

Institutionalism (Part 2)

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It is not the church's business to do many of the things that people want it to. If God wanted the church to support orphan homes, Christian colleges, and publication companies, He would have asked it to. Rather, the church is in the business of providing a collective arrangement of support for Christians (both physically and spiritually). Beyond that, its primary focus is spiritual, and its purpose is to proclaim God's truths to the world (1 Timothy 3:15). It is not the business of the church to teach macramé classes, build hospitals, run an adult basketball league, sponsor a college, or own a bookstore. The problem with instituting all of these human functions is that they go beyond the scope of God's intentions. The silence of the scriptures does not give permission in any matter (Leviticus 10:1-3, *"Which the Lord had not commanded"*; Matthew 15:1-9; Acts 15:22-24, *"To whom we gave no instruction"*; 2 John 9). When we make a church-supported human institution, it does one of two sinful things:

- Either it supplants or replaces the church by fulfilling a duty that was expressly given to the church by God;
- Or it attempts to complement the church by receiving funds from the Lord's treasury and doing things that are required of the individual.

The Individual and the Church

The argument is often made that since the church is composed of individuals, then whatever we are allowed to do as individuals, the church is permitted to undertake as well. This would necessarily include the use of the funds collected on the first day of the week for the church treasury. Though seemingly logical on the outside, this belief has far-reaching consequences. Not everything that is righteously expected of the individual can also be expected of the congregation, and vice versa. And the logic becomes very flawed when we consider some examples of individual acts of righteousness that are clearly not desired by God in a congregational setting:

- Individuals are commanded to support their families (1 Timothy 5:8). So does this mean that if the congregation does not undertake a profit-making venture it is worse than an unbeliever?
- In Matthew 18:15-17, Christ specifically forbids the church from getting involved until late in the process.
- In Acts 5:4, if there is no distinction between what the individual and the church do, then why does Peter make such a clear distinction?
- 1 Corinthians 14:34-35; obedience to this command requires a distinction between individual and church action. Otherwise, women are not allowed to speak ever.
- In Hebrews 10:25, this is directed at the individual because "assembly" is impossible for a church because it is an "assembly" already.
- 1 Corinthians 11:18; "When you come together as a church" means that there is a distinction between individual activities and church activities. We are not always

“together as a church”, thus our lives consist of many activities that are not the work of the church.

The All-Sufficiency of the Church

The church is completely and totally sufficient for everything that it was designed to do. There are only a few things that God asks from the church, but they are important: limited benevolence for other Christians only (Philippians 4:15), edification and admonishment (1 Thessalonians 5:14), Biblical education (Titus 2:1-8, 2 Timothy 2:2), fellowship in worship (1 Corinthians 10:16-17), the spreading of the Gospel, and the support of preachers and missionaries (2 Corinthians 11:7-9, 3 John 5-10). These are the clearly stated duties of the church of Christ. Anything beyond this is going too far (1 Corinthians 4:6, 4:17, 2 John 9). Individual Christians are asked to do many other things, but these are not in the context of the congregation's mission. The church should not financially support summer camps, homeless shelters, orphan homes, convalescent homes, Christian colleges, para-church educational institutions or periodicals because it is sufficient for doing what it was asked to do by God. We have been given all things pertaining to life and godliness, according to 2 Peter 1:3, so anything beyond what we find in the Bible (try finding the words “Christian college”, “orphan home”, or “Gospel Advocate” in the Word of God) would clearly not have anything to do with life and godliness. Being a non-institutionalist does not mean I am preventing the church from practicing “pure and undefiled religion”. It simply means I want the church to abstain (collectively) from doing activities that are the responsibility of individuals.