

# *What is Institutionalism*

**1** I have been asked to take some time and discuss the idea of institutionalism. It is often referred to, and done so, with the understanding that everybody knows what is being talked about. But in reality, based on a conversation that I had this last week, I believe that there are a growing number of people who claim to be members of the "Church of Christ", who do not know what "institutionalism" is all about. This includes members of both institutional and non-institutional congregations. I hope that a quick study of the principles of institutionalism will prove helpful to our own understanding of this concept.

The importance of this understanding is founded in the statement that God makes through James...

**James 2:10**

**2**

**10** For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all.

Do you see the vast importance and impact of what is being said here? God has put into place a standard, His Law that governs every man and every deed of every man. God has decreed that man is to live by His standard and that the ultimate decision of what man's eternal fate hinges on how man chooses to live by that standard or not. Therein is the real impact of what James says; there is no room for an attitude of error or personal input of doctrine. God says if we...

**3**

## *"Stumble in one point"*

That means if we decide to ignore any point of authority that He gives. Intentions make no difference, meeting God hallway with partial effort makes no difference, if we stumble in just one point then we fail in it all. Now you might be wondering how that dynamic has anything to do with a discussion on institutionalism, but, quite frankly, that is the problem. The line that separates non-institutional with institutional congregations is found in the principle that God establishes in James.

The real question that has to be answered is the question that is posed in the understanding of **James 2:10**.

**4**

## *Is institutionalism authorized by God's standard?*

To be able to answer that question we must first understand just what institutionalism is. There is nowhere in God's scriptures that we can turn to and see the term or even the idea of institutionalism, it just isn't there. It is a definition that man has come up with to describe something. The definition, as given by Websters is...

**5**

- a) Emphasis on organization (as in religion) at the expense of other factors
- b) Public institutional care of disabled, delinquent, or dependent persons
- c) An economic school of thought that emphasizes the role of social institutions in influencing economic behavior

The idea is that any organization that functions as an entity unto itself can be considered to be an institution. That doesn't mean that that organization doesn't necessarily have outside

obligations or even responsibilities and accountabilities, it just means that, on the whole, any decisions that are made, are made in-house.

Many years ago, dating back into the early 1600's in England, and probably even before that, organizations began to arise to help those that were in need, orphans, widows, or homeless, anyone who was in need. Then organizations also began to arise that were called missionary societies. These were groups that organized, funded, and sent out people to preach or teach the Word of God. There is tremendous irony in that thought, see if you can see it, but bear with me a moment or two and I'll try and illustrate it. So these organizations, and mind you these are just a couple of examples, there are many, many more covering a very wide variety of functions, were put into place to help facilitate funds and efforts on a scale that neither a small group or an individual could hope to accomplish. That is an institution. The problem happened when different local congregations of God's people began to send money from the Lord's treasury, the contribution, to these organizations to take of the needy or to spread the Word. The reasoning was that a small local Church that might have a couple of hundred dollars a month really can't do much in the way of supporting a preacher or alleviating the need of someone in trouble, but that money, combined with a lot of other congregations money, could fully support a man or even a group of men or feed the hungry or house the homeless. That is the logic, and quite frankly, there is a lot of truth to that logic. That must be understood. This isn't a question of good being done, this is a question of good being done the way God has decreed it to be done. The argument that the ends justifies the means is scripturally an invalid argument. Moses found that out when he struck the rock. Water still forth, the ends were accomplished, but the means he chose prevented him from entering the land of Canaan. In...

**Matt 7:21-22**

**6**

**21** "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. **22** "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?'

These people are doing good, that cannot be denied or even argued. That said, why did the Lord tell them...

**Matt 7:23**

**7**

**23** "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; DEPART FROM ME, YOU WHO PRACTICE LAWLESSNESS.'

They are doing good, but whether it be how they did it, or their motivations for doing it, Christ says they acted outside of His standard, they...

**8**

### ***"Stumbled in just one point"***

He sent them away. So the idea of obedience must be tempered by comparing that obedience to the standard of God's Word. Both must be there. That is what God means in...

**Col 3:17**

**9**

**17** Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus,

When Jesus tells those that came to Him in Matt. 7 to depart, it is because that, in whatever way they missed, they did not do what they did by His authority.

Authority comes from the scriptures in 3 ways...

- 10** A) Direct command  
*God says do it or don't do it*

**Heb 11:6-7**

**6** And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.

- 11** B) Apostolic or approved example  
*Where we can see that the New Testament Church engaged in something that was obviously approved of*

**Acts 20:7**

**7** On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread

- 12** C) Necessary inference  
*This is where something is evidently authorized, though not necessarily in the specific*

**Acts 20:7**

**7** On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread

In the same passage we just looked at we see the disciples gathering together, where? Christ met with the disciples in a rented upper-room, we see examples of local groups gathering in the Jewish synagogue or people's homes. What is authorized, the scriptures don't specify, other than that something is authorized, so it is left up to the congregation to decide and any decision they make, rent, buy, use a home, whatever, is authorized as long as that decision doesn't violate God's standard in some other way.

Now keep in mind this principle. The standard does not need to specify what is not authorized if it specifies what is. God told Noah to make the ark of Gopher wood. Would Noah have obeyed God in all points if he had built it of Oak? Obviously not. Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, in their role as priests, were commanded to use fire from the altar to burn the incense, in...

