

The Institutional Issues in the Twenty-first Century

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The Unity of the Spirit

It amazed me, when I was a boy, to hear that there were 250 denominations in America. Charlie Brackett reports the existence of 35,500 “Christian denominations” in 2001. Through the years gospel preachers have pleaded for unity, but even the church of Christ is divided into groups which have no fellowship with each other. Mac Lynn identifies seven groups of churches of Christ in America based on doctrinal beliefs. Each group refuses to recognize the others as faithful to the Lord.

But in Ephesians 4:1-6 the apostle Paul besought Christians “to keep the unity of the Spirit.” This causes us to raise four questions regarding the unity of the Spirit. **What is it? Is it desirable? Is it possible? How can we achieve it?**

A Prayer

In John 17:20-21 the Lord prayed:

'I do not pray for these alone, but also for all those who will believe in Me through their word;

'that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me.

The Master’s prayer teaches that the unity of the Spirit is the same kind of unity that Jesus and His Father have. Jesus and His Father are not tied together in some organizational scheme despite doctrinal differences. Thus, the unity of the Spirit is not ecumenism. Nor do the Father and the Son just “agree to disagree agreeably” and to love each other in spite of their differences. The popular notion that love will cause us to overlook differences of faith and practice is not true unity. Rather, Jesus and the Father are truly one in nature, doctrine, and practice, and we must be one in these ways also.

Furthermore, the fact Jesus prayed that we all be one proves that such unity is both desirable and possible.

The desirability of the unity of the Spirit is further demonstrated by the fact Jesus observed it would lead people to believe in Him. As sectarian division has grown in America, so has unbelief.

How can we expect our unbelieving friends to accept the gospel, when Christians fail to agree on what constitutes the gospel?

The Unity of the Spirit

Prayer - John 17:20-21

Plea - 1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Plan - Ephesians 4:1-6

A Plea

Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment

(1 Corinthians 1:10).

The unity for which the apostle pleads includes speaking the same thing (unity of doctrine), having the same mind (the attitudes of faith toward the Word of God and love toward each other - Philippians 1:27; 2:3-4), and the same judgment (drawing the same conclusions on

matters of faith) (Ephesians 4:13).

Again, Paul's plea demonstrates that unity is both possible and desirable.

A Plan

*I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called,
with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*

There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling;

one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all (Ephesians 4:1-6).

In this great passage the beloved apostle first teaches us how to have peace (verses 1-3).

We can have peace without unity, but we cannot have unity without peace. "Peace" is the absence of turmoil, whereas "unity" is true spiritual oneness. I once had a friend who was an avowed atheist. We had peace but not unity.

Verses four through six contain the Spirit's platform upon which all Christians are to be united. This divine plan for unity has seven planks.

One Body

The body of Christ is his church (Ephesians 1:22-23). Christ has but one church (1 Corinthians 12:20). This is **unity of relationship**. We must not be joined to a human denomination. The Lord forbids sectarian allegiance and religious party names that reflect and demonstrate such loyalty (1 Corinthians 1:11-13).

One Spirit

The Holy Spirit is the divine Being who revealed all truth (John 16:13). Thus, we have **unity of revelation**. We must not accept any gospel other than the gospel of Christ (Galatians 1:6-9), whether it be found in the Book of Mormon, the Koran, or wherever.

The Divine Platform for Unity Ephesians 4:4-6	
One Body	Unity of Relationship
One Spirit	Unity of Revelation
One Hope	Unity of Purpose
One Lord	Unity of Authority
One Faith	Unity of Doctrine
One Baptism	Unity of Membership Requirements
One God	Unity of Worship

One Hope

"Hope" is desire plus expectation. The Christian's only hope is a home in heaven (1 Peter 1:3-5). This is **unity of purpose**. We do not look for a material kingdom on earth (premillennial-

ism) or a better earth (the social gospel).

One Lord

The term “Lord” means “ruler” or “master.” Jesus Christ “is Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). He claimed, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth” (Matthew 28:18). If we are to be one in Christ, we must have authority from Him for all we do and say (Colossians 3:17). We must have **unity of authority**.

One Faith

The “faith” is the body of doctrine delivered from God to His people (Jude 3), the Scriptures. The Lord expects us to have **unity of doctrine**. We must all believe and teach the same thing, the doctrine of Christ.

One Baptism

We gain entrance into Christ, into His body, the church, by means of water baptism (Romans 6:3-4; 1 Corinthians 12:13). We must all meet the **same membership requirements** to enjoy the blessings in Christ.

One God

Not only must we all worship the same God, we must worship Him in the same way, “in spirit and truth” (John 4:23-24). Worship that has no higher authority than human traditions is “vain” (Matthew 15:9). We must have **unity of worship**.

Conclusion

The sweet psalmist of Israel, David, sang:
*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is
For brethren to dwell together in unity!
It is like the precious oil upon the head,
Running down on the beard,
The beard of Aaron,
Running down on the edge of his garments.
It is like the dew of Hermon,
Descending upon the mountains of Zion;
For there the Lord commanded the blessing--
Life forevermore.(Psalm 133).*

It is good to get an inoculation when one is sick, but it is not pleasant. Chocolate candy is pleasant, but it is not good. The unity of the Spirit is both good and pleasant. It is something for our good that we enjoy. Let each of us determine to heed **The Prayer, The Plea, and The Plan** and work diligently to promote “the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

The Divine Pattern

Introduction

During the fifties and sixties, many brethren tried to justify unauthorized practices by claiming there is no New Testament pattern in these areas. For example, Athens Clay Pullias, who was then President of David Lipscomb University, wrote a tract entitled "Where There Is No Pattern."

Brethren sowed the wind and reaped the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7). During the sixties and seventies a group of brethren advocated fellowship between those of differing doctrines and practices, even to the fellowship of denominations, claiming there is no New Testament pattern of authority. One wrote, "Nowhere, nowhere, do I find a consistent diagram or blueprint of what life should be or what the church should be" (Sanders. 51).

Now, those who plead for a "new hermeneutic" (new way of understanding the Bible) teach that the life of Christ is the only pattern for the individual Christian and the church as a corporate body has no divine pattern to follow.

For the individual believer, Christ's perfect example remains the benchmark for his or her life. For the corporate body of Christ, there is no historical prototype of the church for duplication.... It is not a fixed, static institution. It has no once-for-all form (Shelly & Harris. 6).

We do not have to speculate about the practical application of this philosophy, for its authors unabashedly spell it out.

This principle has broad consequences for ecclesiology (the study of the church - KS). It says, for example, that the church need not have either explicit mandate or permission for everything it wishes to do (no need for divine authority - KS). The church may confidently ground its activities of compassion and service in the character of her head. In his passionate appeal for caring (cf. Matt. 25, et al.), Jesus not only releases but compels the modern church to find incrementally more effective ways to feed the hungry, cloth (sic) the needy, minister to the outcasts, and provide homes for the homeless.... Literacy programs, soup kitchens, drug dependency programs, and prison outreaches need no other justification than that, in such activities, the church takes on both the heart and demeanor of the one she calls Lord and Master (Ibid. 29).

Of course, this is simply the complete social gospel package with a new justification.

This leads us to inquire. Is there a New Testament pattern? If so, what is it? How may we find it? What are our responsibilities to it?

Age of the Fathers

During the age that God revealed His will to families through their fathers, the Lord God gave patterns he expected His servants to follow. For example, God gave Noah a pattern for the ark (Genesis 6:14-16), and Noah followed it in every part (verse 22). As the result he was righteous (Genesis 7:1) and was saved by faith (Hebrews 11:7). He is our example of obedient faith, and we must follow his example (Ibid).

Age of Moses

Likewise, in the age that God gave His law to Israel through Moses, He also revealed patterns that He demanded His people to follow. The Lord delivered to Moses a divine pattern for the tabernacle which he was to follow in every detail (Exodus 25:8-9,40). Moses and Israel were faithful to that pattern exactly as commanded (Exodus 39:42-43), and, as the result, “the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.” (Exodus 40:34-35) We are to imitate Moses’ faithfulness to the divine pattern (Hebrews 8:1-5).

Age of Christ

God now speaks to all men through His Son Christ Jesus (Hebrews 1:1-2; Acts 17:30-31). Has He given us a pattern to follow?

There Is a Pattern

The apostle Paul commanded His son in the faith, Timothy, “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me, in faith and love which are in Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 1:13). Indeed there is a divine pattern for Christians to follow.

What the Pattern Is

The term “pattern” means “an example, pattern … the pattern placed before one to be held fast and copied, model” (Thayer. 645) or “model, example … Rather in the sense standard” (Arndt & Gingrich. 856). In past generations most women sewed their own clothing. My mother would purchase a pattern and cloth, lay the pieces of the pattern atop the cloth as instructed, cut the cloth according to the pattern, and sew the pieces together according to the instructions. If she followed the pattern, she had a dress exactly the same shape as the one pictured on the package the pattern came in (Well, make allowances for deceptive advertising).

The apostle tells us the composition of the pattern. He commands, “Hold fast the pattern of sound words.” This blueprint is not a picture or a diagram. Rather, it is composed of words.

These words are “sound.” The term “sound” means “to be well, to be in good health … the sound, i.e., true and incorrupt doctrine” (Thayer. 634). The words are conducive to spiritual health. They are true and uncorrupted by that which is false. Whole wheat flour is sound, i.e., healthful. But add to it less than one percent arsenic, and it becomes deadly poison.

Paul even identifies the source of the pattern. He adds, “which you have heard from me.” Paul was an apostle of Christ (2 Timothy 1:1). As such, he received His words, not from men, but from Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12), by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 2:9-13; Ephesians 3:1-7). Thus, his words were “not … the word of men, but … in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe” (1 Thessalonians 2:13).

These words are true (John 17:17; Romans 3:3-4) and must be kept incorrupt from the traditions and teaching of men (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 John 9-11). Just as a little arsenic in whole wheat flour turns what is otherwise good into poison, a little human doctrine mixed with the apostolic doctrine results in condemnation.

What then is the pattern? **The totality of apostolic, i.e., New Testament (2 Corinthians 3:5-6) teaching on any subject is the divine pattern on that subject.** When we have diligently searched our New Testaments for all information on any biblical subject, we have found the

scriptural pattern on that topic.

Our Responsibility to the Pattern

The apostle commands us, “Hold fast the pattern.” The phrase “hold fast” means to “keep, preserve” (Arndt & Gingrich. 332). It is used to denote “stedfast (sic) adherence to faith, or the faith” (Vine. 2:223). We must faithfully, steadfastly follow the New Testament pattern on every biblical subject.

Our Attitude Toward the Pattern

The inspired apostle even reveals the attitudes we must maintain toward the divine pattern. We must act “in faith and love.”

* We must act by faith. “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). To act by faith is to follow the divinely revealed pattern in all respects. Noah did this and was saved by faith.

* We must also do this through love. To love the Lord is to obey Him (John 14:15).

Paul even identifies the object of this faith and love. He adds, “which are in Christ Jesus.” If my faith is in Christ Jesus rather than man, I will follow him, not human wisdom. If I love Him more than I love the approval of men, I will obey Him regardless of what men may say or do.

Conclusion

Those who have abandoned the New Testament pattern for their own ways are disobedient and demonstrate a lack of faith in and love for Jesus Christ. It is the height of arrogance to imagine that a mere uninspired man can improve on the divine pattern, the expression of the wisdom of God (cf. Isaiah 55:8-11; 1 Corinthians 1:25). “Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah” (Jude verse 11).

Let us resolutely determine to follow the divine pattern in every regard. As the Lord through Jeremiah commanded ancient Judah, “Thus says the Lord: ‘Stand in the ways and see. And ask for the old paths, where the good way is, And walk in it; Then you will find rest for your souls’” (Jeremiah 6:16). Be not as rebellious Judah, who in defiance to the Lord of hosts replied, “We will not walk in it” (Ibid), and received the divine punishment for their disobedience.

The Nature of Authority

Introduction

Two extremes in practice are found among brethren. The great majority of those who call themselves members of the church of Christ engage in activities unauthorized by Christ. A small minority refuse to engage in practices the Lord permits. Both extremes are caused by the same misunderstanding of the nature of divine authority.

Brethren who practice institutionalism think a practice is unauthorized unless it is specifically mentioned in Scripture. They correctly assert we engage in many practices not specifically mentioned in the Bible, such as the use of church buildings and song books. Thus, they argue, "We do lots of things without Bible authority."

There are some brethren who oppose the church using the class arrangement for teaching the Bible. They also think something must be expressly mentioned to be authorized. They argue:

There is not one verse in all the Bible that says one word about dividing an assembly into two or more classes with teachers teaching at the same time (Miller. 5).

Therefore, they conclude the class arrangement of teaching is unscriptural.

Both groups misunderstand the nature of scriptural authority. This nature may be stated as a proposition: **authority is both exclusive and inclusive**. In this lesson we will define, illustrate, prove, and apply this proposition.

Definitions

When I say authority is exclusive, I simply mean whatever the Lord has not authorized is excluded. If this is so, we cannot practice anything unless we can prove it is divinely authorized. It is not enough to ask, Where does the Bible condemn it? We must be able to prove the New Testament authorizes it.

By inclusive, I mean that whatever the Lord authorizes includes those things that are incidental to accomplishing what He authorizes. Thus, though a specific item may not be mentioned in Scripture, if it is necessary or aids what God requires or permits, and by using it we do nothing in addition to that which He authorized, the specific item is itself authorized.

If these principles are true, two important conclusions follow. Some things are sinful although not specifically condemned in Scripture. This is because they are unauthorized and thus excluded. On the other hand, it means some things are authorized and therefore pleasing to God, although not specifically mentioned. This is because they are incidental to accomplishing an authorized action.

Illustrations

Suppose a dad gives his teenage son a twenty dollar bill (first mistake) and tells him, "Son, go get a loaf of bread." Suppose the son stays gone three hours and comes home with the loaf of bread but no change from the twenty dollars. The father indignantly inquires, "Where have you been and where is my change?" The son replies, "Dad, I got the bread, but you didn't say not to go to the movies, so I used the change to go to a movie. And, of course, while I was there, I got popcorn, a soft drink, a hot dog and a candy bar." Would the dad be impressed with his son's logic? Or would he respond, "I didn't give you permission to use my money for anything but a

loaf of bread. You're grounded!" That's the exclusive nature of authority.

Now, let's try another scene. The dad gives his son a twenty dollar bill (slow learner) and again says, "Son, go get a loaf of bread." This time the son returns in ten minutes with \$18.50 change and a loaf of bread. The father inquires, "Son, how did you get back so fast?" His son replies, "Dad, it's just three blocks to the store. It doesn't take long to drive there." To which the dad replies, "Son, who told you to take the car? Why didn't you just walk?" To which Jr. replies, "Dad, you just told me to go get a loaf of bread; you didn't say how to go." This time the son was right. This is the inclusive nature of authority.

Proof

Is authority exclusive? We must "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17), i.e., by His authority. To do or teach those things unauthorized by the Lord is to leave God and be without Him (2 John 9-11). Yes, divine authority is exclusive. We must have divine authority for all we do.

But is divine authority also inclusive? The Lord commands, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). He didn't say how to go; He just said "go." We have approved examples in the New Testament of a man walking and riding in a chariot to preach the gospel (Acts 8:29-31) and of men sailing in a ship to preach the gospel (Acts 13:1-4). The Lord said nothing about running, riding in a chariot, or sailing in a ship, but these are just means of going. In using these methods of transportation, the preachers did nothing in addition to "go preach the gospel." So today, if I drive a car or fly in an airplane to a preaching engagement, I'm just doing what the Lord authorized in Mark 16:15. If I buy a passport to go to a foreign country to preach, that is incidental to the command, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature." Yes, divine authority is inclusive.

Application

The Lord told Noah to build an ark of gopherwood (Genesis 6:14-16). Although the Lord did not mention tools such as a hammer or saw, such tools were incidentally authorized in the command to "Make yourself an ark." But Noah could not have used any wood other than gopherwood and pleased the Lord. Though God did not say "Thou shalt not" make the ark of any other wood, when He specified gopherwood as the material for the ark, all other kinds of wood were



Excluded or Included?	
Authorized Action: Build an Ark of gopherwood	Excluded: Any Other Kind of Wood
Included: Hammer or Saw	

excluded.

The Lord has also told us the kind of music he wants Christians to use in worship in the New Testament age. He commands us to sing (Ephesians 5:18-19). This authorized action includes everything necessary and incidental to carrying it out. Thus, although the Bible does not mention them, we are authorized to use song books, a song leader, four part harmony, and a pitch pipe. When we use these aids, we do nothing in addition to what the Lord has authorized - sing. But, instrumental music, another kind of music than that which the Lord authorizes, is excluded. This is not because the Lord forbids instrumental music in worship. He simply did not authorize its use in worship in this age.

Conclusion

Thus, authority is both exclusive and inclusive. This answers the two common fallacies concerning the authority of the Scriptures. Just because a practice is not specifically condemned does not necessarily mean God approves it. It must be authorized. On the other hand, just because a practice is not specifically mentioned in Scripture does not mean it is wrong. It may be incidental to an authorized activity. If we will apply these principles in faith and love to the issues that divide us, we will be able to resolve them and be one in Christ.

