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"Institutionalism"

BY LUTHER G. ROBERTS

(Condensed from a speech delivered at the Sunset
Church of Christ during the 1946 Annual
Dallas Lectures).

I want to express my gratitude to the brethren who arranged this program and to the Sunset church for the confidence evidenced in me in inviting me to speak on this series of services. Speaking on the subject assigned to me "puts me on the spot." On the other themes of this series there is little or no controversy among brethren, but on the subject of Institutions there is less understanding and unanimity. I am opposed to Institutionalizing the church.

There is a specious method of thinking or reasoning which we might refer to as condemning by labelling or name calling. Such terms as "foreigner," "northerner," "southerner," "negro-lover," "Republican," "politician," "laborite," "Campbellite," etc. In the same vein, we say, "institutionalism," with the implication that anything called by the term "institution" is wrong and can't be right. But we should tell what we mean, and explain the terms we use. As one brother put it, "We should not spurn without specifying," "nor damn without designating." What then is "institutionalism?" An "institution?" Webster defines these terms thus: "Institution," n., "an established society or corporation; an establishment, esp., one of a public character; a foundation; as a charitable institution." "Institutionalism, n. The upholding of institutions, of their usefulness, validity, or, in the case of established institutions, of their authority and sanctity."

There are divine and holy institutions such as the home, the church, marriage, baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Then there are human institutions, such as the religious paper, the colleges, etc. The home is of divine origin with a divine purpose, which is to bear and rear children in the love and fear of God. Of first importance in the home is to teach children to love, respect, and obey God.

The civil government is ordained of GOD to protect the good and to punish evil doers. The responsibility of its citizens is to support it.

The church of the Lord is divine in origin and purpose. Its purpose is to preach the gospel, edify the church and support the needy. The church is the saved, those called out of sin to follow Christ. The church in the general sense of the term means the redeemed in the aggregate. In the local sense of the term, it means the saved in a given locality. The only organization of the church revealed in the New Testament is the local congregation. Each congregation was independent. The autonomy of the church must be maintained. We cannot have scripturally any organization which usurps the functions of the church.

There are numerous human institutions. Religious denominations are human institutions formed to emphasize particular ideas in religion. There are missionary societies, human in origin, which propose to do the work of the

church. They stand between the church and the work being done. The organization supersedes and usurps the work of the church. It, therefore, supplants, displaces and controls the local churches. Such institutions are unauthorized by the scriptures. They are wrong for they rob the church of its glory (Eph. 3:20, 21).

Religious periodicals exist:

1) To make a profit for the publishers. The papers do not, perhaps, make the profit, but are instrumental in doing so in that they serve as mediums of advertising merchandise which is sold for profit.

2) To further the Cause of Christ; to strengthen and fortify the church, and to stay the tide of digression and error; these are some of the purposes of publications among us today. "For whatever may be the subsidiary motives for publishing a gospel paper, the primary purpose must be the glory of God through Christ in the salvation of the lost, through the proclamation of the gospel." G. H. P. Showalter, *George Pepperdine Colleges Lectures*, p. 97.

"There is no way to estimate the good that has been accomplished by the various publications of the Restoration Movement, nor to measure the value that has been and is being done by those who issue the **Gospel Advocate, Firm Foundation, Christian Worker, and The Christian Leader.**" Coleman Overby, *Tulsa Lectures*, p. 105. To this list might be added the **Christian Chronicle**, and others. "These publications have been mighty weapons in staying the flood tide of digression which at its highest crest all but swept the church from its moorings." (Ibid., p. 105).

3) These statements are true enough, and the papers in their rightful place perform a great work. But they must not be bound on the church. The church teaching and practice comes from the word of God. The papers must not control the churches nor invade their autonomy.

4) These publications help individuals, members of the body of Christ, and in so doing they help to strengthen the church.

It is the duty of the church and christians to care for needy dependents (Jas. 1:27). This may be done in one or two ways. Individually or collectively.

Luke 10 gives an example of caring for a needy person by an individual. Matt. 19:21 directed a young man to sell all that he had and give to the poor and follow Christ. In 1 Cor. 16:1-3, 2 Cor. 8 and 9, the churches are directed to give to support the poor saints.

It has been found that this can be done as a body as the church, more thoroughly and efficiently than by individuals.

3) What was the method used? It is not stated. It was done decently and in order or arrangement (1 Cor. 14:40). If one says orphans must be taken into private homes, then we must take in the "widows in affliction" also. The homes for the fatherless, aged, are not comparable to the Missionary Society. The society destroys the autonomy of the church; the homes do not. The Society controls the churches; the homes do not. We can help the orphans in a home and care for the aged dependents in a home on the same basis that we can help a needy person in a private home or that we can help a needy servant of that home.

