**Part 5: Issues that Divide Us – The Local Church and Institutions**



INTRODUCTION:

1. I would like to remind you of some of the major issues that have caused division among churches of Christ.



1. Early within the restoration movement the question of whether the local church could rightfully do its work *through* man-made institutions became an issue of debate and division.



* 1. The doctrine that the local church can and should do certain works through man-created institutions is the doctrine of **institutionalism**.



* 1. **Defined:** “What is institutionalism in terms of the Church? It is the conception that the Church of Christ is a religious organization, composed of individual congregations, being at the center of dependent and supplementary social organizations—such as schools, welfare agencies, hospitals, etc.—which **necessarily aid it** in fulfilling a collective social and spiritual mission.” (**Harry Pickup, Jr.**, “*Institutionalism*,” 3-4)



* 1. Institutionalism pictured (see chart)



1. Today, few people talk about their *institutions* or *institutionalism*, but the concept is still alive and well in denominations and among a large portion of churches of Christ.
   1. Now these organizations are generally referred today as *ministries* or by names that do not reveal their organizational structure.
      1. Church of Christ Disaster Relief Incorporated (BOD of men from various congregations)
      2. World Evangelism.org (“a mission effort of the churches of Christ” – www.worldevangelism.org)
   2. There are a large number of organizations like this used by churches of Christ.
2. What we are going to examine today are the biblical reasons why brethren questioned and ultimately rejected the creation and supporting of human institutions to do the work of the local church.

BODY:

1. **The issue of institutionalism:**
   1. The issue **is** **not**:



* + 1. Does the local church have evangelism, edification, and benevolent responsibilities?



* + 1. May human institutions exist?



* + 1. May facilities to do God’s work be provided?



* + 1. May the local church employ men and methods to do its work?



* + 1. What the individual can biblically do



* 1. The issues **is**:



* + 1. May a church of the Lord build and maintain institutions **through** which to do their work?



* + 1. Is the **local church** that God designed and revealed **sufficient** to do the work God has given it to do?



* + 1. The dividing line:



* + - 1. Institutionally minded churches, which includes the majority of churches of Christ, believe they can and should do much of their work of benevolence, edification, and evangelism by supporting various man-made institutions.



* + - 1. Non-institutionally minded churches of Christ, like this congregation, do not support these man-made institutions to do their work, believing that God designed the local church to be sufficient, or completely adequate, to do the work God gave it to do.



1. **The history of religious institutions among churches of Christ:**



* 1. The first man-created institution to cause division among brethren was the **American Christian** **Missionary Society** (MS) created in **1849**.



* + 1. It was created because some believed the organization of the local churches was too limited to get the “very large” job of evangelism done—that this was a job for the “body of Christ.”



* + 1. The creation of the MS, an institution for evangelism, allowed local churches to pool their money under its oversight to do the work of evangelism on a large, brotherhood-wide scale.



* + 1. The MS created immediate problems among brethren because its design supplanted/usurped the role of the local church by taking away the oversight of its money and its work of evangelism.



* + - 1. Faithful brethren pointed out that N.T. churches did their own work of evangelizing, determining for themselves who, where, how much support, etc., for their part in preaching the gospel.



* + - 1. They objected because the MS, or preaching institutions, was taking away the oversight of the local church’s money and work of evangelism and that they were doing nothing more than contributing money while the institution did the work for them.



* + - 1. So, when faithful brethren rightfully rejected this institution, tensions rose!



* + - * 1. When you add the fact that most churches that supported the MS also accepted the use of mechanical instruments of music in their worship, division was unavoidable!
        2. And, the result was the Disciples of Christ/Christian churches holding to the MS and the instrument, while churches of Christ did not.
        3. “The founders of the Christian Church hoped to restore Christian unity by returning to New Testament faith and practices. But the church found that even this led to division. One group which **opposed practices not specifically authorized by the New Testament, such as instrumental music in the church and organized missionary activity, gradually pulled away**. That group finally was listed separately in the 1906 federal religious census as the “Churches of Christ.”” (https://disciples.org/our-identity/history-of-the-disciples/).