Excluded or Included?	
Authorized Action: Sing	Excluded: Play
Included: Books, Leader, Parts, Pitch Pipe	

Four Views of the Church

There are four common ways of thinking of the church of the Lord, and each has a profound effect on the practices of those who hold the view.

Catholic

Our Catholic friends use the word “Church” to denote the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The one Church of Christ, as a society constituted and organized in the world, subsists in (subsistit in) the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter and the bishops in communion with him. Only through this Church can one obtain the fullness of the means of salvation since the Lord has entrusted all the blessings of the New Covenant to the apostolic college alone whose head is Peter (**Compendium** 162).

As the result of this totally unscriptural viewpoint, they trust the Catholic leaders (Pope, Arch Bishops, Bishops, Priests) to give them the correct, even infallible, answer to every question pertaining to salvation. “The Church has authority from God to teach regarding faith and morals, and in her teaching she is preserved from error by the special guidance of the Holy Ghost” (Gibbons. 54). They erect a world wide, earthly organization, of vast wealth and power, headed by the Pope in the Vatican.

Christ condemned the idea of a clergy separate and above the laity.

But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant (Matthew 23:8-11).

Protestant Denominations

The Protestant denominations employ the term “church” to mean a mystical, invisible body comprised of the various denominations.

Billy Graham stated:

God has His people in many churches and denominations, and I cannot agree with those who condemn all churches but their own. All true believers affirm the basic truths of the Gospel, regardless of their denomination.

Protestants think of the one church as a “mystical body” of which the various denominations are parts.

Sometimes sectarians appeal to the first clause of John 10:16 as “proof” that Jesus approves denominationalism. The Master stated, “And other sheep I have which are not of this fold.” Is the Lord stating that He has sheep in various denominations? The remainder of the verse explains, “them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be one flock and one shepherd.” If the flock of the verse represents the church, and it does, then the passage plainly teaches Jesus has only one church. And that is exactly the point. We have but one Chief Shepherd, Jesus Christ, and He has but one flock, His church. Jesus’ sheep are those who hear His voice, i.e., who believe and obey His word. He had sheep from among the Jews at that time, since He went

only to Israel during His personal ministry (Matthew 15:24). But later His gospel would go to Gentiles also, and many of them would receive it (Acts 13:45-48). Now all, both Jew and Gentile, are one in Christ (Ephesians 2:14-18). Rather than authorizing sectarianism, the passage declares the unity of the Lord's church.

Another passage perverted to approve denominationalism is John 15:1-8, the parable of The Vine and the Branches. Sectarians contend denominations are the branches of the passage. If so, the vine had no branches for six hundred years, for the first denominations, the Roman Catholic Church and the Greek Orthodox Church, did not arise until six centuries after the death of Christ. Please read John 15:1-8. See how many times the Master employs the personal pronouns "you," and "he" in reference to the branches. When Jesus applies the lesson of the branches, He refers to them as "anyone" (verse 6) and "disciples" (verse 8). The branches of the parable obviously represent individual disciples of Christ, not denominations. And they are all the same kind of branch. The Lord is not a freak with three thousand different species of branches growing from Him.

God wants believers in His Son to be one. Jesus prayed for the unity of those who believe in Him (John 17:20-21). Paul revealed to us a practical plan whereby we may "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-6) In spite of these plain passages, denominational preachers tell us that the existence of thousands of separate religious sects in America, most of them claiming to be part of the body of Christ, is according to God's will. They continue to thank God for their sinful divisions and to exhort trusting, misguided souls to help foster sectarianism.

Furthermore, the doctrine of Christ scathingly condemns sectarianism as a damnable sin. Among the "works of the flesh," of which the apostle Paul warns, "those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God," are "dissensions" and "heresies" (Galatians 5:19-21). "Dissensions" are "a standing apart ... indicating division" (Vine. 1:329), whereas "heresies" denotes:

an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects.... (Ibid. 2:217)

Sectarianism is a sin which will cost one his soul. How then can denominationalism, the fruit of sectarianism, be considered acceptable to God?

The church Jesus built is not composed of denominations, nor is it sectarian in any way. We must turn away from all religious denominations, sects, and parties and have an undivided loyalty to Christ. My friend, don't let loyalty to a denomination stand between you and salvation in Christ.

The Institutional View

It has become standard parlance among institutional brethren (those who advocate church support of human organizations) to refer to the body of Christ as "The Churches of Christ." For example, the "Christian Chronicle" newspaper states concerning itself, "All trustees, editors and staff are active members of the Churches of Christ." This sounds good, because, except for capitalization (Which was added by uninspired men), "Churches of Christ" is a direct quote of Romans 16:16 - "Greet one another with a holy kiss. The churches of Christ greet you."

The problem is, it's a misuse of a biblical phrase reflecting a misunderstanding of the nature of the church. It's like a Catholic finding "bishop" in 1 Timothy 3:1-2 and concluding this means there are "successors to the apostles" who each govern a number of local churches (a Catholic

diocese). The word is there, but the concept is not. As Moses E. Lard correctly remarked in 1914 concerning the phrase “churches of Christ” in Romans 16:16, “That is, all those in this region of country” (460). Surely we understand that not every local church of Christ in the whole world joined with Paul in sending greetings to the church in Rome.

The use of this phrase to denote the universal church implies the one body of Christ, the universal church, is composed of local churches. What else could it mean without endorsing the existence of numerous denominations?

This leads to the idea these congregations may act together in concert in some way, whether through denominational organization, a human organization, or a sponsoring church. Institutional brethren use the word “cooperate” to denote this, local churches being tied together in some super organization. By the way, I believe in cooperation between congregations but not of the institutional variety.

This is a false concept of the church of God which leads to unscriptural, even denominational, organization.

The Truth

As a body the church is figuratively the kingdom of Christ (Matthew 16:18-19; Hebrews 12:22-29), and the units which make it up are citizens (Ephesians 2:19). The church is a fold composed of sheep (John 10:16), a body made up of members (1 Corinthians 12:27), a temple built of stones (Ephesians 2:21; 1 Peter 2:5), and a family with children (Ephesians 3:14-15; Galatians 3:26). Christ is the vine, and disciples, not congregations or denominations, are the branches (John 15:5-6).

How are all Christians tied together? Only by spiritual ties of fellowship with the Father, the Son, the apostles, and each other, as we each walk in the light of Christ (1 John 1:3,7). Our only universal Head is the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 1:18), and we all must obey Him alone (Colossians 3:17). As each of us does so, we share in the work our Head directs us to do and share in the spiritual blessings that come from the Father through Him.

I am often thrilled to learn of Christians in distant parts of the world of whom I was previously unaware. Undoubtedly there are uncounted and uncountable numbers of people throughout the world who have by faith been baptized into Christ and are following His Word. No earthly organization ties us together, and we may never contribute money to a common treasury. We may never even know of each other’s existence in this life.

Have you met my dear brother Sunday Ayandare in Ibadan, Nigeria? Now you know he exists. If you and he are walking in the light, you are in fellowship in Christ. As each of us lives for the Master, we are joined in bonds of fellowship in Christ with the common hope of an eternal home in heaven with all the redeemed of the ages.

Conclusion

The church is not the Roman Catholic hierarchy, nor a mystical, invisible body composed of denominations, nor is it composed of congregations which can be tied together in a super organization. It is simply individual disciples of Christ serving the Lord and tied together in bonds of spiritual fellowship.

(The idea for this chapter came from excellent lessons delivered by Sunday Ayandare and Emmanuel Ebong, Jr. In Nigeria.)

The Autonomy of the Local Church

Introduction

There was a time all gospel preachers at least gave lip service to the principle of congregational autonomy. For example, Brother Lewis G. Hale, Bible professor at Oklahoma Christian College, wrote over 50 years ago:

We are all in agreement that each local church is separate and independent in organization from all other local churches. All of us are opposed to the destruction of autonomy. (77)

Today many have quit even giving lip service to the principle of the independence of the local church. In a 1985 publication, Brother Alvin Jennings wrote:

To sum it up, the church, the treasury and elders will be one in the urban area. Elders will allow and encourage assemblies anywhere and everywhere that men gather in the name of Jesus. Congregational autonomy will begin to fade within the city.... (71)

(I understand both Brother Jennings and the International Church of Christ denomination, which began in the 70's as the "Crossroads Movement," metamorphosed to the "Boston" or "Discipling" ministry, then crystallized as the ICOC, have now renounced this view.)

Although the word "autonomy" is not found in the New Testament, the principle of congregational autonomy is plainly taught there. In fact, no principle is more basic to the New Testament pattern for the organization of the church than that of the independent, self-government of the local church. The purpose of this chapter is to scripturally explain congregational autonomy.

The Word "Autonomy"

The term "autonomy" means "The quality or state of being independent, free, and self-directing; individual or group freedom" (Webster. 1:148).

How Applied to Local Church

Does this principle apply to the local congregation? If so, how?

It certainly does not apply to legislative (i.e., law making) power. Christ is the only Head of the church (Ephesians 1:22-23) and its only Law Giver (James 4:12). No man or group of men may make laws and bind them on Christians as a test of fellowship, whether they act within or without the confines of the local church. Christians must neither draw up nor recognize human creeds or uninspired statements of faith as binding. To do so is to usurp the authority of Christ.

Rather, by "congregational autonomy" I mean that the direction of the execution of the will of Christ belongs completely within the local church and is not to be surrendered, partially or completely, to any outside control. Elders are to be appointed within each local church (Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; Titus 1:5). These elders (also called bishops, i.e., overseers, or pastors, i.e., shepherds - Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-2) have the oversight of the congregation of which they are members (1 Peter 5:1-2). There they rule under the authority of Christ, the Chief Shepherd (1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). No passage of Scripture broadens their authority. The elders of the local church have no right to oversee anything other than the work of the local church

where they are members. There is no authority for a congregation to allow any man, group of men, or organization outside the local church to oversee all or any part of its function.

This principle applies to every facet of the work of the congregation. Each local church selects its own leaders (Acts 6:1-6), governs itself within the limits of those things Christ has authorized (1 Peter 5:1-4; Colossians 3:17), determines its own program of work and selects the arrangements to carry it out (cf. Acts 11:22; Romans 16:1; 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25), controls the use of its own resources (Philippians 4:15-16; 2 Corinthians 11:8), and disciplines its own sinful members (1 Corinthians chapter 5).

I believe Brother Lewis Hale well summarized the scriptural principle of congregational autonomy:

Church autonomy includes and requires that the local church, under Christ (1) control its own resources, (2) exercise the oversight of its own work, (3) manage its own affairs, (4) discipline its own disorderly members, (5) provide for its own worthy indigent to the limit of its ability, and (6) governs itself in all matters of judgment and expediency (Ibid).

Acts 15 and Congregational Autonomy

I received this e-mail message from a friend in response to an article on the autonomy of the local church. “I appreciate the emphasis on individual congregations. Though I was wondering how you would view Acts 15 in light of this?” This is an excellent, pertinent question. Let’s examine Acts chapter 15 and it’s bearing on the autonomy (independence, self-government) of each local church. (Why not read Acts 15 now?)

Paul and Barnabas had been sent out by the church at Antioch on the first preaching journey to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-3), and they returned there at the end of this very successful trip (Acts 14:26-28). Some men came from Judea, teaching the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1).

These men were trying to bind the law of Moses, the Old Testament, on Gentiles (Acts 15:5). If they had been successful, they would have caused these brethren to be severed from Christ (Galatians 5:1-4) and turned them into Jewish proselytes rather than Christians. Those introducing this doctrine were “false brethren secretly brought in (who came in by stealth to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage)” (Galatians 2:4).

Paul and Barnabas did not yield to them for even an hour (*Ibid*) but opposed them vigorously (Acts 15:2). This should have settled the matter with the church in Antioch due to Paul’s apostolic authority (cf. 1 Corinthians 9:1).

But, for whatever reason, the brethren at Antioch wanted to hear from the apostles and elders in Jerusalem about this question (Acts 15:2). Thus Paul, Barnabas, Titus and at least one other went to Jerusalem about this issue (Acts 15:2-3; Galatians 2:1).

They met first with the apostles and elders over the question (Galatians 2:2). These men added nothing to Paul’s understanding of the matter (Galatians 2:6). Rather, Paul “went up by revelation, and communicated to them that gospel which” he preached “among the Gentiles” (Galatians 2:2). Thus, the apostles at Jerusalem gave to Paul “and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship” (Galatians 2:7-9).

Then the matter was discussed before the entire congregation at Jerusalem, and even the false teachers were given the opportunity to present their case (Acts 15:4-17). James stated the conclusion he drew, in which the apostles and elders, including Paul, had already concurred, that Gentiles need not be circumcised or keep the law of Moses (Acts 15:18-22).

Therefore, “the apostles and elders, with the whole church” decided to send Paul and Barnabas, along with Judas and Silas, from Jerusalem to Antioch stating this conclusion (Acts 15:22). They put this in the form of a letter which became a part of the inspired canon of Scripture (Acts 15:23-29). They claimed the guidance of the Holy Spirit in reaching this conclusion (Acts 15:28).

Johnson, in a commentary published by the Church of England, comments, “This, the first council of the Church, is generally considered an example for all times” (2:15). Thus, such denominations as the Catholic Church, Orthodox Church, Lutheran Church, and Episcopal Church view this as the First Ecumenical Council, in which questions of church doctrine are settled for all time. This is a strange “ecumenical council,” that consisted of a few messengers sent by the congregation at Antioch, all the members of the congregation in Jerusalem, and no one from any

other congregation.

This High Church view assumes “The Church” decides doctrinal soundness in councils composed of uninspired men. The church decides nothing about truth or error. The Holy Spirit sent by Christ to His apostles revealed to them all truth (John 16:13-15), the entirety of the mind of God for our salvation (1 Corinthians 2:6-13). They wrote it down for us in the New Testament (Ephesians 3:1-7). Anyone who adds to this is anathema (Galatians 1:6-9; 2 John verse 9). The responsibility of the church is to uphold and defend this divine truth (1 Timothy 3:14-15; Jude verse 3).

The High Church position also assumes that the apostolic authority has been passed down to bishops today. The apostles of Christ were led into all truth and guarded from any error by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 16:13-15). They demonstrated their authority by working the miraculous signs of apostles (2 Corinthians 12:12). To occupy their office, one would have to be an eye witness of the resurrected Lord (Acts 1:15-26), and Paul was the last such witness (1 Corinthians 15:5-8). Modern denominational bishops don’t even claim these abilities. They are pretenders.

Acts fifteen does not authorize church councils or courts, nor does it sanction less formal assemblies of representatives of congregations to discuss and decide anything. All matters of salvation were decided by the Lord two millennia ago and written by His apostles in the New Testament. Matters of individual conscience must be decided by each Christian for himself alone (Romans 14:1-5).

Those in Acts 15 who stated the conclusion that all accepted were inspired of God. They were led by the Holy Spirit. Their conclusion is a part of the canon of Scripture. This was not a council of representatives from all or even various churches. One congregation sought to know if those who had come from another congregation to trouble them actually represented the views of that congregation.

Thus, there is nothing in Acts 15 that contradicts or amends the fact that the direction of the execution of the will of Christ belongs completely within the local church and is not to be surrendered, partially or completely, to any outside control. The local church is indeed to be autonomous.

Scriptural Congregational Cooperation

Several years ago a preacher asked me if I was “anti-cooperation.” I told him I am in favor of scriptural congregational cooperation. I further add that I have many times been and even presently am involved in authorized cooperation between local churches. We are examining the scriptural pattern for cooperation between congregations.

Benevolence & Evangelism

Defenders of the sponsoring church arrangement characteristically employ passages authorizing churches to send funds to another church for the work of benevolence to defend churches sending money to another church to do the work of evangelism. What difference does this make?

Pattern

It makes a big difference. First, the New Testament clearly authorizes many churches to send to one for benevolent needs within the receiving church (Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9; Acts 24:17) and for one church to send to several for benevolence inside the receiving congregations (Acts 11:27-30). But there is no authority for a church or churches to send to another church or other churches to do the work of evangelism. Shall we follow the New Testament pattern or not?

Autonomy

This also involves the principle of autonomy. Each local church has the responsibility to assist its own needy members (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-3). Local churches may assist a church unable to relieve its own needy members until the church is able to do so (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). The work of the sending church is to help the needy church, and the work of the receiving church is to assist its own indigent members. Thus, equality of congregations relative to oversight and the autonomy of local churches are maintained, in that oversight of the work of each local church is within that local church, and each local congregation is able to do its own work.

But each local church has equal responsibility in the work of evangelism, commensurate with its own ability (Matthew 28:19-20). Thus, when churches send funds to another church to do the work of evangelism, the oversight of the work of all the churches involved is within the receiving church. Sending churches sacrifice oversight of part of their work and give up autonomy.

In essence, there is one pattern (the autonomy of the local church) with two applications (cooperation for benevolence and for evangelism). This is not hard to understand. We often preach on “God’s Two Laws of Pardon.” God has one plan of salvation: by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-10). But there is one set of conditions for forgiveness of the alien sinner and another for pardon of the erring child of God. One pattern - two applications.