These homes are held in trust by trustees for use by the members of the churches in doing the work the Scriptures teach Christians to do.

4) How shall they be controlled? A home may be organized by a congregation and be directed by the elders of that congregation. This home, under the direction of the elders of a local church, may receive support from other congregations. In this manner churches cooperate in the work of providing for the needy.

Another method is for a group of individual brethren to be selected as a board of trustees to hold in trust the property of the home for use by members of the churches, and to oversee or direct the affairs of the home. But someone may object that this method is not found in the Scripture. Neither is the other one. Again, someone suggests that would be an organization other than the local church. But it is simply a group of brethren overseeing or directing the work of feeding, clothing, and providing shelter for a group of needy.

In the New Testament we read of a group of brethren selected by the churches to go about among the churches, having been sent by the churches to take up a collection for poor saints (2 Cor. 8:16-23). What kind of an organization was this? It was not the local church. It was a group (a committee) of brethren representing the churches that sent them out to do a work on behalf of the churches. This is all the brethren do who serve as trustees and directors of the work of caring for the needy.

c. **Bible Colleges or Christian Schools.**

1) Man is a two-fold being—the outer and the inner man. (1 Cor. 4:16; 5:1-10). The outer man is decaying day by day; the inward man is renewed day by day. The inner man is of more importance than the outward man.

2) Schools are human institutions to teach, instruct, train the individual. This should certainly include the moral and spiritual as well as the intellectual and physical.

3) Colleges and religion go hand in hand. The oldest college found in the annals of history is thus associated. Seven hundred years before Christ's birth there was a college in Jerusalem. The "School of the Prophets" existed in the days of the Kings of Israel. Paul, the apostle, attended school in Jerusalem in his day taught by Dr. Gamaliel (Acts 22:3). Later, Paul taught the word of the Lord daily in the school of Tyrannus for two years (Acts 19:9-10).

Colleges today are supported by members of the churches of Christ where secular subjects are taught along with the Bible by teachers who are Christians.

1) They are not church schools. The church would have to be a denomination with earthly headquarters, a legislative body and other denominational machinery before these colleges could be properly dominated church schools.

2) But to whom do they belong? Who owns them? Not the church; not the trustees; they hold them in trust for those who use them. Brother G. C. Brewer says, "They (the colleges) exist for a purpose and they belong to that purpose and to those who engage in the work and fulfill the purpose." **Contending for the Faith**, p. 221. Brother E. R. Harper states, "I am going to take this position that they belong to 'A Noble Cause.' They are the property of this 'Universal Principle of Preparedness for Service.' " **Tulsa Lectures**, p. 114.

To whom does this meeting house belong? To the congregation? No. It is held in trust by trustees for those who use it for the purpose set out in the deed.

3) What is the purpose of the Bible college? The purpose is not to take the place of the church; it is not to control the church. The purpose of the Bible college is, first to aid the parents or the home in educating the children properly.

"The Bible being the greatest textbook of morals in the universe, it is but a matter of simple reason that it should be prescribed in a course of study by a school seeking to reach the heart, as well as the mind." Foy E. Wallace, Jr., **The Bible Banner**, September, 1938, p. 2.

In the second place, it is the purpose of the schools to further the Cause of Christ; to fortify and strengthen the church, by teaching, instructing, indoctrinating, in the faith, in the word of the Lord, those who attend the colleges. Since it is right for the parents to teach the word of the Lord in the home, it is right for parents and others interested to teach the same in the schools established for this purpose. In helping individual Christians, the church is helped. For the Christians are the church. Every boy or girl, every man or woman who is a Christian and is taught the Bible in the Bible college helps the church.

"When properly managed, our schools become the greatest aid the church has in preparing young men and women for the work of preaching and teaching the gospel of Christ." E. R. Harper, **Tulsa Lectures**, p. 114. "We have seen that the work of these institutions is not to take the place of the church, but to educate our young people for service." Ibid., p. 114. In summing up the purpose of the schools, Brother Harper stated the following as that purpose: "To educate our boys and girls without the evils of worldly institutions, to create a safe environment conducive to right living, to develop Christian character, to encourage Christian living, and to prepare young people that the church may be able to use them in her program of work as set forth in the Bible." Ibid., p. 116.

d. Who should support, and how should the schools be supported?

1) Support them with free-will contributions. Individuals who are Christians should support them liberally; yes, **must** support them if they are supported. They must be supported if the young people in the church and from homes of Christians are going to be saved from Modernism and Atheism. Young people of the church are going to college somewhere, if not to Christian schools, then to schools where Atheism and Modernism are taught, and where they are sneered out of their faith.

