

INSTITUTIONALISM

Text: Acts 14:23

INTRO: One of the issues confronting the church today involves what is sometimes called "institutionalism." When we speak of institutional-ism, we are usually referring to questions re the work and/or organiza-tion of the church.

How did God intend for His people to organize themselves & what work has He authorized for His people to do in an organized way?

We will begin our study by reviewing how we determine God's will. How do the Scriptures authorize?

I. THE SCRIPTURES INDICATE GOD'S WILL IN THREE WAYS:

- A. Precept. A direct statement or command. Paul shows us by precept that Christians are to continue to observe the L.S. till Christ returns, 1 Cor 11:23-26.
- B. Example. Acts 20:7. At least 2 inspired men present.
- C. Implication/necessary inference. L.S. instituted at Passover. Leavening forbidden during Passover, therefore the bread Jesus used was unleavened bread.

II. AUTHORIZATION MAY BE EITHER GENERAL OR SPECIFIC

- A. Some precepts, examples & implications involve general authority. In the great commission, Jesus commanded the apostles to go into all the world, MK 16:15. Walk, horse, ship, etc.
- B. Some precepts, examples & implications are specific. They were not limited in their methods of going--but they were commanded to preach the gospel. That command did not authorize them to teach math, biology, tap dancing, etc. While such may be permissible in the realm of secular occupation, they certainly would not be obeying the great commission by doing so.
- C. We should note that the same precept, example or inference may sometimes contain both general & specific characteristics. Eph 5:19 specifies singing. A command

to sing does not authorize Christians to play a mechanical musical instrument in worship. Nor does it authorize us to hum, whistle or yodel. On the other hand, the passage is general re melody/harmony: soprano, alto, tenor, bass. If I play an instrument, I am doing something besides sing; something besides what I was instructed to do. But I can sing either bass or lead, & be doing exactly what I was commanded to do: sing.

III. APPLYING THESE PRINCIPLES TO INSTITUTIONALISM.

A. God authorized each local church to be organically independent. Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1-4. Biblically, the oversight of elders is exercised within the flock (congregation) where those elders are members.

B. There is no authority for brotherhood elders to oversee a brotherhood project. The basic difference between an independent congregation & one that is part of a denomination is organization. When there is a brotherhood eldership, board of directors or committee to which several congregations report or thru which they function, they have formed a denominational organization whether they call it that or not.

IV. PRINCIPLES APPLIED IN MATTERS OF CHURCH CO-OPERATION. N.T. congregations cooperated with each other in several ways, but never in such a way that the elders of one congregation exercised oversight of another congregation or its work.

A. When brethren moved from one place to another, congregations sometimes communicated with regard to their faithfulness, etc. Acts 18:27; 2 Cor 3:1; Acts 15:23-24.

B. Letters received from apostles & other inspired writers were circulated among churches so that all might have access to the truth contained in them. Col 4:16; Rev 2:29, etc.

C. Churches, in keeping with their ability, sent preachers out to other areas to preach and/or supported preachers

who were preaching in other areas, Acts 8:14; 13:1-6; 2 Cor 11:8; Phil 4:15. In this way, N.T. congregations were able to cooperate without forming missionary societies, boards of directors, or brotherhood elderships.

D. On at least 2 occasions, one or more N.T. congregations were victims of famine, unable to care for the physical needs of their own members & thus became the recipients of alms from other congregations, Acts 11:27-30; 1 Cor 16:1-3; Acts 24:17. These were emergency situations, not intentionally created "needs." The needs were temporary in nature. No permanent brotherhood committee or organization was set up to deal with such matters. The congregations sending alms selected their own messengers to take the alms,
1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 8:23.

V. PRINCIPLES APPLIED TO THE WORK OF THE CHURCH.

A. It is generally agreed that the work of a N.T. church involves 3 areas:

1. Teaching/preaching God's truth to saints & sinners to the full extent of its ability.
2. Assisting needy saints within its own membership.
3. Assisting a faithful church that is unable to provide for its own destitute members.

B. It has yet to be established that a church has any Scriptural obligation to provide recreation, entertainment, social & domestic functions, secular education, day care centers, & other non-spiritual services for members or non-members who are able to provide for themselves.

CONCLUSION: In closing, let us emphasize the principle set forth in Heb 7:12-14. Where God has not authorized, we dare not tread.

Shiloh, Mexia, TX, April 26, 1992
La Porte, TX, May 6, 1992 (meeting)
Susquehanna, Marietta, PA, January 7, 2001