Pattern for Cooperation for Benevolence

Six passages comprise the New Testament pattern for cooperation between local churches to do the work of benevolence: Acts 11:27-30, 24:17, Romans 15:25-28, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9; and Galatians 2:10. Parallel to this, seven passages authorize music in New Testament worship (Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; James 5:13), They constitute a pattern which specifies the kind of

music, singing, and we must follow it (sing in worship) and not violate it (use instrumental music in worship). Even so, the pattern for congregational cooperation for benevolence specifies the kind of cooperation, concurrent, and we must follow this (each contributing church send directly to the church in need) and not violate it (create a collectivity of churches or a church supported benevolent society).

Two Contributions

The New Testament passages authorizing congregational cooperation for benevolence relate to two historical occurrences separated by over a decade. The church in Antioch sent benevolent aid to the churches in Judea ca. A.D. 44-45 (Acts 11:27-30), and the apostle Paul took a collection from Gentile churches for the benevolent assistance of Christians in Jerusalem ca. A.D. 57-58 (Galatians 2:10; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9; Acts 24:17). Don't confuse the two collections.

Antioch to Judean Churches

The brethren in Antioch assisted their brethren in Judea (Acts 11:27-30). Since the elders of each church had the oversight of the work of that church (1 Peter 5:1-4), this money was not sent to one church in Judea, such as Jerusalem, for distribution to the other churches. Rather, congregational autonomy was maintained, and no collectivity of churches was created.

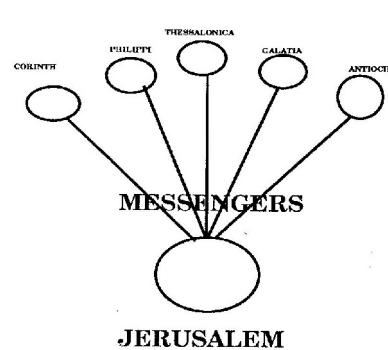
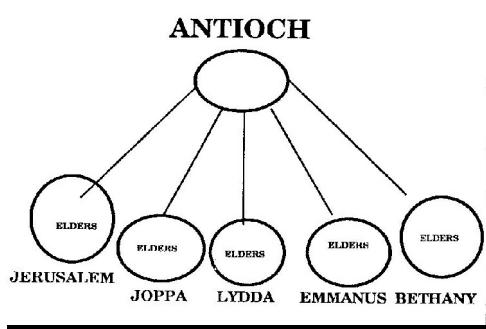
Gentile Churches to Jerusalem Brethren

James, Cephas, and John asked Paul to remember the poor, and he eagerly followed their request (Galatians 2:10). He took a voluntary contribution from Gentile churches for the needy

Christians in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapter 8 - 9) and delivered this assistance at the end of his third journey (Acts 24:17). The purpose of the collection was to maintain the equality of the churches (2 Corinthians 8:13-15), i.e., to insure that each church would have sufficient funds to do its own work. Each church raised its own funds and chose its own messengers (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). No church or human organization acted as a collecting and dispersing agency or assumed the oversight of the benevolent work of all the contributing churches.

Each congregation
maintained its

autonomy, and no collectivity of churches was created.



Modern Example

Several years ago I received word from Brother H.F. Short that a severe, prolonged drought in Southwestern Zimbabwe threatened to cause starvation among Christians there. I brought this to the attention of the members of the Tri-County Church of Christ. We, along with many other congregations, sent relief funds to Brother Short, who in turn forwarded these funds

to Brother Newman Gumbo in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. Brother Gumbo traveled to the churches in the bush of Southwest Zimbabwe and dispersed the funds to each local church as they were needed. Brother Gumbo received a receipt from each receiving congregation, acknowledging receipt of the funds. Each church being helped reported the number of members whom it aided. Brother Short reported all funds received and dispersed to each assisting congregation. Brethren Short and Gumbo were messengers of the churches (Acts 11:29-30; 1 Corinthians 16:3-4; 2 Corinthians 8:16-23; Acts 24:17). They insured there was no fraud or even reasonable suspicion of it (2 Corinthians 8:18-21). No Christians in Zimbabwe starved. Each local church maintained its autonomy. Congregations cooperated scripturally to do the work of benevolence.

The pattern of congregational cooperation for benevolence further establishes the principle of local church autonomy. Each church is to raise its own funds and send directly to the church in need. The equality of all the churches relative to oversight of its own work must be kept. No church may act as an agent for another or assume oversight of a benevolent work of several churches. We must maintain local church autonomy.

Congregational Cooperation for Evangelism

How may congregations scripturally cooperate in evangelism while at the same time maintaining autonomy?

It is perfectly scriptural for churches to send teaching to each other. The church in Jerusalem sent Barnabas to the young church in Antioch to encourage them "that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord" (Acts 11:22-23; cf. 13:1-3; 14:21-23, 26-28; 15:22-31,40; 18:22; Colossians 4:16). A local church may send scriptural teaching to any person or group of people anywhere (1 Thessalonians 1:8). When a local church sends a teaching paper to other churches, or when a congregation pays the way of an evangelist to preach a gospel meeting for a small congregation or to preach overseas, this is scriptural congregational cooperation.

A congregation may act alone in supporting a preacher in another place (Philippians 1:3-5; 2:25,30; 4:14-18). Or, several churches may independently and directly support a preacher working in another place (2 Corinthians 11:8-9). Thus, when several churches send directly to a preacher to work with a small church or to send that preacher to another nation, they are scripturally cooperating in evangelism

The Pattern Applied

This reveals three facts. No church is to act as an agent for another church or churches since, when several churches pool their resources to do a work common to all of them, all the other churches become subordinate to the congregation which decides how the funds will be used. No church may assume the oversight of any part of the evangelistic work (or any other work) of any other congregation(s). Also, the equality of each local church relative to oversight must be maintained.

The Pattern Summarized

The principle is congregational autonomy. The oversight of all the work of each local church is completely within that congregation (1 Peter 5:1-4). The expression of that autonomy in congregational cooperation for evangelism is concurrent cooperation. Local congregations may and should work concurrently to achieve a common objective, but they must not pool their resources under the oversight of one church.

Violations of Congregational Autonomy

Church of Christ - Nigeria

I possess a legal document entitled “**Amended Constitution of Church of Christ - Nigeria.**” This document was adopted by many churches of Christ meeting in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State (where I taught 111 preachers in classes on the authority of the Scriptures in January, 1992), Nigeria in 2003 . While declaring, “The Church shall uphold the Supremacy of the Bible in all matters of doctrine as the standard of her practice and faith,” the document nonetheless declares, “WE THE MEMBERS of Church of Christ - Nigeria, ...DO HEREBY MAKE, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES the following Constitution.” I thought the Bible was the constitution of the church of Christ. The Constitution declares the organization to be composed of churches of Christ in Nigeria. It provides for the selection of a board of trustees and states, “All landed property of the Church shall be registered in the name of the Registered Trustees.” The document decrees a “National General Meeting” of the church at least annually. It claims for the organization the power to deny any congregation the right to bear the name “Church of Christ” if they are not approved by this national organization.

Obviously this constitution simply creates a national denomination calling itself “Church of Christ” and wielding power over local congregations to keep them in line. It would be hard to imagine a more obvious denial of the autonomy, self rule, of local churches. It would be difficult to conceive of a more dramatic proof that, when local autonomy is ignored, denominational tyranny results.

The creation of a Church of Christ denomination in Nigeria was the result of a half century of American missionary influence. Let’s see how.

The Sponsoring Church

For over sixty years, among the majority of brethren, much mass evangelism has been carried on through the sponsoring church arrangement. The elders of the sponsoring church begin a program of evangelism and solicit contributions from other congregations. All oversight of the program is exercised by the elders of the sponsoring church.

Lewis G. Hale, a notable defender of this arrangement, thus described the part of contributing churches to a radio or TV program:

There are hundreds of churches which send financial aid to help keep the program on the air. They have no part in the management of the program. They have no part in the selection of the preacher, singers, nor sermon topics. Their part is solely that of financial assistance (2).

This is the work of all involved churches.

The principle of representative work is involved when a church sends a gift to another church to assist in a work which it is doing. If the gift is to help pay the expenses of the evangelistic effort, the contributing church is preaching the gospel just as surely as if it had used those finances to have the preacher come to its own locality to do the preaching. In either case, the church is preaching by means of a representative, the preacher (Ibid. page 57).

Thus, the elders of the sponsoring church oversee the work of a number of churches.

This violates all scriptural principles governing congregational cooperation for evangelism. One church acts as the agent of other churches, one church assumes the oversight of an evangelistic work belonging to several churches, and the equality of each congregation relative to oversight is destroyed. The sponsoring church violates the New Testament pattern for congregational cooperation and destroys the autonomy of local churches.

Human Organizations for Spread of Gospel

World Bible School is a notable example of an organization begun by men to preach the gospel. Its founder and long time head, the late Jimmy Lovell, wrote:

*Legally, and again I have never been questioned, we are incorporated under the laws of California as West Coast Publishing Co. - a non-profit, tax deductible religious organization. We have another corporation in Texas known as World Bible School, with directors who are on the WCC board (**Action**, Sept., 1983. 2).*

It is funded by churches of Christ. Again, Jimmy Lovell wrote:

*We would like to see more churches financially supporting WBS. Small churches that do no mission work because they are small would find themselves responsible for more baptisms than more large churches if they simply sent a monthly check to WBS to help with this good work. Mention it to the leaders and elders where you worship and ask that they consider doing it (**Action**. March, 1986, 2).*

When churches support a human organization to do the work of the church, they establish ties of fellowship with the human institution, since a contribution by a local church is an expression of fellowship (2 Corinthians 8:4; Philippians 4:15-16). The only tie in Christ is that of fellowship (1 John 1:3). Thus, by donating to the Missionary Society, World Bible School, or any other human organization, that man-made institution is attached to the churches in ties of fellowship. It becomes in reality a church organization. It thus is a violation of the New Testament pattern for the organization of the church (2 John 9).

Church support of human institutions violates the independence of the local church. Churches send the money; World Bible school provides the over-sight. "All of this is handled through our follow up work in Visalia, California with funds provided by churches and individuals who want someone to follow-up on their students" (**Action**, January, 1986. 4). This clearly violates local church independence (1 Peter 5:1-4).

WBS is a missionary society parallel in structure to the American Christian Missionary Society of the Christian Church that divided the Lord's people in the USA in the nineteenth century. The Missionary Society was a human organization supported by churches and individuals for the furtherance of the gospel.

The convention met in Cincinnati, Ohio, October 24-28, 1849, at which time the American Christian Missionary Society was organized. The following resolution was proposed by John T. Johnson, of Kentucky, and passed by the group:

'Resolved, That the 'Missionary Society, ' as a means to concentrate and dispense the wealth and benevolence of the brethren of this Reformation in an effort to convert the world, is both scriptural and expedient.

After full discussion of the matter, a constitution was adopted, ...

'Article 2d. The object of this Society shall be to promote the spread of the Gospel in destitute places of our own and foreign lands.' (Hailey. 148-49)

The missionary society was defended in the same way WBS is defended. *The Christian Missionary Society, too, on its own independent footing, will be a grand auxiliary to the churches in destitute regions, at home as well as abroad, in dispensing the blessings of the gospel among many that otherwise would never have heard it.* (Alexander Campbell, “Millennial Harbinger,” 1849. 694-695, as quoted by Hailey. 150-51).

Results of Centralization

Over sixty years of American influence in Nigeria has resulted, not in the promotion of nondenominational Christianity, but in the birth of a national “Church of Christ” denomination claiming the power to crush dissent. We have sown the wind and reaped the whirlwind (Hosea 8:7). American churches and preachers operating with commendable zeal to reach the lost but in ignorance of the divine principle of congregational autonomy have caused enormous harm (cf. Romans 10:1-2). They have spawned a human denomination.

Lest someone claim I oppose foreign evangelism, let it be known that I have made fourteen trips to Africa, working in six nations, four trips to Belize, in one of which I also preached in Mexico, six to the Samoan Islands, one to the United Kingdom. Of course, I’ve preached next door in Canada more times than I can recall, and some would call our move from the South to Northern New York State, where Sandy and I lived for fourteen years, foreign evangelism.

But we temper our zeal with knowledge by following the divine plan for congregational cooperation for evangelism. We must maintain the independence of each local church by engaging in concurrent cooperation for evangelism. This is both the most effective plan and the way that will glorify and please God.

Superiority of Divine Wisdom

The sponsoring church system and church supported human organizations corrupt the organization of the church, alter the divine pattern for congregational cooperation, destroy local church autonomy and lay the groundwork for denominationalism. Furthermore, these human schemes just don’t work. The last generation has seen a dramatic increase of sponsoring churches and church supported human organizations for evangelism among churches of Christ. As the result the church of Christ has virtually ceased numerical growth in America in the present generation.

This study dramatically demonstrates the superiority of God’s wisdom to man’s (Isaiah 55:8-9; Romans 11:33-36; Ephesians 3:8-11). By the amazingly simple plan revealed in the New Testament, in stark contrast to the elaborate organizational schemes of men, the first century church took the gospel to the whole world in one generation (Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:5-6,23). How could mere men possibly improve on this divine plan? God’s way is both right and best.

Missionaries

“The Christian Chronicle” is “An international newspaper for Churches of Christ.” A search at its website for the term “missionaries” turned up numerous hits. “African ministers and missionaries gather this month for Jabulani, a celebration of 100 years of Africa evangelism” (www.christianchronicle.org/article1407484). “About 150 church members got a taste of Mexican culture at the Pan American Lectureship in early November. The week-long excursion demonstrated the trials and triumphs of life in the mission field and connected missionaries to the congregations that support them” (*Ibid.* Article 1210048). And on and on.

I admire immensely the dedication of missionaries. They of their own choice leave their friends, extended family, in some cases their children, and country to travel far to be of benefit to strangers whose customs, foods, and sometimes their language are strange to the missionaries. They are examples of self sacrifice (Matthew 16:24), dedication (Galatians 2:20), and love (1 Corinthians 13:1-3,13). Every Christian should be determined to use his time, opportunities, abilities, and resources to take the saving gospel to a world lost in sin (Mark 16:15).

“Missionary” is the standard word employed in mainline (institutional) Churches of Christ as the name for those who leave their homes to go to foreign countries for religious service. The term “missionary” means “a person who has been sent to a place, usually a foreign country, to teach their religion to the people who live there” (<http://dictionary.cambridge.org>).

I used an English dictionary to define the term rather than a Bible lexicon because the word is nowhere found in the Bible. A search of the **King James Version, American Standard Version, New King James Version, New American Standard Bible, English Standard Version, International Standard Version, and New International Version** turned up zero usages of the word.

This fact is significant because words are important. Words convey ideas. God revealed His will to man “not in words which man’s wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches” (1 Corinthians 2:13). “Whoever speaks must speak God’s words” (1 Peter 4:11, **International Standard Version**).

Corruption of speech reveals corruption of thinking. When Ezra and Nehemiah were restoring the law to the Jews after their return from Babylonian captivity, Nehemiah was dismayed to see “Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab” and to learn that “half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people” (Nehemiah 13:23-24). This change of language meant they were losing their Jewish heritage. When we quit speaking “God’s words” and use the language of our denominational neighbors, we are losing our uniqueness as the people of God (Titus 2:11-14) and becoming like the denominations around us (cf. 1 Samuel 8:4-5).

And yet, there is a Bible word, found eighty times in the New Testament, that in some contexts might possibly be translated “missionaries.” This is the Greek word “*apostolos*,” meaning literally “one sent as a messenger or agent, the bearer of a commission, messenger” (Mounce, 1094), usually transliterated as “apostles” (58 times) or “apostle” (19 occurrences), but also translated “messengers” (2 Corinthians 8:23) or “messenger” (Philippians 2:25), and once represented by the phrase “one who is sent” (John 13:16).

Jesus Christ is the one and only apostle of God (Hebrews 3:1). At the beginning of His ministry on earth Christ Jesus sent out twelve apostles to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:2-6), and at its end He sent His apostles “into all the world” (Mark 16:14-15). But

Barnabas also is called an “apostle” (Acts 14:4,14), though He was not one of the personal messengers of the Lord Jesus Christ. Rather, He was “sent away” by the church in Antioch to preach the gospel (Acts 13:1-3), and later he and Paul reported to this congregation on the work they had done (Acts 14:26-27). Earlier, Barnabas had been sent by the church in Jerusalem to go “as far as Antioch” (Acts 11:22-23).

Barnabas would come the closest to fitting the modern idea of a missionary. But even here, there are some key differences.

Modern “Churches of Christ” missionaries are overseen by the elders of the church which sends them out. I suggest you check the web sites of missionaries you know to confirm this statement. I spent eleven hours in July of 2009 in one on one studies with missionaries who defended this arrangement.

These same missionaries receive support from many congregations. The funds are sent to an account their overseeing congregation keeps for them. Thus, the elders of their overseeing congregation are supervising the evangelistic work of a number of congregations. Elders have the oversight of and only of the work of the church where they are members (1 Peter 5:1-2). This maintains the autonomy (independence, self government) of each local church. New Testament congregations sent directly to the evangelist or evangelists they were supporting (Philippians 4:15-16; 2 Corinthians 11:8) rather than sending to an overseeing congregation.

