

Church Issues: Institutionalism

by Casey Head

The religious world today tells us that the church really isn't that important. Not only is that plainly stated by most people, but it is also evident in the existence and popularity of denominationalism. A prevalent attitude is, "join the church of your choice, for one church is just as good as another." But we have to realize the error of this line of thinking, and understand also the importance of the church Christ died for.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told Peter and the apostles, "Upon this rock I will build MY church." He did not promise to build a multitude of denominations, but rather He simply stated that He would build His church (singular). To further this point, Paul instructs the elders at Ephesus in Acts 20:28, "Feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." The church of the first century was owned by the Son of God, Jesus Christ- He bought it with His blood. And then in Romans 16:16, we learn of the "churches of Christ." The word "of" here describes ownership, and this drives the point home that the church belongs to Christ- it is HIS! He is given all authority, and He is the head over the church (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 5:23). Is the church important? Does it matter what church we join? Does it matter what the church does? The answer to all three questions is a resounding "YES!" There is only one church (Eph. 4:4) and that one church OF Christ is given a pattern for worship and works (Jn. 4:24; 1 Tim. 3:15; Heb. 8:5-6). Transgressing this pattern results in our committing sin against God, and the wages of sin is death (1 Jn. 3:4; Rom. 6:23). Finally, as we see in Revelation 2:4-5; 14: 1-2, an entire church can be rejected by Christ and fallen.

With those simple yet controversial points in mind, we want to begin a series of articles addressing various church issues. In this first lesson, we will discuss the issue of institutionalism. This has been a divisive issue among so called "churches of Christ" and is a shortcoming of the denominational world. What is institutionalism and why is it wrong?

Institutionalism involves a local church sending its money to another organization to accomplish a given work. For example, a church decides to send a \$1000 check to a benevolent organization which in turn will incorporate that money into their one account and use it as they see fit. While this may seem harmless (Prov. 16:25), it is without the authority of God, which makes it a transgression of His silence (1 Pet. 4:11). Never do we find in the scriptures local churches pooling their funds, nor do we find churches sending their money to central organizations to carry out their work for them. Rather, when the church's treasury is used, the money is sent directly to the source (See Acts 11:28-30; Rom. 15:25-26; Phil. 4:15-16). Can you find one New Testament example where a church sent money to some missionary society or to another local church to accomplish a given work such as benevolence or preaching?

Finally, it is important to establish that the church is to be self-governing and independent in its work. This is evident in God's design for the church. In both Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2, God instructs the elders to "Take heed therefore *unto yourselves* and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood." In other words, the elders (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) are instructed to oversee the flock of which they are members. No where in the New Testament do we find one church ruling over another, or an eldership governing multiple congregations. We do not find synods and central headquarters. What we find are independent, self-governing local churches. We also never find multiple churches combining their efforts to achieve what God has assigned the individual churches to do by themselves.

As we close, notice the admonition of Paul in Ephesians 5:26-27, "That He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish." Let us strive to maintain the purity of the church, to act ONLY within the confines of the New Testament. That involves an adamant rejection of institutionalism!