

We Do Not Support Institutions

What is “Institutionalism”? An Institution is an established organization of people with a specific (benevolent) purpose. It could be anything; a coffee club, Rotary Club, or the like. In spiritual terms, it is usually a group with a beneficial purpose. Institutionalism is the term we use to describe, within a church, the direct support of an established organization with work given or appropriated by that church. Within congregations in the United States that identify themselves as churches of Christ, 85% identify themselves as institutional in practice, and 15% identify themselves as non-institutional¹.

To discuss this issue, we could describe it as an agency that seeks to do the work of the church. The church is charged with very limited work according to Scripture. We are to care for brethren (Benevolence); we are to educate brethren for spiritual works (Edification); we are to teach the lost about the Gospel (Evangelism). Institutionalism seeks to insert a agency into this work; to

What is Institutionalism?

Using “devices” to accomplish church purposes

- Church structure **popes and church councils**
- Worship **musical instruments**
- Doctrinal purity..... **creeds and catechisms**
- Spiritual family bonding **social programs**
- Benevolence **orphanages and rest homes**
- Edification **church schools**
- Evangelism **missionary societies**

accomplish the work of benevolence, it creates agencies such as orphanages or old folks homes to accomplish this work. To the work of edification, it creates schools and preacher schools. For the work of evangelism, it sponsors newspapers, tv shows, or radio programs.

Many brethren see great benefit in this methodology. Some benefits are financial; a pooling of resources for greater ability. There are also the social benefits of engaging with more brethren. With regards to structure, smaller congregations can participate in works they could not do on their own. Ultimately, all goals could be achieved at greater levels

In the 1950s and 1960s, churches of Christ in the United States divided over this issue. Because of this division, the Sunset church of Christ identifies itself as a “Non-Institutional” congregation on our website. This means, not only do we not use agency to fulfill the work of the church, we teach that it is an error to do so. We do so for four reasons:

1. Authority: We do not have God’s permission
2. Results: It always progress into further digression
3. Focus: It makes worldly spiritual things
4. Division: It create division among brethren.

¹ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_churches_of_Christ_\(non-institutional\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_churches_of_Christ_(non-institutional))

AUTHORITY: There are two rather straightforward points to consider. First, the pattern of the New Testament church was that they used NO organizations to fulfill their obligations or duties. Second, we are NOT allowed to “add to or take away from” the pattern of the church (1 Corinthians 4:6, Revelation 22:18-19). The pattern of the church is perfect, and therefore the absence of the institution doing the work of the church is not a mistake.

RESULTS: Churches that accept the ideology of institution ALWAYS digress into other problems. Institutional churches move into liberal ideologies such as unqualified workers (women serving as deacons and evangelists), unauthorized worship (musical instruments), and other such innovations. Jesus said that we can know a false prophet (or teacher) by their fruits; so it is with institutionalism (Mathew 7:15-20).

FOCUS: Why were institutions created? Because the church “needs help”? Because they can do it better? When Abraham was promised a son (Isaac), he believed that in some way God was incapable of fulfilling His promise, and Abraham brought forth a son of error, Ishmael. So it is with institutionalism, which looks at the purpose of the church and decides that the pattern is insufficient to the purpose. In this case we are missing the mark of 1 Corinthians 3:7, which tells us that when we follow the pattern, GOD causes the work to be effective. Institutionalism focuses not on the will of God, but the outcome (the ends justifying the means).

DIVISION: When institutions are introduced in the church, division is ALWAYS the result. In the 1800s the institution of the missionary society and the musical instrument split congregations the Lord’s church. In the 1950s another great division occurred among brethren when institutions such as schools, orphanages, radio programs and missionary groups were supported by churches. NO ONE teaches that these things are NECESSARY; instead, some see them as a liberty allowed. If that is true, they would still not be allowed because of the division they create (Romans 14:15, 1 Corinthians 1:10).

We do not support institutions that do the work of the church. It is our work to care for the saints, to edify the saints, and to preach to the lost. We do it to glorify God, and we have faith that doing it according to the pattern results in the work accomplished. We believe that faith works.