Evangelists have fellowship with congregations that send them to preach (Philippians 4:15-16). The New Testament never records elders in the church in Antioch, and they sent out Paul (Acts 13:1-3). Did a church without elders oversee the work of an apostle of Christ (2 Corinthians 1:1; 11:5), who himself was ruling, along with the other apostles, over the universal church (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:28-30)? If elders were overseeing the “missionary” work of Paul and Barnabas, why didn’t they settle the argument between them over John Mark (Acts 15:36-40)?

These same missionaries attend the business meetings of the congregation where they are preaching and exert great influence on the decisions made. Yet, some state they are members of the supervising congregation which sends them out. How, then, can they participate in the decision making of a congregation in which they are not members? How could they ever be selected to be elders in the congregation where they preach if the elders of another church oversee their work? Whatever happened to congregational autonomy?

Not all missionaries sent out by the Churches of Christ do evangelistic work. There are many medical missionaries as well those who build houses for poor people in the lands to which they are sent. This involves the churches who send them in benevolent work to the general populace, whereas the local church is limited in the benevolent work it is authorized to do to the relief of needy Christians (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8 - 9; 1 Timothy 5:16).

I am an evangelist (Ephesians 4:11; 2 Timothy 4:5) or preacher (Romans 10:14; 1 Timothy 2:7; 2 Timothy 1:11). My work is to preach the word wherever I have the opportunity (2 Timothy 4:1-5). I am also a member and elder of the Highway 5 South Church of Christ in Mountain Home, Arkansas and participate in the decision making of that congregation alone (1 Peter 5:1-4). Churches that support me have fellowship in my work of evangelism (Philippians 4:15-16), I report to them on that work (Acts 14:27), and I thank the Lord for them and their help.

Zeal for the Lord is essential to our salvation (Titus 2:11-14). But there are many zealous Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormon “elders” and “sisters,” and denominational missionaries. Zeal without knowledge will lead one to reject the righteousness of God and be lost (Romans 10:1-3).

The Individual Christian and the Local Church

Once I was discussing the work of the church with a lady who is a Christian. When I noted that individual Christians have benevolent responsibilities the church does not have, she objected by observing, "The church is just Christians." The implied conclusion is, Whatever the individual Christian does, the church is doing. Let's examine this assumption.

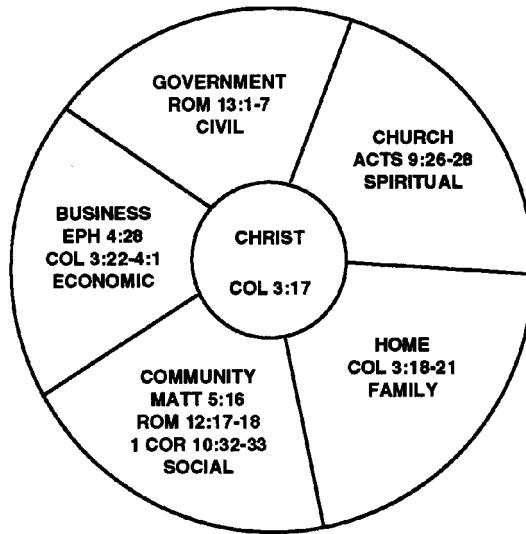
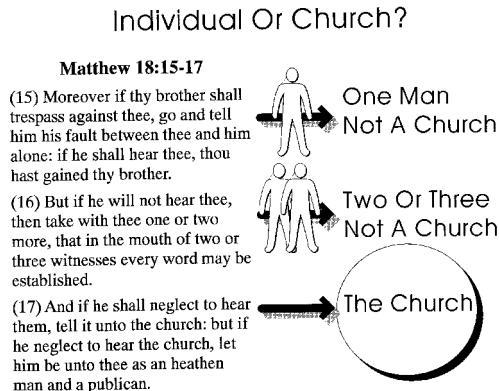
Christians have responsibilities in several relationships. Since we must "do all in the name of the Lord Jesus" (Colossians 3:17), we must act according to the will of the Lord in all these relationships.

We have obligations in the home, the family relationship. For example, the husband and wife are to give each other the "affection due" one another (1 Corinthians 7:3-5). Surely we will agree that, when the husband fulfills his wife's need for affection, that is not the church at work!

We also have economic responsibilities in business. We are to work to earn a living (Ephesians 4:28), and this gives each of us the right to start his own business (Acts 16:14; 18:1-3). But the church is limited to a first day of the week, free will offering of its own members as the means to raise its funds. If a Christian is in the dairy farming business, that doesn't mean the church is in that business.

We also have social responsibilities in the community. We should so live before others that we draw them to Christ (Matthew 5:16). In an effort to be a good influence in the community, I am a member of Lions Club, a civic organization. Probably few would question my right to join the Lions Club, but neither would any say that made the church a part of Lions Club.

Chart by Wayne Greeson



We also have obligations and liberties toward civil government. I believe Christians have just as much right as unbelievers to enter politics in order to hold public office (Romans 16:23). But I don't believe that gives the church the right to interfere with government affairs (Mark 12:17; John 18:36).

The local church is more than just Christians. It is Christians in a certain relationship, a spiritual relationship (John 18:36; Romans 14:17; Ephesians 1:3,22-23). It is when these Christians in this spiritual relationship act collectively that the local church is functioning.

This is exemplified in Matthew 18:15-17. If your brother sins against you, you should tell

him alone about it. If he will not listen, you should take with you one or two witnesses to talk to him. If he still refuses to repent, you should tell it to the church.

Neither one Christian acting alone, nor two or three Christians from among others in the church acting together constitute church action. It's when all the Christians who regularly worship together act as one in regard to God's work that the church is at work.

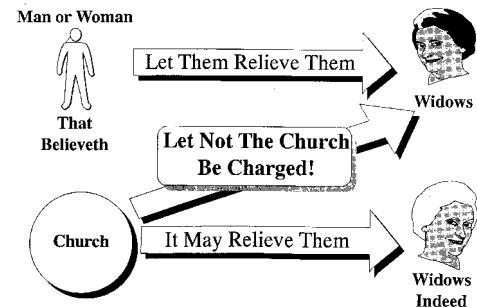
Another illustration is found in First Timothy 5:16. Each believer should care for needy widows related to him, and the church must not be burdened with their care. Although an individual Christian is at work, the church is not.

I have encountered several arguments to get around this fact. Many brethren used to say, "Whatever the individual Christian may do, the church may do." But individual Christians may,

Chart by Wayne Greeson

indeed must, provide for needy widows kin to them, but the church must not be burdened with their care (1 Timothy 5:16).

Individual & Church
1 Timothy 5:16



Some Individual Responsibilities Are Collectively Fulfilled

Work	Individual Obligation	Collectively Fulfilled
Sing	Eph. 5:19	1 Cor. 14:15, 23
Give	1 Cor. 16:1-2	1 Cor. 16:1-2
Support Preacher	Gal. 6:6(?)	2 Cor. 12:13
Relieve Sinners	Gal. 6:10(?)	(?)
Work for Living	Eph. 4:28; 1 Tim. 5:8	(?)
Raise Children	Eph. 6:4	(?)
Fulfill Marital Obligation	1 Cor. 7:2-5	(?)

How Do We Know Which Ones?
Those The Scriptures Identify!

(Matthew 18:15-17). No, that would show I had not forgiven him! Should I turn the care of my widowed mother over to the church? Absolutely not! (1 Timothy 5:16) The only way I can know which individual responsibilities may be collectively fulfilled are those the Lord identifies as collective (church) work. We individually should sing praise to the Lord (Ephesians 5:19), and we may and should do that in the public worship assembly (1 Corinthians 14:15,23). Whatever the New Testament identifies as church work, we may do collectively.

Brother Mac Deaver had an especially complex argument. He asserted:

All passages which authorize the performance of an act based upon the peculiar ground of one's being a Christian are passages which apply with equal force both to the church and to the individual Christian.

What in the world does that mean anyway? What is "peculiar ground of one's being a Christian"? Does it mean our motive for doing it is that we are Christians? Everything a Christian does is to be motivated upon the ground he is a Christian (1 Corinthians 10:31; Colossians 3:17). Is he referring to obligation? The law of Christ is for both saint and sinner (Mark 16:15), thus, there are no

obligations peculiar to one's being a Christian. Does he mean relationship?

The only peculiar relationship we have as Christians is to the local church, and we find what to do in this relationship by studying what the work of the church is.

Individual Christians may do many things in secular relationships that the local church is not authorized to do. Individuals may marry and have children (1 Timothy 5:14), but the local church certainly cannot (Ephesians 1:3). Individual

Christians may operate

businesses (Acts 18:1-3), but the local church is only authorized to raise money by a free-will, first day of the week collection from its own members (1 Corinthians 16:1-2). Christians individually may join a bowling team or ball team (1 Timothy 4:8), but the local church has no business sponsoring such recreational activities (1 Timothy 3:14-15). A disciple of Christ may run for political office (Romans 16:23), but a congregation must not be involved in politics (John 18:36).

The local church is more than just Christians. It is Christians in a certain locality who have agreed to worship together regularly and to do God's work together collectively through the use of common funds (1 Corinthians 1:2; Acts 9:26-28; 2:46; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The church does its collective work by the use of funds contributed by its members each first day of the week (1 Corinthians 16:1-2), by assembling as a body (1 Corinthians 11:20), through functions planned by its leaders (Acts 6:1-4), or through authorized representatives (e.g., Romans 16:1-2). We must not confuse our individual obligations in other relationships with the work of the church.

Chart by Wayne Greeson

Deaver's Law

What Does He Mean?

"All passages which authorize the performance of an act based upon the peculiar ground of one's being a Christian are passages which apply with equal force both to the church and to the individual Christian"

Mac
Deaver

Motive?	Obligation?	Relationship?
Everything A Christian Does Is To Be Motivated Upon The Ground He Is A Christian!	Sinner & Saint Have The Same Obligation!	(Local Church)
1 Cor. 10:31		Acts 2:44-45
Col. 3:17		Acts 4:32-35
		Acts 6:1-6
		Acts 11:27-30
		Rom. 15:25-31
		1 Cor. 16:1-3
		2 Cor. 8 & 9
		1 Tim. 5:16

The Work of the Church

Introduction

The apostle Paul was always thankful for the church in Thessalonica because of their “work of faith, labor of love, and patience of hope” (1 Thessalonians 1:2-4). The Lord wants His people, collectively and individually, to “be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Corinthians 15:58).

But we must do only those things that please the Lord. The Master warned:

Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?, And then I will declare to them, I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness! (Matthew 7:22-23)

The Scriptures equip us “for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:16-17), thus, regardless of how good an activity may seem to us, if it is unauthorized by the word of God, it is not a good work. What is the scriptural work of the local church?

The Nature of the Church

The local church is the only organized relationship within the realm composed peculiarly of God’s people, the universal church. As such, it is spiritual in its nature (John 18:36; Romans 14:17; Ephesians 1:3,22-23). Thus, we should expect its work to be spiritual.

Authorized Work

What is the divinely authorized work of the local church?

The primary responsibility of each congregation is to be “the pillar and ground of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:14-15). A “pillar” is a column that upholds a roof or other structure. The word “ground” refers to a foundation. The basic function of the church is to uphold and support the truth, the word of God (John 17:17).

The Work of the Church

- ☛ Evangelism
- ☛ Edification
- ☛ Benevolence for Needy Saints

This means the congregation must be actively, zealously, steadfastly engaged in the work of **evangelism**, taking the gospel to the lost. Like the church in Thessalonica, we should preach the gospel everywhere to everyone (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8; cf. Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19).

But we also must be diligent as a congregation in the work of **edification**,

building up one another by preaching and teaching the word of God (Ephesians 4:11-16; cf. Matthew 28:20).

But each local church should see that the material needs of all its own members are met (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 1 Timothy 5:3-10) and that needy Christians in other places are also helped (Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8-9). Since a contribution from the church treasury is an expression of fellowship in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:1-4), this **benevolence** is also spiritual work.

Thus the divinely authorized work of the local church is limited to **evangelism**, **edification**, and **benevolence to needy Christians**. As the local church is a spiritual relationship,

its authorized activities are uniformly spiritual.

The Work Corrupted

Although the New Testament plainly reveals a pattern for the work of the church, a blueprint of activities that will cause the congregation to grow and prosper spiritually, many churches, including many churches of Christ, have completely or at least partially abandoned this divine plan for humanly devised schemes of church functions. What are some unauthorized activities that have been introduced by modern churches?

Probably the most universally prevalent corruption of the work of the local church is **general benevolence**, giving material help to the lost from the church treasury. Not only is this a corruption of the divine pattern of congregational benevolence, it amounts to using carnal attractions to bribe people to hear the gospel. The Lord refused to feed people who came to Him for food for the belly (John 6:26-27). The church of Christ is not a glorified Salvation Army.

Many churches of Christ have blindly blundered toward the Social Gospel by sponsoring **social and recreational activities**. How many buildings owned by churches of Christ contain kitchens and “fellowship halls” to be used for the entertainment and social activities of the members and others? Most new church buildings contain “family life centers,” which are simply sanctified gymnasiums. Many churches sponsor camps, ball games, skating parties, retreats, etc. “The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). God appeals to the spirit, Satan to the flesh (Romans 8:5-8). The Lord did not die for a glorified YMCA!

Many congregations now provide schools for **secular education** and support colleges. The Lord’s church has the responsibility of teaching people the Bible and Bible-related subjects, such as singing, which help us to be better Christians (cf. 1 Timothy 3:14-15; John 17:17). Colleges as separate, service organizations have the right to exist and to teach the Bible. But where is the Bible authority for the church to teach a child art or a college student mathematics? The church Jesus built is not a sanctified school for secular education.

We have seen many churches and preachers in recent years **fighting to obtain political, social, and economic rights** for minorities. The causes may be good in the social sphere, but are they part of the God-ordained work of the church? Paul urged the Corinthians, whether slave or free, to “abide in the same calling” they were in (1 Corinthians 7:20-21). In a society of gross injustice and even slavery, the inspired apostle made no attempt to change the social or economic orders. Such change is no part of the work of the church. Christ did not suffer on the cross to establish social, political, and economic justice. The gospel is spiritual not social, and the church is not a civil rights organization.

The Pattern Corrupted

☛ General Benevolence

(Glorified Salvation Army)

☛ Social and Recreational Activities

(Glorified YMCA)

☛ Secular Education

(Glorified School)

☛ Civil Rights

Glorified Civil Rights Organization)

☛ Politics

(Glorified Political Party)

The Social Gospel

Finally, some churches enter the arena of **partisan politics**, trying to influence political affairs. Protestant churches as well as the Roman Catholic Church, have long acted as special interest groups in politics, trying to sway candidates and voters to their political views. It is tragic to see bulletins put out by churches of Christ trying to influence voters on political issues. When shall we learn that the kingdom of Christ is a spiritual government, not a political state (John 18:36)? The Lord's church has absolutely no place in politics. The church of the Lord is not a glorified political action organization!

Conclusion

What kind of congregation do you want to be a member of: a nice, comfortable church that does little and expects little of you, a “live-wire” church that engages in all sorts of fun activities, or a faithful church that diligently does the Lord’s work and expects you to pull your share of the load? Your choice reflects what you want to be (1 Corinthians 15:58). Be zealous in the Lord’s work and be a member of a local church that diligently does what He directs.

The Social Gospel

“We believe in the sacred freedom and dignity of persons and are committed to the redemption of the world in all its dimensions (physical, spiritual, social, economic and political)” (Salvation Army web site, statement on “economic justice”). This is a plain affirmation of the social gospel, the belief that redemption in Christ applies to the physical, social, economic, and political realm. “Therefore lay aside all filthiness and overflow of wickedness, and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (James 1:21).

Jesus answered, ‘My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here.’ (John 18:36)

In the period following the Civil War in the United States, a religious movement arose and gained widespread popularity throughout our land. This new philosophy was styled “the social gospel.” “... in place of the mansions on high, these prophets of a social faith dreamed of a heaven on earth as the goal of the human race” (Hopkins, 128).

As radical as this philosophy sounds, it is nonetheless true that it had and continues to have great influence upon those who have sometimes been called “the heirs of the Restoration Movement.”

The Disciples of Christ responded to the social challenge in unison with the major American denominations. If Disciples leaders were rarely in the vanguard of the social gospel movement, the church was generally represented at every level of Christian social protest (Harrell. 85).

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the social gospel from several aspects: its nature and history, its impact upon the Lord’s church in the nineteenth century, its influence upon churches of Christ today, and its relationship to the true gospel of Christ.

Nature and History

The social gospel is *a movement in American Protestant Christianity initiated at the end of the nineteenth century and reaching its zenith in the first part of the 20th century and dedicated to the purpose of bringing the social order into conformity with the teachings of Jesus Christ* (Webster. 4:2162).

The three most prominent and influential leaders were Richard T. Ely, Washington Gladden and Walter Rauschenbusch. Ely stated the position he and his fellows occupied.

