

Institutionalism

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For our purposes, the term “institutionalism” will be defined in the following way, *“Institutionalism is the doctrine which assumes that congregations may or should financially support or underwrite certain charitable or religious organizations”* (“Problems In The Church: Institutionalism”, William Wallace, www.truthmagazine.com). It is not a matter of the existence of these human organizations being controversial, but their relationship to the local congregation. Are the Lord’s funds being distributed to them? By nature, larger, wealthier, and more urban churches tend to drift toward supporting human institutions for various reasons. Many church leaders believe that it is okay to use the Lord’s money for orphan homes, Christian colleges, and convalescent homes because we are commanded in the Bible to help in these endeavors. Other people believe that whatever the individual can do, the church can do (and vice versa). Still others contend that in order to compete with the denominations around us, we need to secularize and make our churches more appealing in the marketplace of religions.

Along with a sermon being presented on this subject, this short series of articles will address the problem of institutionalism in the church. Is it biblical? Is it even important? Many try to toss this and other similar subjects under the rug because they appear to be paltry and nitpicky. Much to the contrary, the apostles actually place a premium on all Bible doctrines, and command faithful Christians to stand up for the truth in spite of what the world thinks of our practices. *“As for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine”* (Titus 2:1). *“Hold fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that [you] will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict”* (Titus 1:9). *“So that in us you might learn not to exceed what is written”* (1 Corinthians 4:6). *“Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God... Do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting”* (2 John 9-11). *“Pay close attention to you teaching”* (1 Timothy 4:16). *“Handling accurately the Word of truth”* (2 Timothy 2:15).

The Bible Model

If we ascertain what the model is in the Bible, then good and honest hermeneutics would immediately make all deviations unsound. In the Bible, we are told some things about the benevolent activities funded by the church treasury:

- *“Not a needy person was among them”* (Acts 4:32-35). Notice that the needy people who were being aided were “among them”, that is, members of the church. The church in Jerusalem was not undertaking the benevolent work of unbelievers in foreign lands.
- *“For the relief of the brethren living in Judea”* (Acts 11:29). The general example is that it was only “brethren” being assisted, and the specific example is that it was brethren in Judea. By necessary inference, we conclude that only Christians are to be helped by church funds, regardless of where they live.
- *“The collection for the saints”* (1 Corinthians 16:1). The money being collected was specifically reserved for the saints (Christians).

- Acts 2:44-45 mentions that only those who were saved were sharing all things in common.
- Acts 6:1-8 clearly gives the example that it was widows who were members of the church who were receiving their ration of food.
- “*Support of the saints*” (2 Corinthians 8:4).
- “*Ministry to the saints*” (2 Corinthians 9:1).
- Romans 15:25-26 is equally exclusive in nature. Only the poor and needy who were members of the church in Jerusalem were to receive the funds being sent from Macedonia and Achaia.
- Widows who are put in the church budget are clearly members of that church, according to 1 Timothy 5:3-10.