2) What about the congregations sending money to support the schools? All the schools that I know anything about (I attended one of them many years, and two others some months) have at some time in their history accepted contributions from congregations as such. This in itself would not make it right. But it shows that many think it right. The View Point Church of Christ, Milan, Tennessee, gave \$50.00 to Freed-Hardeman College to pay my tuition for my first half year in college. One of the elders of that church at that time told me recently that he and the other two elders decided to send the money

and sent it to the college to pay my tuition for the half year.

But this ties the congregation and the college together as an organization. one says. No. the View Point church is still independent from Freed-Hardeman College. I was with this church in a meeting last summer. When individuals contribute to the college, does that tie them to it in an organizational manner? It does not. Then how could it so bind the church and college together? They are already bound together by a common trust, a mutual interest. If a business firm makes a contribution to a college, does that form an organizational connection between the business firm and the college? Of course not. The college should be supported by those interested in the salvation of souls and Christian education for boys and girls as long as the school is true to the teaching of the word of the Lord.

However, the college does not have the right to invade the autonomy of the church and demand that the church contribute to the support of the college. As long as the Sunset church has the prerogative to refuse to meet any demand of any college, the college is not institutionalizing this church.

DANGERS OF INSTITUTIONALIZING THE CHURCH

1. There are dangers connected with institutions; dangers that the institutions will be abused and prove abortive. This we all admit. Any instrument for good is a potential danger for destruction. But it is also a potential danger for the destruction of humanity. The same is true of the home, the automobile, etc.

The abuse of a thing does not, therefore, make the thing wrong or the use of a thing wrong. If so, nothing good could be used. For every good thing has been abused. Christianity is counterfeited, but it is not, therefore, wrong to teach Christianity.

2. There is danger in institutions, institutionalism.

There is danger of the paper controlling the church, but that is one reason for having elders in the church. There is danger of a preacher gaining control of the church, and hence another reason for elders in every church. There is danger of the schools gaining control of the church; but only if churches fail in their duty. "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty" and of truth also.

2) There is danger that the Bible college will lead the church into digression. That this is a possibility we all admit. But there is also danger that a church may be led into digression by a preacher, an elder, or a sister congregation. If the churches indorse false doctrine and tolerate false teachers, the church itself will go into digression. If the members of the churches permit the schools to be engulfed by error, the churches, no doubt, will be swept into the stream of apostasy also.

There are safeguards to keep the college from going into errors in doctrine and practice as there are to keep the congregation from apostatizing. For instance, I secured a copy of the charter of Abilene Christian College. I want to quote a statement from it as to the qualifications of the trustees of the school. Article II of the Charter states:

"This corporation is created for the following purposes, to-wit: The establishment and maintenance of a college

for the advancement of education in which arts, sciences, languages, and Holy Scriptures shall always be taught, together with such other courses of instruction as shall be deemed advisable by the Board of Directors, and which shall be managed and controlled as hereinafter set forth by a Board of Directors, each of whom shall be a member of a congregation of the church of Christ, which takes the New Testament as its only and sufficient rule of faith, worship and practice, and rejects from its faith, worship and practice everything not required by either precept or example, and which does not introduce into the faith, worship and practice as a part of the same or as adjuncts thereto any supplemental organization or anything else not clearly and directly authorized in the New Testament either by precept or example."

This charter provides that each member of the board be a member of the church in good standing, but it also defines the church of which he must be a member. This charter further provides that in case the board of directors fails to continue, "said property shall revert to the original donors in proportion to their donations." This would seem to make the college as safe from digression as the church, if not safer.

When it is estimated correctly that 80 per cent of preachers and church leaders come out of the Bible colleges, can their importance be questioned?

It is a fact that we are responsible to God for teaching the gospel of Christ to our generation. We will not be held responsible for the generation to come only **in that** wherein we fail to prepare the rising generation in heart and mind for their tasks and responsibilities to their generation. But the obligation is ours to preach the message of Christ to this generation. Yes, this is the work of the church, but those doing this work must be educated where they are trained for, and inspired to do, this work as the church of the Lord.

Let the publications, colleges, preachers, elders, and members of the body of Christ generally stand forthright for the "faith once for all delivered to the saints," for the truth that shall make us free, and for the church against any teaching or movement, or institution of any kind, that would invade and destroy or hamper the church of the Lord. Let us seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

Finally, let me reiterate, that although these human institutions which do not displace or control the church, may assist and help the home in its work; although they may help to strengthen, fortify, and bolster the Cause of Christ; yet, the church in all of her primitive, pristine purity must ever be considered the greatest institution on earth, **for she is**, having been purchased by the blood of the Son of God; having as her holy mission the deliverance or salvation of mankind from sin and eternal death; and having as her destiny the eternal and supernal glory with the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, the angelic hosts with all the redeemed ones; she must reign supreme in the hearts and lives of those who constitute her during the milleniums of time.