‘I take this as my thesis’ Ely stated in his **Social Aspects of Christianity**:
‘Christianity is primarily concerned with this world, and it is the mission of Christianity to bring to pass here a kingdom of righteousness and rescue from the evil one and redeem all our social institutions’ (Rader. 61).

These men had a distorted concept of Christ. “... they thought of Jesus more as a prophet of social righteousness than as a divine Saviour...”(Olmstead. 490). Some even mourned the death of Christ as the untimely end to a great career of social reform.

*Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’?
But for this purpose I came to this hour.... And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself. This He said, signifying by what death He would die* (John 12:27,32-33).

All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in

the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8).

Advocates of the social gospel have distorted concepts of the kingdom of God similar to premillennialists.

The Kingdom of God is humanity organized according to the will of God.... The Kingdom of God is not confined within the limits of the Church and its activities. It embraces the whole of human life. It is the Christian transfiguration of the social order (Mullens. 31).

This false idea of the kingdom is the key to the movement. They deny that the kingdom and the church are the same and contend that the kingdom is physical rather than spiritual. The “kingdom” is the church from the standpoint of its rule (cf. Hebrews 12:22-23,28), and it is most certainly spiritual in nature (Luke 17:20-21; John 18:36; Romans 14:17).

Practical Results

The social gospel movement is primarily practical, one of action. The most common fruit of the social gospel was the formation of “institutional churches.” “The adjective ‘institutional’ was commonly employed to describe the numerous churches and missions which were expanding their functions to cover the entire life of man” (Abell. 137). Teaching and preaching the word was no longer of primary importance. They concentrated on relief programs, secular education, better housing, voting rights, social equality, orphanages and settlement houses, becoming simply social institutions.

The modern Salvation Army and Methodist Church provide outstanding examples of institutional churches in full bloom. Recreational facilities supposedly built for the poor became centers of “fun and games” for the members. The YMCA and YWCA grew out of and are expressions of the social gospel.

Development

Those who espoused the social gospel thought the world in which we live could and would become perfect. World War I, the Great Depression, and World War II effectively broke the back of the movement. But the practical fruit of the social gospel remains among those who rabidly disclaim its philosophy. Most Protestant denominations and our institutional brethren rail against the materialism of the social gospel but practice every aspect of the “institutional churches.” In the summer of 2009 I mentioned the social gospel to an American “Churches of Christ” missionary in American Samoa. He angrily condemned the materialism of the social gospel. I replied, “You practice everything they do but simply justify it in a different way.” He had no reply.

Impact Upon the Lord’s Church in the Nineteenth Century

The leading promoters of the social gospel among disciples of Christ were young, college-trained preachers who never really had any faith in the binding authority of the scriptures.

Most of all, the emergence of the social gospel among disciples was the work of young liberal ministers. A new generation of college-trained, sophisticated, socially conscious preachers, unawed by the conservative traditions of the restoration movement, began exploring new social and theological avenues which led some Disciples into the mainstream of liberal American Protestantism (Harrell.

85-86).

But

The success of the social gospel movement among disciples was made possible by moderate churchmen who broadened their concept of the church to include a social mission.... Of course, most moderates in the church insisted that Christianity should be a balance between social and spiritual work (Ibid. 88-89).

The older, influential, “moderate” preachers accepted part of the fruit of the social gospel while rejecting its philosophy. The younger generation of preachers recognized the obvious inconsistency between the leaders’ preaching and practice and rushed headlong down the “broad way” the old leaders timidly trod.

Probably the most important innovation to come out of the new social liberalism among Disciples was the building of institutional churches. In fact, the idea of making churches centers of community service was one of the most basic contributions of the social gospel movement (Ibid. 100).

Justification

How could they possibly justify in their own minds such obvious departure from the New Testament pattern? They did not believe the New Testament even contained a pattern for the church. They argued on the basis of “the end justifies the means” (cf. Romans 3:7-8).

Alva Taylor clearly described the work of the institutional church for Disciples readers: ‘How then must the church act.... She must do more than build massive stone walls and great organs. She must open her doors, not on Sunday alone but every day and night. Must provide night schools for busy boys and girls, men and women; provide labor bureaus and free libraries, build gymnasiums, yea, entice the masses to her sacred walls (Ibid).

Influence Upon Churches of Christ Today

Just as young, college-trained preachers who never really had faith in the authority of the scriptures led the movement in the late nineteenth century, even so, such young lions of the *Mission Magazine* variety led the charge into institutionalism among Churches of Christ in the mid twentieth century.

Many in the younger generation, well educated and driven by the social agenda of the period, found the traditional concerns of twentieth century Churches of Christ inadequate and irrelevant to the world in which they lived.... they differed significantly from their parents in the way they read the Bible. They declined to take it as a blueprint that lined out in detail the forms and structures of the primitive church... ” (Hughes. 307).

As “moderate” leaders, who rejected the social gospel philosophy but accepted the portions of its fruit that suited them, made possible the triumph of young left-wing preachers of the nineteenth century, so it was in the mid twentieth even until now. In 1991 I debated Mac Deaver on the issue of congregational benevolence. While rejecting outright the social gospel, Deaver contended that “benevolence is a means of evangelism” and proceeded, in answer to my questions, to accept every social gospel practice of the Salvation Army I could think to mention except soup kitchens. His reason for drawing the line on soup kitchens? “Churches of Christ don’t do that.”

Human tradition was the only reason he could give (cf. Matthew 15:1-9).

What is the practical fruit among churches of Christ today? By the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, mainstream Churches of Christ, while vociferously condemning the social gospel, have accepted into practice the entirety of its fruit. The Riverside Church of Christ in Gassville, Arkansas, on its web site, advertises, “Each Sunday at Riverside (just after communion), we dismiss the children to the fellowship hall for Kingdom Kids childrens worship.... Riverside is blessed with a very active and vibrant youth group. They engage in service projects and fun activities....” They advertise “Serenity House womens shelter,” “Christian Clinic Diabetic Meals,” “Annual School Supplies drive,” “Christmas dinner & gifts for families,” “No Debt, No Sweat Course,” and “Angel Food Ministry” which “provides area families the opportunity to purchase meals at deeply discounted prices.” Thus, many churches of Christ are becoming indistinguishable from denominational churches and are little more than glorified Red Crosses and YMCAs.

Attempted Justification

How do Christians justify such obvious apostasy in their own minds? They have no knowledge of the New Testament as a binding pattern for all ages (2 Timothy 1:13; Hebrews 8:5). They boast of the great numbers who come, thus contending “the end justifies the means” (cf. Romans 3:7-8). And they contend they are doing much good, not realizing that any work the Lord has not authorized in Scripture cannot be good (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Assessment

What is the relationship of the social gospel to the true gospel of Christ? The social gospel has a different Savior, who saves society rather than the souls of people (Luke 19:10; 1 Corinthians 15:3), an earthly rather than a heavenly kingdom (John 18:36; Romans 14:17; Matthew 16:18-19), a physical instead of spiritual mission and work of the church (Matthew 28:18-20; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 1 Corinthians 7:20-21; Romans 13:1-2; Philippians 4:15-16; Ephesians 4:12-16; Acts 2:44-45), an earthly rather than a heavenly hope (Matthew 6:19-21; Ephesians 4:4; I Peter 1:3-5), and it is in fact a different gospel that will lead to condemnation rather than salvation (Galatians 1:6-9; Romans 1:16; 6:23; John 6:26-27).

Conclusion

Our determination must be to preach the gospel of Christ that saves men’s souls (Mark 16:15-16) rather than the social gospel that seeks to change social, economic, and political institutions. We must follow the New Testament pattern for the work of the church (2 Timothy 1:13) rather than becoming just another Salvation Army.

Congregational Benevolence

The late Robert Jackson told how he walked into the dry cleaners one day, and the owner, a long time friend, said, "Brother Jackson, I've just got to ask you something. Someone told me a little baby was left on your door step, and you refused to take that little baby in." Brother Jackson facetiously replied, "No, that's not exactly right. Actually, I just pinched his head off!" The owner, realizing the joke, apologized for even asking. For years some brethren have refused to discuss our differences while slanderously calling me an "Anti"! Hateful name calling takes the place of loving discussion. I've been accused of opposing the care of orphans. Dear brother and sister, I've never even met someone opposed to caring for helpless little children.

The subject of church benevolent aid to the needy is loaded with emotion. We must be very careful not to let emotion cause us to violate the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9). Conversely, we must not let fear of doing something wrong paralyze us so we fail to do what we ought (James 4:17). What, then, is the scriptural work of the local church in ministering to the needy?

Background Principles

Individual Christians have the obligation to help the worthy poor as we have opportunity and ability regardless of whether or not the poor are Christians (Matthew 5:43-48; James 1:27). This is especially true of "orphans and widows" (James 1:27). We must always practice the great principle "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Yet, even as individuals we have primary responsibility in material aid first to our own families (1 Timothy 5:8) and second to our fellow Christians as our spiritual family (Matthew 25:40).

We must never forget that the local church is neither required nor allowed to do all the benevolent work we as individuals may and should do (1 Timothy 5:16). The church is a spiritual relationship (Romans 14:17). When a local church gives benevolent aid, it is an expression of fellowship in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:1-4).

To find the pattern for the work of the local church in ministering to the needy, we must examine every scripture dealing with the subject and obey this pattern but not go beyond it (2 Timothy 3:16-17; 2 Corinthians 8:1-2; 2 John 9). Our appeal must be to a "thus saith the Lord" rather than emotionalism (Colossians 3:17).

The Pattern Revealed

Nine New Testament passages address the subject of the work of the local church in ministering to the needy. If we will study them, we can discover the New Testament pattern on this subject.

Acts 2:44-45

The word "all" is unlimited in its context but is limited by its context. For example, in two passages the apostle Paul said, "All things are lawful for me" (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23). Does this mean there is nothing unlawful? If so, there is no such thing as sin, for "sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Rather, "All things are lawful" pertains to the realm of liberty, things allowed but not required (1 Corinthians 8:7-9). Even so, in Acts 2:45, the disciples divided their goods "among all." Is the term "all" absolutely unlimited? If so, they gave benevolent aid to everyone in the

world, a physical impossibility. Rather, “all” is limited by its context. The context is “all who believed.” The inspired writer Luke specifies who the “all” is - “all who believed.” The church rendered benevolent aid to believers.

Acts 4:32-35

The “each” who received benevolent aid (verse 35) were from “among them” (verse 34), i.e., “the multitude of those who believed” (verse 32).

Acts 6:1-4

The widows who received assistance were from “the number of the disciples.”

Acts 11:27-30

The “relief” was to the “brethren.”

Romans 15:25-26

The contribution was for “the poor among the saints.”

1 Corinthians 16:1-2

The “collection” was “for the saints.”

2 Corinthians 8:1-4

This contribution was for “the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.”

2 Corinthians 9:1-2,12-14

The collection was for “ministering to the saints.” The contribution supplied “the needs of the saints.” Sometimes brethren argue that verse 13 widens this church benevolence to unbelievers, since the apostle spoke of “your liberal sharing with them and all men.” The collection Paul referred to was specifically for the saints (Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4, 12-14; 9:1-2). To distribute these funds to alien sinners would be to misappropriate funds. Further, this collection was “fellowship” (2 Corinthians 8:4). May the church have fellowship with sinners? Rather, again “all” is limited by its context. The Jerusalem brethren were not selfish. They rejoiced whether the collection was for them or other poor Christians.

1 Timothy 5:3,9-10,16

The only widows who may be permanently enrolled as charges of the church are those “who are really widows.” Among other qualifications, they must have diligently followed every good work.” These are dedicated Christians.

That is every passage in the New Testament which addresses the work of ministering to the poor by the local church. Often brethren cite Galatians 6:10 and James 1:27 as applying to the congregation. Simply read the contexts of the two verses (Galatians 6:1-10; James 1:19-27), and you will see that in each case the inspired writer is addressing individual Christians. Do not confuse the benevolent work of the individual with that of the congregation as a collective whole (1 Timothy 5:16). Christians have many obligations that do not pertain to the local church, which is a spiritual relationship.

James 1:27 assigns Christians the obligation of caring for “orphans and widows in their trouble.” Brethren often want to shift their responsibilities. Some take the care of these helpless ones away from the individual and burden the church with them. And then the church sends a pittance off to a distant institution where they are shipped. Brethren congratulate themselves on their benevolence, castigate those who personally care for widows and orphans as “anti-orphan,” and the helpless, hapless widows and orphans languish in institutionalized care.

A couple who are members of a congregation where I used to preach have two biological children, two adopted children, and two nieces they raised. A woman who was defending church support of orphanages accused them of lacking love! The daughter of a couple who are members of a nearby congregation that supports orphanages had her children taken from her because of drug abuse. Although her parents and numerous aunts, uncles, and cousins are Christians, the children were sent to a Churches of Christ orphanage. The family, with a loving father and mother, not an institution, whether run by a board of directors or an eldership, is the divine arrangement for raising children (Ephesians 6:4; Titus 2:3-4).

The Bible Teaches The Church is to Engage in “Limited” Music

- ☛ Acts 16:25 - “sang”
- ☛ Romans 15:9 - “sing”
- ☛ 1 Cor. 14:15 - “sing”
- ☛ Ephesians 5:19 - “singing”
- ☛ Colossians 3:16 - “singing”
- ☛ Hebrews 2:12 - “sing”
- ☛ James 5:13 - “sing”

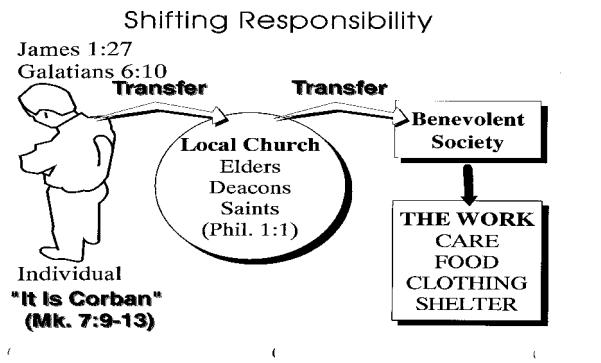
Shall we add instrumental music, another kind of music?

What happens if we go beyond God’s limits?

We are limited to “sing.”

We cannot go beyond the limits God set (2 Jn. 9)

Chart by Wayne Greeson



A Parallel

Seven New Testament passages address the subject of music in worship in this age (Acts 16:25; Romans 15:9; 1 Corinthians 14:15; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16; Hebrews 2:12; James 5:13). They all specify singing. Though the Scriptures never say, “Thou shalt not play an instrument in worship,” we realize that, since God specified the kind of music He wants (vocal), all other kinds (instrumental) are excluded.

Even so, nine New Testament passages specify to whom the church may give benevolent aid (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4,12-14; 9:1-2,12-14; 1 Timothy 5:3,10,16). They all say “saints” (Christians, disciples). No, the Lord never said to the church, “Thou shalt not give benevolent aid from the church treasury to alien sinners.” But do we not realize that, since the Lord specified the recipients of church benevolent help (saints), all others are excluded? If not, why not?

Incidental

One brother objected to this entire line of reasoning by contending that the fact the contribution by the churches was to needy saints is only an incidental detail and that church funds may be used for other work besides helping needy saints. New Testament commands and examples pertaining to church benevolence uniformly teach it is for needy Christians, and such contributions constitute fellowship (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). How can the brother insist on singing only as music in worship while denying that church benevolence is only to saints? Yes, other passages show that church funds may also be used for the preaching and teaching of the gospel (e.g., Philippians 4:15-16). What passage indicates the church may assist needy sinners from its treasury?

The Pattern Applied

Here are principles we should learn from this divine pattern. The “really widow” is the only one to be enrolled as a permanent charge of the local church (1 Timothy 5:1-16). The local church is limited in its benevolent work to the relief of needy saints. Its first obligation is to its own needy members (Acts 4:32-35). However, local churches may assist another church or other churches which have benevolent needs they are unable to meet. This is so each church may be equal in terms of its ability to meet its own needs (2 Corinthians 8:13-15). It is not the work of the church to eliminate poverty, provide the world’s medical needs, or eliminate the world’s social ills (John 12:8; Romans 14:17; 1 Timothy 3:14-15).

The church as God designed it is sufficient to do everything He designed it to do. We can take the gospel to the world, but we do not have the resources to eliminate the world’s material woes. Even the United States government can’t do that. Churches which have taken up these works have

The Bible Teaches the Church is to Engage in “Limited” Benevolence

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">☛ Acts 2:44-45 - “believers”☛ Acts 4:32-35 - “believers”☛ Acts 6:1-4 - “disciples”☛ Acts 11:27-30 - “brethren”☛ Rom. 15:25-26 - “saints”☛ 1 Cor. 16:1-2 - “saints”☛ 2 Cor. 8 - “saints”☛ 2 Cor. 9 - “saints”☛ 1 Tim. 5 - “really widows” | <p>Shall we add sinners,
another kind of people?</p> <p>What happens if we go beyond God’s limits?</p> |
|---|---|

We are limited to “saints.”

We cannot go beyond the limits God set (2 Jn 9).

turned from the spiritual gospel designed to save men's souls to a social gospel designed to make this world a better place to live. They have prostituted the church of Christ into a glorified Red Cross.

