show their support of orphan homes, schools, etc.; others are a bit more secretive about these things. We should not be surprised at such for error is often subtle (II Corinthians 11:3).

An example of the subtle ties between these human organizations and many churches of Christ, is the human organization called "Congregate" (<http://www.congregateonline.com>). It is a software company that was started by Florida College alums under a company called DP Media Group (<https://www.linkedin.com/in/erockwallace>). The "who's" "who" of congregations that love Florida College (<http://www.congregateonline.com/gallery/>) use this software that provides membership tracking, member interaction tracking, website hosting, contribution tracking, etc. (<http://www.congregateonline.com/features/management/>). Since Florida College is the "Non-

Institutional churches of Christ” Vatican, it should not be a surprise that an organization exists that ties the college to congregations in these ways.

Florida College alums, people that proclaim to be “Non-Institutional”, have also formed at least one human institution for adoptions (<https://www.sacredselections.org/directors/>). In addition to this, other Florida College alums have formed at least one human institution such as “1213 online” (<http://1213online.org>), which is a human institution that provides benevolent care to Christians in need. Yet, those same people say James 1:27 is an individual command.

This is a small sample that proves that the lines between those practicing Institutionalism and those proclaiming not to are not clear. The only thing all of these people in error really disagree about is who can fund these human institutions. They do not, at all, have any disagreement about the existence of these human organizations. As we have already covered, God has authorized three institutions to do His work on earth. The family [home] is an institution God put in place (Ephesians 5:22-6:4). The government is an institution God put in place (Romans 13:1-7). The church of Christ is an institution God put in place (Matthew 16:13-18 and Hebrews 3:1-6). If a work is of God, to be done by an organized group of people, it must be done through one of the organizations He authorized to do so. The blurry lines that exist today make these errors hard to recognize amongst those proclaiming to be churches of Christ.

### **With Blurry Lines, You Must Pay Attention To Small Details**

Many so-called churches of Christ that believe and practice Institutionalism are obvious. These are not as concerning to those of us who know the truth for we can see them from afar. However, the congregations that oppose church supported Institutionalism, but have no problem with the formation of unauthorized human institutions doing spiritual work are of greater concern. The word of God warns us about wolves in sheep’s clothing (Matthew 7:15-20). They are not easily seen. In fact, the faithful have had them creep in and they were unaware of such (Jude 1:3-4). At times, the wolves can already be among the saints and waiting to arise for their unlawful causes (Acts 20:28-31).

Knowing them by their fruits requires an attention to details. For example, when a congregation has members who are encouraging the youth to attend Florida College Camps, they are planting the seed of Institutionalism. When members of congregations are pushing the purchase of “Bible Materials” from a certain bookstore written by certain people, they are planting the seed of Institutionalism. When members of congregations are encouraging subscriptions to certain “brotherhood publications”, they are pushing Institutionalism. When a congregation is using “Congregate” software, they are supporting Institutionalism. When a congregation has a certain group of preachers holding “Gospel Meetings” and those men are associated with schools, publishing companies, etc.; they are pushing Institutionalism. Pay attention to what the members and leaders of congregations are doing. Look behind the curtain and see the details.

## **Don't Let Those Operating In Disguise Go Unnoticed**

We cannot ignore the fact that false doctrines and practices are often stealth operations. We cannot sit back and allow those operating in secret to get away with their errors. Consider how Paul, Barnabas, and Titus dealt with such: *"Then fourteen years after I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, and took Titus with me also. And I went up by revelation, and communicated unto them that gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but privately to them which were of reputation, lest by any means I should run, or had run, in vain. But neither Titus, who was with me, being a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised: And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: To whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour; that the truth of the gospel might continue with you"* (Galatians 2:1-5). If you care about the souls of your brethren and yourself, you will mark and avoid those whom are tied to Institutionalism (Romans 16:17-18).

### **Conclusion**

This article will conclude our series on Institutionalism. While there are side issues that are often tied to this subject, this study should resolve all of the main questions that an honest Bible student would have regarding Institutionalism. Remember, as with all false doctrines, to be careful not to fall prey to these errors. For, if you do, you will stand accountable for such on the Judgment Day (Matthew 15:1-14, II Corinthians 5:10, Ephesians 5:6, and II John 1:6-11).