**Lev 10:1-2** **13**

**1** Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. **2** And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and consumed them, and they died before the Lord.

Now combine this with what we read in...

**Num 3:4** **14**

**4** But Nadab and Abihu died before the Lord when they offered strange fire before the Lord in the wilderness of Sinai; and they had no children.

God did not have to specify what not to use as He apparently had already specified what to use. We see this pointed out in...

**Lev 16:12** **15**

**12** "He shall take a firepan full of coals of fire from upon the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of finely ground sweet incense, and bring it inside the veil.

Now let's apply these principles of determining divine authority, what God does or does not authorize, to the concept of institutionalism.

This is where those that would practice institutionalism run headlong into God's Word. There is nowhere, in any way, shape, or form, that the idea of sending funds to any organization that is set up to do a good work, is authorized in God's word. Not only is the sending of funds to an organization not found, the very idea of an organization, other than a local Church, is not even mentioned.

So, no, we cannot turn to any passage that says don't build the ark out of oak. But we can, most assuredly turn to passages that do tell us how to mete out benevolence or support, God tells us to use Gopher wood, He doesn't need to say, don't use oak.

The Scriptures contain everything man needs 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 Word that proceeds from the mouth of God (**Luke 4:4**). So again, that being said, if we can't find where God has authorized it, whether by direct command, approved example, or necessary inference, then, quite frankly, it is not authorized, period.

So, what does God authorize? In...

**James 1:27**

**16**

**27** Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.

The idea of visit here is not restricted to just going to see someone, but , rather, it is talking about taking care of whatever needs they may have, spiritually, financially, or any other way, if needed. Please note, that God is addressing this to the individual...

**17**

***"And to keep oneself unstained by the world"***

We see then authority for the individual to do what they can to help the widowed and orphaned, but does that apply to Church?

Interestingly, the term orphan is used maybe 2 times in the New Testament, one in the passage we just looked at from **James** and maybe one in **John 14** where Christ says to His disciples that He would not leave them as orphans, fatherless, though Young's Literal translation does not include that passage. The only passage that speaks to taking care of orphans is directed toward the individual and not the Church. Does this mean that any orphan in a local congregation is to be left to fend for itself, that's just plain foolish. Of course the local Church has an obligation to care for those that are among it.

For anyone to say that any Christian, let alone a local congregation of Christians is anti-helping orphans is an insult. The true Christian recognizes their responsibility in helping all men, but unlike those in **Matt. 7** chooses to do their good works in accordance with the Law of God.

But, there is a responsibility that the local congregation is given that is specific to widows. The Church is charged with the care of...

**18**

***"Widows Indeed"***

In **1 Tim. 5**, in his discussion with Timothy, Paul sets forth the principle that widows who meet the qualifications as proscribed by God can and should be taken care. This is the responsibility

of the Church. We also see in **Acts 6 & 7** how that the local Church in Jerusalem took the responsibility for making sure that the Grecian widows among them were being taken care of.

There are some principles that need to be established that govern how a local Church can offer benevolence. As we have illustrated, there is no authority for sending funds to an institution to mete out as it sees fit. Rather, what we do see is that each individual congregation would send their funds by a trusted courier, i.e. Paul, directly to the Elders of the congregation where the need was or directly to the person in need.

Principle one then is...

**19** 1) Any funds sent were sent directly to the need (*No other example or authority seen*)

Now note, that the passages which speak of Church supported benevolent work speak only of the Church helping saints, members. Time doesn't permit us to view each of these but they can be read in: **Acts 2:43-46; 6:1-6; 11:27-30; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9; Rom. 15:25-31**. You can't find any means of authority in the scriptures where any Church was responsible for, or ever did, help anyone who was not a saint, a member, either at their own locale or somewhere else.

2) Only members are authorized to receive benevolence

In **Acts 4...**

**Acts 4:36-37**

**21**

**36** Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), **37** and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.

Here is the account of the Christians of Jerusalem responding to the great need of those that were there. The money was laid at the feet of the Apostles to distribute as they saw fit. That is the approved example that each Church is to follow today. Any funds that might be sent are to be sent either to the Elders of the congregation where the need is at or to the individual that is in need.

We must assume, given the times they lived in, that the first century had its share of orphans and poor people, we can only read where the Church helped saints from its first-day-of-the-week contributions.

Based then on the principles of authority in God's Word and the all-encompassing need for that authority in everything we say and do, the only authority that is seen for a Church in helping others or sending to the need of a preacher is that it be done directly and not through any other organization.

The idea of an institution being set up to help facilitate taking care of the needy or spreading the Word is founded in good intentions. There is much to be said for the advantages that such an organization can bring to the effort. But, none of this is at heart of the question. The only thing that matters is what does God authorize? The emotional aspect of this question causes many to ignore the authority of the scriptures and to do what they think best. God wants us to show love, He wants us to help everyone, so any way that we can do that, authorized or not is ok with God and His standard. The ends justifies the means.

Brethren God's standard cannot, must not, be ignored, not even in one point. Study the scriptures to show yourself approve. This is not a discussion of what is good or not. It is strictly a discussion of what is authorized or not, nothing more, but most certainly, nothing less.