Conclusion

Here is a pattern for the benevolent work of the church that we must not shirk (2 Corinthians 8:24). When we have brethren in our midst who are doing without the necessities of life, or if we learn of congregations elsewhere which cannot meet their benevolent needs, we should rush to their assistance and so cement our ties of fellowship in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). But church relief of needy saints is also a pattern of benevolence we must not violate (2 John 9-11). Let us all abound in the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Institutionalized Benevolence

In the New Testament church, the independent, local congregation, as the organization God ordained for the church, was completely sufficient as an organization to do all the work God gave the church to do. This was specifically true in the benevolent work of the church. Three things are needed to carry out organized relief of the needy: supervision, ministration, and provision. The local church was given elders to supervise (1 Peter 5:1-4), deacons to minister (serve) (1 Timothy 3:8-13), and the collection from the members to provide (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The relief of the widows in Jerusalem exemplifies this (Acts 6:1-6). From within the local congregation in Jerusalem there was the supervision, ministration, and provision to care for the needy widows of the congregation. The local church did its own benevolent work without building or contributing to any organizations of human design.

Institutionalized benevolence (church support of humanly designed benevolent organizations) has always been a step in apostasy away from the New Testament pattern. It displays disregard of and lack of respect for the Lord's plan for His church. This was true in the falling away that led to Roman Catholicism.

In primitive times every case of poverty or suffering was separately brought to the notice of the bishop and personally relieved by a deacon. Afterwards institutions were founded for widows and orphans, poor and infirm, and generally placed under the superintendence of the bishop; but personal responsibility was diminished by this organized charity, and the deacons lost their original significance and became subordinate officers of public worship (Schaff. 2:143).

This was also true in the apostasy that led to the formation of the Christian Church in the nineteenth century.

The most generally accepted benevolent precept among Disciples was: 'It is the duty of every congregation to provide for its own poor.' ... Each local congregation should see that its own members did not suffer; if catastrophe exhausted one church's ability, it should call on neighboring congregations to help.

Congregational charity was to be dispensed by deacons who were appointed to care for such matters (Harrell. 52).

A much more noticeable, and more important, symptom of the growing denominational consciousness of church leaders was the growth of institutionalized benevolence in the late nineteenth century. Organized benevolence grew slowly in Disciples history because of the caustic anti-institutionalism preached by the church's early leaders (Ibid. 62).

The crucial point at which Disciples disagreed about benevolence was how it should be done. Conservatives remained convinced that the church was an adequate organization to accomplish all that needed to be done; liberal Disciples increasingly looked for more efficient and orderly methods (Ibid 69).

Even more telling was the conservative argument that organized benevolence killed the sense of local responsibility; Christians too often relieved their consciences with token contributions to remote institutions (Ibid).

Church support of human benevolent organizations is wrong for the same reasons that church support of human evangelistic organizations is wrong. When churches support a human organization to do the work of the church, they establish ties of fellowship with the human institution, since a contribution by a local church is an expression of fellowship (2 Corinthians 8:4; Philippians 4:15-16). The only tie in Christ is that of fellowship (1 John 1:3). Thus, by donating to a human organization, that man-made institution is attached to the churches in ties of fellowship. It becomes in reality a church organization. It thus is a violation of the New Testament pattern for the organization of the church (2 John 9).

Church support of human institutions violates the independence of the local church. The elders of those local churches surrender their oversight of that work to the board of directors of a human institution. The board of directors decides who shall be cared for and how. The churches just provide the money. This lowers the local church from the divine organization to do the work of the church to just a fund-raising organization for humanly devised organizations.

If the orphanage has an eldership as its overseers, those elders have unscripturally broadened their oversight in two ways. Elders are to rule the congregation of which they are members (1 Peter 5:1-2). An orphanage is an organization other than the local church. It is not the work of elders, in their function as elders, to oversee an orphanage. Since many congregations claim support of the orphanage as part of their benevolent work, the elders who superintend the orphanage oversee part of the work of many congregations rather than just the work of the local church where they are members.

In his debates with Roy E. Cogdill over a half century ago, Guy N. Woods presented an argument which convinced a large number of brethren that church support of an orphanage was scriptural. He argued that the orphan had become homeless, that the church had the right to supply a home for the orphan, and that the orphanage was the “home restored.” This became known as the “Home Restored” argument.

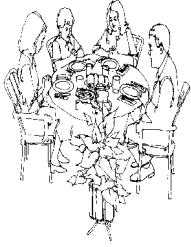
The fallacies of the argument are glaring. First, it assumes that the care of homeless children is the work of the church. Certainly individual Christians may and should help care for these helpless, unfortunate children as we have opportunity and ability. But this falls outside the area of the work of the local church.

Furthermore, the Home Restored argument is equivocation. “Equivocation” is “a fallacy in logical reasoning arising from an ambiguous use of a word or phrase” (Webster. 769). Brother Woods used the word “home” in three different ways in the same argument. The child had lost his family (definition 3a of “home” in Webster. 1082), he asserted the church could supply him a place to live (definition 1a), and the orphanage is a “home” (a corporation, see Articles).

An orphanage, a corporate body, is no more a family than the local church is. Furthermore, it cannot replace the divine arrangement, the family, any more than a denomination can replace the church. If a corporation can restore the family, I would like to see how brethren who employ this argument would restore the New Testament church. Would they set up a denomination and call it the “church restored”? Only another family can restore the family lost by an orphan (by adoption or foster care). So far as a place to live, the corporation known as an “orphan home” is not such a place but provides it.

Conclusion

Clever sophistry notwithstanding, church support of orphanages, whether they are corporations with a board of directors or supervised by elders, is a corruption of both the work and organization of the church of the Lord, is destructive of the autonomy of local congregations, and reduces local churches to mere fund raising organizations. Let us return to the Old Paths.

What Do You Mean by “Home”?		
Family Relationship	Dwelling Place	Corporate Body
		
“the social unit formed by a family living together in one dwelling” (Webster . 1082. def. 3a)	“the house and grounds with their appurtenances habitually occupied by a family” (Ibid. def. 1a)	“The name of this association is the Southern Christian Home” (Articles of Incorporation, Southern Christian Home, Morrilton, Arkansas).
“equivocation”: “a fallacy in logical reasoning arising from an ambiguous use of a word or phrase” (Webster . 769).		

Visit Orphans and Widows

Years ago, when we moved to a new town, my wife introduced herself to a neighbor. The neighbor coldly stated, “Oh, you’re those folks who don’t believe in taking care of orphans.” We must be doing something right if folks so malign us! “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake” (Matthew 5:11).

The essence of the religion of Christ is righteous living and good works rather than religious ceremony. James states:

“If anyone among you thinks he is religious, and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one’s religion is useless. Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world” (James 1:26-27).

How shall we care for widows and orphans?

Past Ages

God has always required that His people care for the poor and helpless. The righteous conduct of the patriarch Job included caring for widows and orphans (Job 31:16-22). The Lord taught Israel to be compassionate toward those who were helpless and easily oppressed (Deuteronomy 10:18; 14:28-29; 24:19).

Law of Christ

We also must be compassionate toward them. The help of our needy brethren in Christ will be a basis of the final judgment (Matthew 25:31-46).

We don’t do this by sending a little money to a distant institution. M.R. Vincent in his **Word Studies in the New Testament** remarks on the word “visit” in James 1:27:

“James strikes a downright blow here at ministry by proxy, or by mere gifts of money. Pure and undefiled religion demands personal contact with the world’s sorrow: to visit the afflicted, and to visit them in their affliction” (**Vincent’s Word Studies**, 1:736)

We also must honor our parents by caring for them when they are too aged and infirm to care for themselves (Exodus 20:12; Matthew 15:1-9; Ephesians 6:2-3).

How to Do It

But the Lord doesn’t just command care for the needy. He gives us guidelines how to accomplish it.

Each of us individually should care for the needy, including parents, widows, and orphans, who are kin to us. “But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever” (1 Timothy 5:8, cf. Verse 4). My “own” includes more than those of my household. They encompass my own parents, my brother’s children, and others to whom I am close kin, as exemplified in the Old Testament “near

of kin” redeemer (cf. Leviticus 25:47-49).

In contrast, the local church is only to permanently care for those who qualify as “really widows” (1 Timothy 5:3-10). The church should offer emergency, temporary help to its own needy members (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4). Congregations may assist directly other congregations which are unable to care for their own needy (Acts 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8 - 9).

If a Christian is caring for widows or orphans that are his kin, and he is unable to fulfill this responsibility, then he is needy, and the local church where he is a member should assist him (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35). If this becomes too great a burden for one congregation, other congregations should help this needy church (passages previously cited).

The local church is the specific organization for the Lord’s people to do His work (1 Corinthians 1:2). In His divine wisdom He has given the church everything it needs to discharge its own work (Ephesians 3:8-12). He has given elders to oversee the church (1 Peter 5:1-4), deacons to administer the benevolence of the church (Acts 6:1-6), and members to provide the funds (1 Corinthians 16:1-4). In the apostolic age the local church discharged its own benevolent work without building or contributing to institutions begun by men (Acts 6:1-6). We must do the same today.

Institutionalism

Most brethren today shift their responsibilities. Rather than doing their own work of benevolence, they want the churches to do it for them. Then, rather than allowing the church to do the work, they send off a contribution to a distant institution, where orphans are institutionalized without the love of real parents.

Conclusion

Christians should personally “visit” orphans and widows rather than delegating them to an institution. If you want to learn more about adoption, google “Sacred Selections.” To date this Sacramento, California couple has placed 314 children with adoptive families.

An Examination of Passages Used to Defend Church Benevolence to Sinners

The evenings of September 23, 24, 26, and 27, 1991 Brother Mac Deaver and I debated the church benevolence issue in Camden, Arkansas. Monday and Tuesday evenings Brother Deaver affirmed, "The Scriptures teach that a local church may grant benevolent aid to sinners." Thursday and Friday evenings I affirmed, "The exclusive New Testament pattern for the benevolent work of the local church from its treasury is the relief of needy Christians."

These propositions state a basic difference that divides churches of Christ today. Mainstream (institutional) Churches of Christ agree in theory and practice with Brother Deaver. A much smaller number of brethren endorse the position I espouse (cf. Matthew 7:13-14).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the passages used by institutional brethren to uphold their belief in church benevolent aid to sinners and to see if these arguments are valid.

Before we look at the scriptures our brethren employ as proof texts, think with me about what they need to find in these passages. We are discussing the benevolent work of the local church.

What indigent

people should the local church help? Furthermore, most institutional brethren do this work by setting up an organization separate from the local church to which congregations send donations. So, to settle our differences, institutional brethren need to find the local church doing the work of benevolence toward alien sinners by donating to an organization distinct from the congregation.

What Must Institutional Brethren Find?			
Church	Church Relief of Needy	Church Relief of Needy Sinners	Church Support of Human Benevolent Organization
Where Is the Scripture?			

Old Testament Israel

Brethren argue that Old Testament Israel was allowed to render benevolent aid to Gentiles and that, if the church cannot give benevolent aid to sinners, it has a lower standard than Old Testament Israel. Old Testament Israelites were indeed commanded to love the "stranger" who dwelt among them (Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 10:19), and, in addition to not mistreating them (Leviticus 19:33), were to help them (Leviticus 25:35) and to allow them to glean along with poor Israelites from the harvest of their fields (Leviticus 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19-21). This was all individual, but Israel also shared the third year tithe with the strangers living among them (Deuteronomy 14:28-29).

But these strangers among them had to observe the law just as Jews did (Leviticus 24:22; Numbers 15:16), and their sins were forgiven by the offering of animal sacrifices, just as the Israelites' were (Numbers 15:27-29). The stranger who sinned presumptuously was to be cut off

from Israel just as an Israelite was (Numbers 15:30). In fact, they entered into covenant relationship with the Lord just as the native born Jew (Deuteronomy 29:9-15) and had the same obligation to fear the Lord that the fleshly descendants of Jacob had (Deuteronomy 31:12-13). These “strangers” dwelling among them to whom Israel was to give benevolent aid were not unbelieving pagans but believing, obedient, God fearing, forgiven servants of the Lord God of Israel.

What was Israel to do with the unbelieving idolaters of the land? Utterly destroy them, showing them no mercy or pity! (Deuteronomy 7:1-2,16,24; 9:3; 10:16-18; 33:27) Brethren, I don’t think you want to use Old Testament Israel as an example of church benevolence to sinners.

Matthew 5:43-48

In this passage the Lord teaches us to love our enemies. He exemplifies this by presenting the general providence of God as our standard of love. God materially blesses those who hate Him, and we should do the same. Thus, if my next door neighbor were a Muslim imam who hated me to the point he wanted to kill me, if he were hungry, I should feed him. But the local church cannot do so, for congregational benevolence is an expression of fellowship in Christ (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). Will any affirm that the local congregation should extend fellowship to a false teacher? The local church is a spiritual relationship (1 Timothy 3:14-15), and it shows its love to its enemies in a manner consistent with its nature and mission, by sounding forth the Word of the Lord to all (1 Thessalonians 1:1,6-8).

Matthew 6:1-4

Brethren assert that this passage continues the context of Matthew 5:43-48, that it involves giving into the public treasury (cf. Mark 12:41-42), that the two passages combined demonstrate the Jewish public benevolence was for saint and sinner alike, and (whew!) that, therefore, the local church should contribute to sinners. I would be ashamed to try to justify a practice on such a convoluted argument. But it is false anyway.

It is obvious that Matthew 5:48 summarizes one section of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:21-48) and that Matthew 6:1 begins a new section (Matthew 6:1-18). Matthew 5:48 begins with “Therefore,” indicating the Lord is drawing a conclusion from preceding information. The six contrasts of Matthew 5:21-47 compare the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (verse 20) to the righteousness of a citizen of the kingdom (verse 48). The statement, “you shall be perfect” sums up both the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:20) and love like the love of our heavenly Father (Matthew 5:43-48), the highest expression of that righteousness (1 Corinthians 13:13; Colossians 3:14). Furthermore, there is no connecting word between Matthew 5:48 and 6:1.

Matthew 6:1 begins a section of three comparisons warning against performing righteous acts to be seen by men rather than to be seen by God. The Master is warning us against the kind of hypocritical religion practiced by the scribes and Pharisees. There are connecting words at the beginning of verses 2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,14,15,16,17, and 18 linking this whole section together.

Furthermore, if Matthew 6:1-4 were about congregational benevolence, and it is not, our institutional brethren grossly violate it. A Fort Smith, Arkansas TV station reported that an organization associated with the West-Ark Church of Christ sent a 40 foot container with about

\$100,000 worth of supplies for residents of American Samoa affected by the November, 2009 tsunami. For two days running in March, 2010 Haiti Christian Relief, connected to the Pleasant Valley Church of Christ in Little Rock, Arkansas made the front page of the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* for its relief work in Haiti following the earthquake. *Christian Chronicle* headlines blare trumpets about Churches of Christ sending relief aid to disaster victims around the world.

Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly (Matthew 6:2-4).

Not only that, if the passage were about the benevolent work of the church, it would in no way justify perverting the organization of the church by attaching humanly devised organizations to the local church, such as those noted above.

Finally, we have already established that Old Testament Jewish benevolence was not to sinners.

Jesus Fed the Multitudes

Once while I was in American Samoa I had a heated discussion with an American missionary over the benevolent work of the church. He was defending the practice of churches with which he worked, which sent \$100,000 to meet the needs of tsunami victims in American Samoa and donated supplies to the government run hospital in Pago Pago. This general benevolence is, of course, the same kind of “social gospel” work done by denominations.

The brother defended this by confidently asserting, “Jesus fed the multitudes.” Yes He did. Does this justify congregational benevolence toward alien sinners?

All four gospel accounts record Jesus’ feeding of five thousand men besides women and children with a little boy’s lunch of “five barley loaves and two small fish” (Matthew 14:14-21; Mark 6:34-44; Luke 9:11-17; John 6:2-13). Not only this, He later fed four thousand men in addition to women and children with seven loaves and a few fish (Matthew 15:30-38; Mark 8:1-9).

Since Jesus had not yet died on the cross, this took place under the Old Covenant (Hebrews 9:15-17), when fleshly Israel was still the Lord’s covenant people (Deuteronomy 5:1-3). So, in reality, though the multitudes who were fed were not all disciples of Christ, they were all the covenant people of God rather than “aliens” (cf. Ephesians 2:11-12). Thus, these examples have no bearing on the issue of church benevolence to alien sinners.

Furthermore, Jesus never used food as an attraction to get people to come hear Him. In the case of the four thousand, the multitude had been with the Lord three days with nothing to eat (Matthew 15:32; Mark 8:2).

John’s record of the feeding of the five thousand makes this even clearer. The same multitude He had fed on the Eastern side of the Sea of Galilee came to Capernaum the next day seeking Him (John 6:22-24).

And when they found Him on the other side of the sea, they said to Him, "Rabbi, when did You come here?"

Jesus answered them and said, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, you seek Me, not

because you saw the signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you, because God the Father has set His seal on Him' (John 6:25-27).

Their motive for seeking the Lord was wrong. Not only did the Master rebuke their carnality, although they continued to badger Him, He would not feed them again (John 6:28-40).

