

Institutionalizing the Church (2)

Changes Created by Institutionalizing the Church

Introduction:

1. “It seems many think of the church as something like a little red wagon. ‘Established on Pentecost’—it stood ready to roll, and people could jump in and ride to heaven. But somewhere along the line a side-rail broke, an axle was bent, the tongue came loose, and finally a wheel fell away. Martin Luther tried to put the wheel back on, but further bent the axle in his effort. Others replaced the tongue with a new but different instrument—unsuited to the purpose and function of the original tongue. Alas, the church was broken down and out of service.

Then Campbell and Stone determined to restore the church. They straightened the axle, replaced the tongue with an original model, repaired the side-rail and put the wheel back in place. Now people could again ride home to heaven.”

2. This is the parody that Robert Turner used 52 (1964-2017) years ago to illustrate how some people think of the church as an institution that people get in to take them to heaven.

3. But the church is not an institution or organizational entity that saves. It is saved people.

4. The word “church” is simply a collective noun like herd, group, covey or crowd. It refers to that group of people who confess Jesus as the Christ (Matt. 16:18), who call on him for the forgiveness of their sins (1 Cor. 1:2) and who, because they are purchased with His blood, (Acts 20:28) belong to Him (Titus 2:14).

5. Thus, the church of Christ, as described in Scripture, is not some institution that people get into, but simply those people who belong to Christ.

6. The tendency is however, to move toward institutionalizing the church. What are some of the signs of this transformation? How can we know that we are not actually participating in the transformation from organism to organizational entity? May I suggest that we compare ourselves with the church as it is described in the N.T. and see if we are institutionalizing it?

Discussion:

I. Changes in the name of the church.

A. Before, the church had no exclusive name. There was no institution to name.

B. The people of God were described with various descriptive designations.

1. The church of God (1 Cor. 1:2) or God’s church.

2. The body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24).

3. The bride, the wife of the Lamb (Rev. 21:9, Eph. 5:22ff).

4. The temple of God (Eph. 2:21).

5. God’s household (Eph. 2:19).

6. The church of Christ (Rom. 16:16) or Christ’s church.

7. The way (Acts 9:2).

C. Individually they were called . . .

1. Disciples (Acts 11:26).

2. Christians (Acts 11:26).
 3. Saints (1 Cor. 1:2; Phil. 1:1).
 4. Brethren (Gal. 6:1).
 5. Sons (children) of God (Gal. 3:26).
- D. When the church is institutionalized an exclusive name must be given to distinguish it from other institutions. Denominationalism illustrates this well.
1. Groups denominate themselves Red Wagon, Black Wagon, Green Wagon.
 2. Individuals denominate themselves Red Wagon Christian. Black Wagon Christian. Green Wagon Christian.
 3. Some institutionalize the church of Christ, thus "Church of Christ Christians," "Church of Christ Preachers."

II. Changes in the organization of the church.

- A. Before, the church universal was organized solely under the headship of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23).
1. The church was composed of individual Christians each acknowledging Jesus as the Christ the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:18) thus, they made Him Lord in their lives.
 2. Each Christian submitted him/herself to Christ as the authority in their life.
- B. Before institutionalization, localized groups of Christians, having agreed to work together as a team to do the work Christ had given them to do, organized themselves under the leadership of those designated elders, overseers (bishops) or pastors (shepherds).
1. Examples of congregations so organized (Acts 11:30; Acts 15; Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1).
 2. Special qualifications (1 Tim. 3:1ff; Titus 1:5ff).
 3. Manner (1 Pet. 5:1ff).
 4. A plurality in each church (Acts 14:23).
 5. That these terms all referred to different aspects of the same function is evident in (Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1, 2).
- C. When the church is institutionalized the organization changes.
1. The church in its universal sense is thought of as composed of different congregations. It becomes a "churchhood" rather than a "brotherhood."
 - a. In most instances congregations in specific regions are grouped together. For example some group congregations together in "synods," others in "dioceses."
 - b. New designations are used to identify the authorities in these synods or dioceses. Some borrow the term "bishop." The designation no longer refers to a leader in a local church. "Bishop" becomes the designation used of a leader over a diocese or a synod. Others may be called "cardinals," "Pope," or some other such title.
 - c. Why are such never mentioned in Scripture? Such offices never existed.
 2. At the local level congregations are now organized as the institution prescribes. The plan of congregational appointment of those known as elders/bishops/overseers /pastors/shepherds is given up for institutional appointment of a pastor.

III. Changes in the beliefs (creed) of the church.

- A. Before, the simple text of Scripture was the statement of beliefs.
 - 1. The doctrine of Christ as revealed in Scripture was the authority.
 - 2. Each individual voluntarily submitted themselves to the apostles' doctrine as communicating the teachings of Christ (Acts 2:42; Eph. 2:20).
- B. When the church is institutionalized particular interpretations of Scripture, key doctrines, select teachings become the standard. Whatever the institution decides becomes the authority. Generally institutions change their teachings and practices to accommodate present day cultural standards. You may have read such statements regarding stem-cell research, abortion, homosexual practices, women's roles, etc. Institutions issue statements of belief for the organization. Scripture itself is no longer sufficient as a statement of beliefs.

Conclusion:

1. "Does all this really matter? Can't we just agree to be kind and love one another? Can't we just overlook these differences? Does it really matter anyway?"
2. How can we change our perception of the church at such a fundamental level of its definition and it have no significance?
 - a. Does it make a difference if we are loyal to Christ or to an institution?
 - b. Does it make a difference if we are organized as God designed or if we create some other structure? God has a work for us to do and He has given the organizational structure that accomplishes that work. Will our way work better than God's?
 - c. Does it make a difference if we are disciplined by the teachings of Christ or disciplined by some institution?
3. I think it makes a difference to the Lord. It makes a difference to me. I think it makes a difference in the purpose and work of the church. We will talk more about that later.
4. Would you give your allegiance to the Lord this morning? You can be a Christian without being a member of any institution or denomination.