* 1. This, however, was not the end of institutionalism and its resulting division among churches of Christ.
     1. About 50 years later, another institutionalism problem arose in the form of edification institutions, or the *Bible college*.



* + 1. Originally, Bible colleges were the private enterprises of an individual Christian, or group of Christians, who created these institutions because they desired to provide the means for young men and women to receive a bible-centered education.



* + 1. In the 1930’s, however, the issue of money arose and men who ran these colleges began asking churches to contribute to their Bible programs, which they claimed were *needed* to *train preachers*.



* + - 1. Like the creators of the M.S., these men were asking churches to pool their money under the oversight of the college so that it could take the oversight of their money and do their work of edifying/teaching brethren to become preachers and teachers for the local churches.



* + - 1. As was true when the MS was created, this form of institutionalism was sternly opposed by most churches of Christ, believing local churches could edify/teach their own members and train men to preach without the use of man-made institutions, or Bible colleges.



* + - 1. The debate was silenced for a time by WWII.
    1. When the war was over, they restarted their efforts with new tactics.



* + - 1. Instead of focusing on the Bible college, they began focusing on churches’ support of “orphan homes,” which churches were supporting in general and with little thought.



* + - 1. Why? N. B. Hardeman of FHC made the purposes of this shift in tactics clear in the **Gospel Advocate** stating, “The right to contribute to one (orphan home/benevolent institution) is the right to contribute to the other (Bible college/edification institution). They must stand or fall together.” (1947, p. 844).



* + - * 1. He was **right** in that *if* there was authority for churches to support and do their work through one of these institutions, they could do this through the other institution as well.
        2. For, their organizational structures were basically identical and their purposes similar in that both sought to be institutions through which local churches would do their work!
        3. Yet, certain brethren claimed he was **wrong**, however, in assuming it was right for churches to do their work through either of these institutions!
      1. Hardeman’s statement and work did successfully shift the debate away from the emotionally sour issue of church support of edification institutions/Bible colleges to the much more palatable emotions attached to local churches’ support of benevolent institutions/orphan homes.
         1. This was an effective tactic because many local churches were so *emotionally* *attached* to these benevolent institutions that no amount of sound biblical argumentation was going to get them to give up their support.
         2. So, the path was paved for churches to begin supporting the colleges because to be consistent, they could not reject the Bible college while supporting the *orphan home*.
  1. The next cause of division among churches of Christ was the issues of benevolent institutions, or whether the local church was authorized to do its work of benevolence through an institution.



* + 1. This division came because certain brethren argued that the benevolent institution had the same biblical problems that the MS and the Bible college had!
       1. Local churches in the N.T. did their own work.



* + - 1. The benevolent institution took away local churches’ oversight of their money and work and meant they were doing nothing more than contributing to an institution that was overseeing their money and doing their work of benevolence for them.



* + 1. Institutional-minded debaters were elated that this tactic had worked because it was much easier to argue for church support of institutions that housed and helped “poor little starving orphans” than it was to argue that local churches needed a man-made institution to train their preacher and teachers.
       1. They would often argue that if churches did not support these institutions, these orphans would be left to “starve in the streets,” which was a lie because those who opposed the institutions were arguing that these orphans should be cared for by individual families, which is far more efficient and what an “orphan” would want.
       2. The tactic worked in that most churches of Christ held to their support of benevolent institutions and were led by consistency to support Bible colleges as well!
    2. Because certain brethren rejected this, while most churches of Christ accepted it, tensions arose and division followed.



* + - 1. For, support of these institutions became the litmus test for soundness in the faith.
      2. If you rejected these institutions, you were branded a false teacher, anti, orphan hater, etc.!
      3. But it has also backfired in that most of these same churches now support institutions made for preaching the gospel, while others are now using instrumental music in their worship, meaning churches of Christ have now regressed to become Disciples of Christ/Christian churches.