No, the Lord didn't make a mistake in feeding the multitudes. Jesus fed the multitudes through compassion (Matthew 15:32; Mark 8:2-3) and as a miracle to prove He is the bread of life (John 6:48). The multitudes made the mistake. They did indeed correctly conclude Christ was "the Prophet who is to come into the world" (John 6:14; cf. Deuteronomy 18:18-19), but they failed to follow Him because of their carnality.

Rather than authorizing the church to feed alien sinners, the passages demonstrate that the carnally minded are attracted by free food and that we should not use carnal attractions.

Soon after I began traveling to impoverished countries to preach the gospel, it became apparent many came hoping for handouts from rich American churches. When I informed them I had no money to give them, some left. They went to whatever missionaries were there at the time giving food, clothing, medicine, or other carnal enticements. They went from one to another, seeking, not the truth, but the things of this world.

Satan uses carnal attractions (Romans 8:5-8). The Lord appeals to those who are spiritually minded with the power of truth (Romans 8:1-4; John 8:32).

John 12:1-6; 13:28-29

A brother made the following argument to me. What the Lord taught while on earth applies to us (Hebrews 2:3). The disciples gave to the poor from their common treasury (John 12:1-6; 13:28-29). Thus, the church may contribute to sinners from the common treasury.

It should be obvious this argument has one glaringly obvious flaw - the conclusion does not follow from the premises. Nowhere does it state or imply that the poor to whom the disciples gave were sinners.

Acts 24:17

When the apostle Paul first stood before Felix, the Roman Governor of Judea, to answer the charges brought against him by Tertullus, the Roman lawyer representing the Jewish leaders, he observed, "Now after many years I came to bring alms and offerings to my nation" (Acts 24:17). Of course, he referred to his arrival in Jerusalem at the end of his third evangelistic journey to the Gentiles (Acts 21:17-18) at which time he and other messengers of the churches bore the benevolent contribution sent by Gentile churches to the Jewish brethren in Jerusalem (Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8 - 9), which James, Peter, and John had urged him to collect (Galatians 2:10).

Those who favor congregational benevolence to sinners argue that Paul's nation, Israel (Acts 22:3; 26:4; 28:19; Romans 9:3-5; Galatians 1:14), included many sinners, so this contribution was from congregations and was to both saints and sinners.

It is obvious that this contribution was not to every Israelite but to Jewish Christians. Paul himself forbid benevolent help to those too lazy to work (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Do you think

there might have been some folks too lazy to work in the Jewish nation? Furthermore, Paul had already promised those Gentile congregations who made the contribution that it was for “the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:25-26,30-31; 1 Corinthians 16:1; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4; 9:1,12-13). Did Paul misappropriate church funds?

The scholarship on this passage uniformly favors the view that by “my nation” Paul referred to Jewish Christians. Barnes commented, “‘To My Nation’ Not to all the nation, but to the poor saints or Christians who were in Judaea, ...” (34). Lenski concurs, :’In my nation’ They were not ordinary alms but gifts that the churches had made to God for the needy Jewish brethren” (973). Robertson agrees, “These ‘alms’ were for the poor saints in Jerusalem ... who were no less Jews” (419).

Commentaries written by brethren also agree.

The alms which Paul mentions here were the sums of money that he and his companions had collected in the churches of Macedonia and Achaia for the relief of the church at Jerusalem. This is the only mention of the Acts for the relief of the church at Jerusalem.... Paul mentions this to show that he had been interested and engaged in a good work of collecting sums of money to disperse among the poor brethren (Boles. 383).

“Paul had come to Jerusalem, after an absence of many years, to bring alms contributed by Christians in Macedonia, Achaia, and Asia to his poor Jewish brethren in Judea” (Lipscomb. 215). Even institutional brother Burton Coffman concurs:

‘Alms to my nation ... ‘He had canvassed the Gentile churches extensively collecting money to be distributed to the poor Christians in Jerusalem, and as they were of Jewish background, it was not an error to state that the alms had been brought to Paul’s ‘Nation’ (454).

Paul was answering a lying Roman lawyer hired by unbelieving Jews to try to get him condemned to die. They were accusing him of being a troubler of the nation who had profaned the Temple. Paul was answering by demonstrating his love for his nation. Thus, it was quite appropriate that he emphasize that the Disciples in Jerusalem were of the nation of Israel.

Acts 24:17 gives no support to church benevolent aid to alien sinners.

2 Corinthians 9:9

A brother argued that 2 Corinthians 9:9 is a quotation of Psalm 112:8-10 which pertains to giving to the poor “in all places and situations.” Psalm 112 in its entirety describes the character of “the man who fears the LORD, Who delights greatly in His commandments” (verse 1). It only states that he gives to the poor (verse 9) without specifying which poor. It certainly does not include those who will not work (2 Thessalonians 3:10), and there is no scriptural evidence that it includes congregational assistance to sinners.

Galatians 6:10

Since churches of Christ in the U.S. began to divide over institutionalism in the ‘50's, Galatians 6:10 has almost certainly been used more than any other verse as “proof” a local church could scripturally support an orphanage. In citing Galatians 6:10 to defend congregational benevolence to non-Christians, the late Batsell Barrett Baxter wrote, “This would seem to settle it

for all time..." ("The International Christian," July, 1971).

The passage says:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all, especially to those who are of the household of faith.

For this verse to really authorize church support of orphanages, it would have to mention or necessarily imply the work of the local church, church benevolence to non-Christians, and church support of human institutions. The context (Galatians 6:1-10) seems to be uniformly spiritual, individual Christians are addressed rather than the local church, and it certainly does not prove an organization of human design can be attached to the church. Brethren do not practice institutionalism because this passage authorizes it. They were looking for a proof text for a practice they were unwilling to give up and grabbed a passage that seemed to work.

Brethren argue that, since the apostle addressed the Galatian letter to "the churches of Galatia" (Galatians 1:2), Galatians 6:10 therefore pertains to church work. Paul addressed Second Thessalonians to "the church of the Thessalonians" (2 Thessalonians 1:1). Does that mean the local church must work to eat? (2 Thessalonians 3:10) I often preach to the church about subjects that are individual in application, such as the obligation to pay our taxes (Romans 13:7) and the responsibility of husbands and wives to give the "affection due" each other (1 Corinthians 7:1-5).

Some use Galatians 2:10, the shared concern of James, Cephas, John, Paul, and Barnabas for the poor, as evidence Galatians 6:10 pertains to congregational assistance to sinners. The passage doesn't reveal what poor were to be relieved or if it was to be done individually or congregationally. Other passages show that it included congregational relief of needy Christians (Romans 15:25-28; 1 Corinthians 16:1-4; 2 Corinthians chapters 8 - 9). No passage includes church support of non-saints.

Also, some argue that the use of the plural "brethren" (verse 1), "us"(verses 9-10), and "we" (*Ibid*) proves this pertains to the church. But if I take a plurality of brethren as witnesses to speak to a brother who has sinned against me, the church is not functioning (Matthew 18:15-17). If a plurality of brethren go fishing, the church hasn't gone fishing.

Sometimes brethren argue that Galatians 6:6, "Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches," must pertain to the church or else the church cannot support preachers and teachers. Several passages authorize congregational, financial support of preachers (e.g., 2 Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15-16), but Galatians 6:6 is not one of them.

If Galatians 6:10 authorizes church support of orphanages, it authorizes much more. It instructs us to do good to "all men." Surely, if doing good to all men justifies church supported institutions for homeless children, it also sanctifies church of Christ hospitals for the sick, shelters for the homeless, and soup kitchens for the hungry. Is it any wonder that Brother Mac Deaver endorsed as scriptural all of these things when he debated me?

If "do good to all" in this passage authorizes congregational benevolence to unbelievers and church support of human institutions, it is teaching the Social Gospel. Thus, it is no surprise that Rubel Shelly, a prominent leader of the "New Hermeneutic" forces among extremely liberal Churches of Christ, openly advocates the social gospel.

*The call to follow Jesus' example of self-emptying service is the justification for every kind of help program that churches wish to pursue.
Counseling, day care, literacy, food and housing, drug and alcohol treatment*

programs - all are ways of caring for and nurturing people (Second Incarnation.166).

What scriptural proof does Shelly offer? Galatians 6:10! (Ibid) And why not? He is taking to its logical consequences over half a century of institutional argument.

The misuse of Galatians 6:10 has given institutional brethren much more than they intended over fifty years ago. How did they go astray? They ripped a text from its context, misused it as a proof text, and created a pretext. Brethren, have you “proven” more than you intended?

Ephesians 4:12

Some argue that “ministry” in Ephesians 4:12 is a reference to benevolent work and authorizes church support of sinners. The term just means “service” (**New American Standard Bible**) and is used of the work of preaching (Acts 20:24) as well as many kinds of service. The passage itself reveals nothing about who is to be served.

James 1:27

Brethren argue that if James 1:27 does not authorize church support of orphans, then the church cannot practice “pure and undefiled religion.” The entire context of this passage (James 1:19-27) is uniformly individual. Just because this is the only use of the phrase “pure and undefiled religion” in the Bible doesn’t mean other passages do not address the subject. This misinterpretation of the passage elevates the work of relieving the physically needy above the work of preaching the gospel. The Lord commanded, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15). He didn’t command the church to “Go into all the world and relieve all the poor.” The church is “the pillar and ground of the truth”(1 Timothy 3:14-15) not the soup kitchen for all the poor.

The Power of God

For generations the Salvation Army, Methodist Church, and other liberal denominations have sought to win converts by first caring for their material needs. This leads to an important question. By what means shall we lead the lost to Christ?

Men's Answers

In the Nashville Meeting in December, 1987, in which institutional and noninstitutional preachers from churches of Christ met to discuss their differences, Brother Lewis G. Hale argued that anything which helped get the lost to hear the gospel is scriptural as an aid to evangelism. Of course, this argument includes such popular recreational activities as church camps and "family life centers" (gymnasiums) as authorized activities. Thus, in the argument, every form of social gospel activity in which denominations engage is justified as an aid to evangelism.

Nature of Authority

Are benevolence and recreation means of evangelism? In the first place, the argument itself demonstrates ignorance of the nature of authority. Benevolence and recreation are two kinds of works, and evangelism is another work, just as singing is one kind of music and playing is another. One work (benevolence or recreation) is no more authorized as a means to another work (evangelism) than one kind of music (playing) is authorized as a means to another (singing). Papers, radio programs, pulpit preaching, and home Bible studies are means (methods) of

Authorized Aids or Unauthorized Additions?	
Authorized Action: Sing - Ephesians 5:18-19	Unauthorized Addition: Play
Authorized Aids: Parts, Song Books, Song Leader, Pitch Pipe	

Authorized Aids or Unauthorized Additions?		
Authorized Activity: Evangelism - 1 Thess. 1:6-8; Phil. 4:15-16	Unauthorized Addition: Church Benevolence to Sinners	Unauthorized Addition: Church Sponsored Recreation
Authorized Means: News Paper, Bulletin, Radio, TV, Pulpit, Home Bible Studies		

evangelism (taking the good news of salvation in Christ to the lost); but benevolence (material assistance to the needy) and recreation are other works.

Contradicts Scriptural Teaching

Furthermore, Jesus, our perfect example, refused to use benevolence as an enticement to the lost. He miraculously fed five thousand men besides women and children as proof of His claims (John 6:1-14). But when they sought Him for bread the next day, He refused to feed them and exhorted them to seek everlasting life rather than perishable bread (John 6:26-27).

The apostle Paul observed, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Kingdom blessings are spiritual, not material. The Lord’s church is not a glorified Red Cross. We must not lead people to believe otherwise by enticing them with benevolent aid.

The New Testament limits the benevolent work of the local church to the relief of needy saints (Christians) (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4,12-14; 9:1-2,12-14; 1 Timothy 5:3,9-10,16). We dare not violate this divine pattern (Colossians 3:17; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2 John 9).

Recreational activities as enticements to hear the gospel are an even grosser corruption of God’s plan. The Lord appeals to our higher natures, our spirits, through reason and expressions of love, whereas Satan appeals to our flesh (Romans 8:5-8). When we use fun and frolic as lures to the lost so we can preach to them, we are making carnal appeals. We are helping Satan. The church of Christ is not a sanctified YMCA.

Are We Different?

If we rely on fun, food, and frolic to attract sinners to hear some gospel, what do we offer that is any different from denominations? How do we make the Lord’s church distinctive from churches of men? How can we expect to compete in giving material help and recreation to sinners? If we offer hamburgers, the wealthy denominations will give steaks. If we offer a retreat (camp out), the denominations will send them on a ski trip to Vale. We have only one thing to offer that no denomination does - the truth that leads to salvation (John 8:31-32).

God’s Answer

The inspired apostle announced the theme of the Roman epistle, the greatest treatise ever written on the plan of salvation, when he declared:

For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for every one who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek
(Romans 1:16).

Men have many so-called means with which to try to reach the lost, but God has but one power to save - the gospel.

And how are we to take this message of salvation in Christ to the lost?

For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe (1 Corinthians 1:21).

If we are to reach the lost, we must proclaim Christ “publicly and from house to house” (Acts

20:20). There are many methods of evangelism - pulpit preaching, home studies, classes, radio and television preaching, booths at county fairs, papers, newspaper articles, correspondence courses, circulars, debates, lectureships, web pages, Facebook, YouTube, etc., and these and others are all authorized generically by the directive to take the gospel to the lost (Mark 16:15; Matthew 28:19).

But the divine means of reaching the lost remains ever the same - the preaching of the gospel.

Example of First Century Church

The first century church evangelized the entire world in one generation (Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:5-6,23). How did they accomplish so daunting a task? They “went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4). There is not the slightest evidence the first century church ever used benevolence or recreation as an enticement to lure sinners to hear the gospel. If we will follow the pattern of the first century church, we can have the same results they did.

Conclusion

How shall we reach the lost for Christ in our generation? Men have many answers. But God’s answer alone will work (Isaiah 55:8-11; Jeremiah 10:23; Romans 11:33-36). What is the divine answer?

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15).

Church Social Meals

Each time I have visited Nigeria, the Christians have been wonderful to show me love and hospitality. Just as the food and climate would be strange to Nigerians in America, the food and climate are strange to me in Nigeria. But the Christians in Nigeria do all they can to make the transition easier for the preachers in our travel party. We remember with gratitude the many expressions of love and acts of hospitality practiced by the wonderful disciples of Christ in Nigeria (cf. John 13:34-35; Acts 16:15,34; Romans 12:9-13; Hebrews 13:1-2; 1 Peter 4:8-9; 3 John 5-8).

But in these same expressions of love and hospitality were some things that bother us. While some of these things are matters of judgment, one is not. Some preachers and congregations do not understand the distinction between the work of the individual and the work of the church in providing social meals. One church even provided a lavish feast for one of the preachers in connection with their worship assembly. I encountered the same problem in American Samoa and Samoa. It is this problem which I address.

What Is the Issue?

Someone objects, “Oh, you’re one of those folks who think it’s a sin to eat in a church building. You must think the building is holy.” No, I don’t think the meeting house is “holy” in the sense “*of things which on account of some connection with God possess a certain distinction and claim to reverence, as places sacred to God which are not to be profaned...*” (Thayer. 8). However, the meeting house, as part of the resources of the local church, is “set apart to God, to be, as it were, exclusively His” (Ibid. 7), just as the treasury of the local church is. Thus, it, as the local church treasury, is to be used exclusively for those functions in which the local church is authorized to engage.

Nor do I object to food being eaten in the church building. When we assemble to worship, a mother may feed her baby. Brethren who travel from far places for a class or lectureship may, incidentally to their coming together to study and worship, take refreshment before they leave. But these things are incidental to worship and Bible study, authorized church activities (cf. Acts 20:7-11).

I do not oppose brethren socializing or eating together. Individual members of the church may and should get together for social meals (1 Corinthians 11:22,34). The individual Christian may do many things in which the local church as a collective body is not authorized to engage (1 Timothy 5:16). Christians may do bodily exercise (1 Timothy 4:8), discharge citizenship rights (Romans 13:1-7; Acts 25:9-11), and fulfill marital duties (1 Corinthians 7:2-5), but that doesn’t give the church the right to build a gymnasium, promote a political candidate, or provide the marital bed!

What then is the issue? The issues are, Are social meals a scriptural function of the local church? and Should the local church assemble for the purpose of eating a common meal?

What Are Social Meals?

In Acts 2:47 the inspired historian Luke informs us of the early disciples in Jerusalem:
And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers.

The phrase “breaking of bread”

means to partake of food, and is used of eating as in a meal. The figure (or idiom) arose from the fact that among the Hebrews bread was made, not in loaves as with us, but in round cakes about as thick as the thumb. These were always broken, and not cut (Bullinger. 839).

The context determines the kind of meal under consideration. The New Testament recognizes two kinds of meals. There is one's "own supper" (1 Corinthians 11:21), which he eats because he is hungry (verse 34). Then there is the "Lord's Supper" (verse 20), which Christians eat in memory of Jesus' sacrifice for us (verses 23-26). The meal of Acts 2:42, in a context of spiritual things, must be the Lord's Supper. But in verse 46 we read:

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart (NASB).