1. **Are there Biblical problems with church support of institutions:**



* 1. Local church support of man-made institutions creates an unscriptural **“middleman”** between the local church and the work it is supposed to do. (see chart)



* + 1. Just as is true in buying products, so in Bible matters, we want to eliminate the middleman.
    2. Explain why we want to eliminate the middleman.
    3. The institution is an unscriptural middleman because it stands between the local church and the work the local is commanded by God to do.



* + - 1. **Middleman institutions take away the glory rightfully God’s, and showcase man’s wisdom**.
      2. These *middleman* institutions were built to centralize the funds and oversight of the work that God has given to the local churches.
    1. Why did faithful brethren reject this arrangment, because there is no N.T. authority for local churches doing their work through a *middleman* institution, which is a very serious matter (1 Cor. 4:6 – “Now these things, brethren, I have figuratively applied to myself and Apollos for your sakes, so that in us **you may learn not to exceed what is written**, so that no one of you will become arrogant in behalf of one against the other.”).



* + - 1. There is no **N.T. command** requiring or permitting local churches to build and/or support institutions, the middleman, to do their work.



* + - 1. There is no **N.T. statement** requiring or permitting local churches to build and/or support man-made institutions, the middleman, to do their work.



* + - 1. There is no **approved, N.T. example** of local churches building or supporting man-made institutions to do their work.



* + - 1. There is no **necessary inference** (unavoidable conclusion) **in the N.T.** requiring or permitting local churches to build or support *middleman institutions* to do their work.



* 1. Faithful brethren rejected institutionalism because *middleman* *institutions* deny that the local church is all-sufficient, or completely adequate, completely able, to do the work God has given it to do.



* + 1. The Bible shows that local churches are all-sufficient, or completely adequate in design, to do their God-given work of evangelism.



* + - 1. They determined for themselves what evangelistic work they would do (Acts 11:22-24 – “The news about them reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and **they sent Barnabas off to Antioch**. 23 Then when he arrived and witnessed the grace of God, he rejoiced and **began to encourage them all** with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord; 24 for he was a good man, and full of the Holy Spirit and of faith. And **considerable numbers were brought to the Lord**.”).



* + - 1. They selected their own preachers (Acts 11:22-24)



* + - 1. They sent the preacher where they determined (Acts 11:22-24).



* + - 1. They supported their preachers as they saw fit (Phil. 4:15-16 – “You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church **shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone**; 16 for even in Thessalonica **you** **sent a gift** more than once for my needs.”)



* + - 1. They sent their support directly to the preacher (Phil. 4:15-16; 2 Cor. 11:8-9).



* + - * 1. **F.W. Smith**: “While the New Testament shows church cooperation in mission work, it was simply and only such cooperation as each congregation sending directly by one of its own messengers its contribution to the evangelist in the field (Phil. 4:15-16).” (**Gospel Advocate**, July 1, 1920)



* + - * 1. **C.D. Plum**: “Under the supervision of the officers of the church, mission work is carried on directly through the church. The money for the missionary goes direct from the church to the missionary in the field (Phil. 4:15). If there had been a better way than this, the Lord would have told us so.” (**Gospel Advocate**, Feb. 4, 1920)



* + - 1. They received reports from their preacher concerning the work they were commissioned to do (Acts 14:26-27).



* + - 1. There was no middleman preaching institution involved!



* + 1. Local churches were all-sufficient, completely adequate in design, to do their God-given work of benevolence.



* + - 1. The Jerusalem church was able to do its own work of helping its needy (Acts 6:1-6).



* + - * 1. The elders of that church were in charge of assuring that the work was done.
        2. They selected qualified men from within the congregation to do the work.
        3. There is no evidence that they created a separate institution to care for those widows, scoured the countryside looking for widows to go into that institution, and then funded that institution to do their work!
      1. The brethren Antioch collected their own money and sent relief directly to the needy brethren in the churches of Judea (Acts 11:27-30 – “Now at this time some prophets came down from Jerusalem to Antioch. 28 One of them named Agabus stood up and began to indicate by the Spirit that there would certainly be a great famine all over the world. And this took place in the reign of Claudius. 29 And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. 30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.”).



* + - 1. Ex: Churches sent relief directly to needy brethren in Jerusalem:



* + - * 1. Churches determined to help these brethren (Rom. 15:25-26 – “but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints. 26 For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”).
        2. They raised their own money and sent it by a messenger of their choosing (1 Cor. 16:1-4 – “Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. 2 On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. 3 When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem; 4 and if it is fitting for me to go also, they will go with me.”).
        3. There was no “middleman” benevolent institution involved!



* + 1. I could present these same points about the local church being all-sufficient to do its work of edifying, or teaching the word of God to its members (Acts 2:42, 46, etc.).
  1. Middleman institutions, though likely created from zeal for doing more for the Lord, are unnecessary additions to God’s revealed word.



* + 1. **James R. Cope**: “Each church can do every work God has commanded it to do and can do it effectively without subsidizing the so-called ‘Christian’ institution. There is no work which any human ‘Christian’ institution does *because it receives church donations* that each local church cannot do if none of these human ‘Christian’ institutions existed.” (“May Churches of Christ Support Human Institutions,” p. 6)

1. **The defense of local churches doing their work through man-made institutions:**



* 1. Some attempt to defend local churches doing their work through supporting man-made institutions by claiming that they are just a **means**, or **method**, used by the churches to do their work.
     1. **Guy N. Woods** (one of those men involved in switching the focus from the college to the orphan home): “When the Lord tells us to do a thing, but does not, in connection with the command, specify the *way,* then the *way* is in the field of expediency and is to be done in the *best way* that it can be at the time...There is not the remotest hint in the New Testament of any exclusive way or method by which this command [evangelism] is to be carried out.” (*Cooperation in the Field of Benevolence and Evangelism*)



* + - 1. Woods confuses “how” a certain work is to be done (methods/ways used) with “who” is to do that work, who is to determine and use those methods.
      2. He falsely equates **a middleman institution doing the work for the local churches** by taking **oversight of their money** and **overseeing the work** and **determining** for the local church **the ways and methods** of doing the work with the **local churches doing the work themselves**.
    1. **James R. Cope**: “For years we have been hearing that all the fuss among brethren is over ***how*** the work God has commanded is to be done. *This is simply not true!* The whole issue turns on the matter of *who* is to do *what God commanded*. This necessarily involves the question of whether or not merely making a donation to a human institution is the *action* God commanded a local church to perform. The question to be settled is whether a local church shall do the work God commands it to do or surrender its God-appointed obligation to somebody else…*This is the issue*.” (“May Churches of Christ Support Human Institutions,” 3-4)



* + 1. Consider: “The Issue: Who will do the work?”



* + - 1. Will God’s divine institution, the local church, do the work (so God gets the glory)?



* + - 1. Or, will an institution of human origin do the work?



* 1. Point Illustrated: Parents are commanded to raise their children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4, etc.).
     1. Parents can and do use various *means* and *methods* in fulfilling this responsibility.
     2. Would parents be doing their God-given work of raising their children by giving the care of their children over to an institution and just contributing money to it?
        1. Of course not! We all know that doing that would be shirking their responsibility and putting it on someone else!
        2. When a church supports an institution to do their work of evangelism, benevolence, or edification, that church is derelict in its duty, giving up its oversight and obligations to another!
     3. **Foy E. Wallace, Jr.** summed it up well in saying: “The organization argument has been concisely stated in one sentence, which is eminently true, and is a safe rule of action, namely: **Any organization larger than the local church or smaller than the local church is an unscriptural organization through which to do the work of the church**. Indeed, there are methods of doing what is commanded, but they must be the church’s methods, and within the scope of the thing commanded.” (***The Certified Gospel***, 134).

CONCLUSION:

1. I hope this lesson has helped you appreciate the seriousness of *institutionalism*, given you a clearer understanding of why it caused division, and shown why we must continue to oppose it.
2. I want to offer the invitation now for anyone who would desire to give their live to Jesus in faith and obedience by F-R-C-B-LF.