Here the "breaking of bread" is in contrast with the disciples coming together in the temple and is what disciples did together "from house to house." They were eating "their meals" rather than the Lord's Supper. Thus, these were common rather than holy meals, eaten, not in memory of Christ, but because they were hungry.

The word "social" means "marked by or passed in pleasant companionship with one's friends or for the sake of companionship" (Webster. 2161). Thus, a "social meal" is a common meal (eaten because one is hungry) engaged in "for the sake of companionship." Christians should indeed engage in such meals individually as a function of the home (Acts 2:46). **The question is: Are such meals proper functions of the church?**

Where Is The Authority?

We must be able to prove that all we do is authorized of the Lord (Colossians 3:17; 2 John 9; 1 Thessalonians 5:21). The purpose for which we do something must be scripturally authorized. Authority for things we do incidentally to accomplishing a scriptural purpose is included in the authorization for the purpose itself. For example, the church is authorized to assemble to worship (1 Corinthians 11:18-26; 14:15,23; 16:1-2). This includes everything essential (a place, the meeting house or some other place) and helpful (pews, pulpit, restrooms, water fountain, heating system, loud speaker system) to carry out this scriptural activity.

But where do the Scriptures authorize the local church to provide social meals for its members? Nothing can be claimed as essential or incidental to an unauthorized activity.

Often the claim is made that the church social meals are incidental to the church assembling to worship. Some argue, "The members bring their own food. We come to worship and just stay after to eat." If the church has provided from its treasury a special room for these meals, kitchen facilities for their preparation, and tables, chairs, plates, cups, and utensils for their consumption, how can it reasonably be argued they are

Excluded or Included?	
Authorized Action: Assemble to Worship - 1 Cor. 11:18-26; 14:15,23; 16:1-2	Excluded Addition: Church Social Meal
Included Incidentals: building, pews, lights, restrooms, water fountain, etc.	

merely incidental to assembling for worship? Is a kitchen necessary or incidental to worship? How does eating a meal together after all worship and study for the day aid worship or Bible study?

Under Which Function?

The church may come together and provide facilities for anything necessary or incidental to its authorized activities: preaching and teaching the word of God (Acts 20:7), worship (*Ibid*), discipline (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) and relieving needy saints (Acts 6:1-6). Under which of these categories do social meals fit? They are not evangelism (John 6:25-35,48-63), nor are they edification (Acts 20:32; Romans 14:17). We are forbidden to eat socially with one from whom the church has withdrawn (1 Corinthians 5:11). And if someone claims these meals are worship, the apostle Paul by inspiration plainly forbids them! (1 Corinthians 11:20-34)

Forbidden

The only time a church social meal is mentioned in the Bible, it is condemned

(1 Corinthians 11:22). The apostle explained that social meals are a function of the home, not of the church (1 Corinthians 11:34). If this were only an abuse of the Lord's Supper, why didn't Paul just stop the abuse? **He stopped the church social meals!**

Abused Passages

Sometimes brethren try to find church social meals in such passages as Acts 2:42,46; 6:1-2; and 20:11. We have already examined Acts 2:42,46, so let's briefly look at the other passages.

Acts 6:1-2 is a record of benevolent (helping the poor) work of the first century church. There is no record here of the church coming together to eat a common meal. The only ones the church fed were poor widows. This passage certainly doesn't authorize church social meals.

To understand Acts 20:7-11, we must recognize the time element. Apparently the disciples were observing Roman time (day from midnight to midnight) rather than Jewish (day from sun down to sun down). The disciples came together on the first day of the week to break bread and Paul preached to them until midnight (verse 7). If this is Jewish time it is Saturday night; if Roman time it is Sunday night. A sleeper in the audience accidentally and dramatically interrupted the proceedings (verses 8-10). Paul then spoke until daybreak, ate, and departed (verse 11). If this is Jewish time, Paul departed the same day (the first day of the week), not the next day. If it is Roman time, he departed the next day (Monday morning), just as verse seven indicates he had planned. This must be Roman time.

Thus, in verse seven the disciples ate the Lord's Supper together (as 1 Corinthians 11:17-34 demands) on the first day of the week, and in verse eleven Paul ate alone to refresh himself after speaking all night and in preparation for his journey. Acts 20:11 is not an example of a social meal but of "a common meal Paul ate in preparation for his expected departure" (Boles. 319-20). It is parallel to a preacher eating in his study incidentally to doing his work there. There is absolutely no indication this was a church function.

Love Feasts

Some claim the "love feasts" of the brethren (Jude 12; 2 Peter 2:13) were church social meals. This is argument by assumption and assertion. Where is scriptural proof that love feasts were church social meals? These may have been individual functions, as in Acts 2:46, or the Lord's Supper, as in Acts 2:42. Did Peter and Jude authorize what Paul forbid?

Fellowship

Why do brethren call these social meals “fellowship”? The New Testament uses the word “fellowship” to describe communion with God in Christ (1 John 1:3,7), communion with saints in Christ (1 John 1:3), communion with the body and blood of Christ in the Lord’s Supper (1 Corinthians 10:16), sharing in suffering for Christ (2 Corinthians 1:6-7), partnership in the work and worship of the Lord in His church (Acts 2:42; 2 Corinthians 8:23), partnership in financing the Lord’s work (Acts 2:42; 1 Timothy 6:18), partnership in the gospel by support of a preacher (Philippians 1:5; 4:15), and distributing to the necessity of the saints (Romans 12:13; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13). Where do the Scriptures use this word to describe or denote a social meal? Are some so carnally minded their mouths water when they think of fellowship in Christ? (cf. Romans 14:17; 8:6; Philippians 3:17-21; Colossians 3:1-4). We must use Bible words in scriptural ways (1 Peter 4:11). Social meals are no more fellowship than sprinkling is baptism. Such “language of Ashdod” (Nehemiah 13:23-24) indicates unscriptural, denominational attitudes. To pervert a scriptural word to an unscriptural use to justify one’s practice is to teach and practice error.

Conclusion

There is no scriptural authority for church social meals, and the apostle Paul even forbids them.. Congregations which engage in this practice are going beyond the doctrine of Christ (2 John 9-11). Some churches of Christ have traded “standing on the promises” for eating on the premises. They appeal to people with fun, food, and frolic rather than book, chapter, and verse. The church of Christ is a spiritual institution with a spiritual mission (Romans 14:17; 1 Timothy 3:14-15). Let us get the church out of the business of feeding our bellies and renew our efforts at feeding souls!

The Market-Driven Church

In January, 2008 I was in Calabar, Nigeria, staying in the home of Brother Bassey. A local preacher came by to visit and boasted how the church where he was preaching had grown in just three years from a Sunday morning attendance of 150 to 1500. That is more than a little spectacular. How had such phenomenal growth been achieved? They had consulted a “church growth specialist.” This professional had advised them that the one thing young adults in Calabar were most interested in was job opportunities. So the church had opened a job placement service and presto - stunning growth!

This church has adopted a philosophy of growth pioneered in Protestant evangelical denominations known variously as “Market-Driven,” “Seeker-Friendly,” ‘Seeker-Sensitive,’ “Purpose-Driven,” or “New Paradigm.”

Rather than expose and correct the superficiality and wrong mindedness of a generation addicted to fun, amusement and self, the modern church has all too often chosen to go with the flow and give ‘them’ what they want.... Setting the agenda ... is Willow Creek and its quasi-denomination, the Willow Creek Association (WCA) (Gilley. 33).

Perhaps no single source carries as much weight in the ‘seeker-sensitive’ church as George Barna and his Barna Research Group. Barna, the evangelical counterpart to George Gallup,... assures us that churches sell (or market) their product the same way that major retailers sell shoes and tools (Ibid. 35).

There are churches of Christ following this plan, in America as well as in Nigeria. “In 1997 my congregation (the Southwest Church of Christ) began implementing the Purpose-Driven model” (Adcox. 6 - 7). Besides, for several years most churches of Christ have adopted the position advocated by Lewis G. Hale in the Nashville Meeting in December, 1987, that anything which helps get the lost to hear the gospel is scriptural as an aid to evangelism. This is just a less formal version of the market driven philosophy of church growth.

If we adopt this position, as Gilley states, our first problem is that we are marketing a product that to the vast majority of people is repulsive (1 Corinthians 1:18-24). The cross is still an offense to worldly people (Galatians 5:11). Girls may wear a gold cross as jewelry, but how many people are willing to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow Jesus? (Matthew 16:24) In fact, the market-driven philosophy - “given ‘em what they want; the customer is always right” - is the exact opposite of “Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

If we follow this model for church growth, “God becomes transformed into a product to be sold, faith into a recreational activity to be done, and the Church into a club for the like-minded” (Wells. 180, as quoted by Gilley. 36). Such churches typically have a family life center (glorified gymnasium) to provide recreation, support a camp for “retreats” and summer camping for the young, have a “fellowship hall” in which they have regular church dinners which they mislabel “fellowship” (eating a common meal is not Bible fellowship), have a day care center and perhaps a school for secular education, perhaps sponsor a scout troop, and conduct weight loss classes. Adult singles have activities together so they can find a mate. Sermons are short, pleasant, full of stories and humor but short on scripture, and address psychological concerns rather than requirements for salvation. Worship (so called) is entertaining, with shallow camp style songs (7-11 songs, seven words eleven times) and/or shallow chorus type songs (such complex music that only the musically trained can sing them, again

with little scripture content). There is something to appeal to everyone, and no one is challenged to sacrifice the world for Christ.

Did Christ market the gospel, providing folks “felt needs” so He could say a little to them about their real need, salvation? (In marketing, this is known as “bait and switch.”) He certainly fed 5000 hungry men besides women and children (Matthew 14:15-21) and later 4000 (Matthew 15:32-39). But He did not offer them food as an attraction to come, but fed large groups of people by miraculously multiplying tiny quantities of food as proof He is the bread of life (John 6:35). In fact, when the multitudes came to Him for the purpose of receiving food for the belly, He rebuked their carnality and refused to feed them (John 6:26-27,30-35). Indeed, the Lord gave sight to the blind, caused the lame to walk, cleansed the lepers, enabled the deaf to hear, and raised the dead (Matthew 11:5), not to attract crowds by filling “felt needs,” but as proof He “is the Christ, the Son of God” (John 20:30-31). Rather than giving people what they wanted so they would come hear a little gospel, the Master repeatedly, though vainly, commanded those whom He healed to “tell no one” of the miracles (Matthew 8:4; Mark 7:36; Luke 5:14; 8:56). Jesus Christ never supplied “felt needs” in order to attract sinners to hear the gospel.

Christ and His apostles certainly didn’t market the gospel. How’s this for a sales pitch? “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me” (Matthew 16:24). How about this reply to a scribe who said he would follow the Lord wherever He went: “Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head” (Matthew 8:19-20)? Was Paul advocating “give ‘em what they want” when he stated:

For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ:

whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame - who set their mind on earthly things (Philippians 3:18-19)?

The argument I have heard the most to justify the use of these “marketing techniques” to attract sinners is their success. Look how successful the churches are which provide all these services! The mega churches, those with a Sunday morning attendance over 2000, are market-driven churches.

Are numbers the measure of spiritual success?

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.

Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it (Matthew 7:13-14).

One of the powerful proofs that the market-driven mania is essentially wrong-headed is its popularity. The majority is always on the road to hell.

The market-driven philosophy makes worldly people rather than the will of Christ the standard which determines the work of the church (Colossians 3:17). “Love not the world” (1 John 2:15-17) is corrupted to “give ‘em what they want.” Rather than converting the world to Christ, it converts the church to the world. Our job is to call a sinful world to repentance (Acts 17:30-31), not to make Christ attractive to impenitent sinners (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). The church is a spiritual relationship (Ephesians 1:3,22-23), and the work of the local church is spiritual: preaching the gospel (1 Thessalonians 1:6-8), edifying disciples (Ephesians 4:11-16), and ministering to needy saints (2 Corinthians 8:1-4). The Lord doesn’t employ carnal attractions to get an audience (Romans 8:5-8). Our worship should glorify God and edify Christians (Hebrews 13:15; 1 Corinthians 14:26) rather than entertain the shallow world. Our

preaching should be built on Scripture and designed to reprove, rebuke, and exhort (2 Timothy 3:16 - 4:5).

The market-driven model for church growth is taken from human philosophy found in “how to” books by Protestant evangelicals who have no respect for the authority of Christ Jesus. Our manual for church growth is the book of Acts. We must preach Christ and Him crucified rather than market the church to worldly sinners.

Mainline Churches of Christ - Salvation Army of the Twenty-first Century

Who doles out enormous amounts of relief to down and out sinners in order get them to hear some preaching and come to church? Why, that's the Salvation Army of course.

That's the twentieth century answer. In the twenty-first century it's "Move over Salvation Army, here comes the Churches of Christ!" A Fort Smith, Arkansas TV station reported that an organization associated with the West-Ark Church of Christ sent a 40 foot container with about \$100,000 worth of supplies for residents of American Samoa affected by the November, 2009 tsunami. For two days running in March, 2010 Haiti Christian Relief, connected to the Pleasant Valley Church of Christ in Little Rock, Arkansas made the front page of the *Arkansas Democrat Gazette* for its relief work in Haiti following the earthquake. *Christian Chronicle* headlines were not about evangelistic efforts around the world but about Churches of Christ sending relief aid to disaster victims around the world. The mainline Churches of Christ are not a whit behind the chiefest of social gospel denominations.

Justification

Of course our brethren in mainline (institutional) Churches of Christ would argue that these are evangelistic efforts. By the way, the parallel continues, because so does the Salvation Army. The Salvation Army was started by William Booth in 1865 to evangelize impoverished people in England, and it has not changed its focus, message, or methods.

Arguments used over forty years ago to justify church support of orphanages led to the acceptance of these social gospel relief efforts. Brethren misapplied Galatians 6:10 to the benevolent work of the church, even though the passage is obviously directed to individual Christians. If this passage applies to the church, which it doesn't, all people, even the vilest of sinners, are proper subjects of church benevolence.

But, beginning in a debate with Mack Deaver in 1991, I have repeatedly encountered the argument that "Benevolence is a means of evangelism," until today this is the primary argument I encounter from institutional brethren to justify general benevolence by the church. The end result? Mainline Churches of Christ are out social gospeling the Salvation Army!

Everybody Loves Us!

Wow! "Church of Christ" is no longer a dirty word! Of course the news media and even the public at large react favorably to these relief programs. After all, that's what they've done for decades! "If you were of the world, the world would love its own. Yet because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). Brethren, have you joined the world?

Benevolence a Means of Evangelism?

Is benevolence a means of evangelism? In the first place, the argument itself demonstrates ignorance of the nature of authority. Benevolence is one kind of work, and evangelism is another work, just as singing is one kind of music and playing is another. One work (benevolence) is no more authorized as a means to another work (evangelism) than one kind of music (playing) is authorized as a means to another (singing). Papers, radio programs, pulpit preaching, and home Bible studies are means (methods) of evangelism (taking the good news of salvation in Christ to the lost); but benevolence

(material assistance to the needy) is another work.

Authorized Aids or Unauthorized Additions?	
Authorized Activity: Evangelism - 1 Thessalonians 1:6-8; Philippians 4:15-16	Unauthorized Addition: Church Benevolence to Sinners
Authorized Means: Newspaper, Bulletin, Radio, TV, Pulpit, Tracts, Home Bible Studies, etc. - Acts 5:42	

Contradicts Scriptural Teaching

Furthermore, Jesus, our perfect example, refused to use benevolence as an enticement to the lost. He miraculously fed five thousand men besides women and children as proof of His claims (John 6:1-14). But when they sought Him for bread the next day, He refused to feed them and exhorted them to seek everlasting life rather than perishable bread (John 6:26-27). The Master never used benevolence as an attraction.

The apostle Paul observed, “for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17). Kingdom blessings are spiritual, not material. The Lord’s church is not a glorified Salvation Army. We must not lead people to believe otherwise by enticing them with benevolent aid (cf. Romans 8:5-8).

The New Testament limits the benevolent work of the local church to the relief of needy saints (Christians) (Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-4; 11:27-30; Romans 15:25-26; 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; 2 Corinthians 8:1-4,12-14; 9:1-2,12-14; 1 Timothy 5:3,9-10,16). We dare not violate this divine pattern (Colossians 3:17; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2 John 9).

Are We Different?

If we rely on food and clothing to attract sinners to hear some gospel, what do we offer that is any different from denominations? How do we make the Lord’s church distinctive from churches of men? How can we expect to compete in giving material help to sinners? If we offer hamburgers, the wealthy denominations will give steaks. We have only one thing to offer that no denomination does - the truth that leads to salvation (John 8:31-32).

Conclusion

The first century church evangelized the entire world in one generation (Mark 16:15; Colossians 1:5-6,23). How did they accomplish so daunting a task? They “went everywhere preaching the word” (Acts 8:4).

Mainline Churches of Christ are taking relief efforts to down and out sinners everywhere. What’s the result? From 1945 to 1980 the church of Christ was perhaps the fastest growing religious body in the United States. Since 1980 the Lord’s church in this country has actually lost membership (<http://www.christianchronicle.org/article2158685>).

Brethren, let’s get back to the way the first century church did it.

Voices from the Past

Mainstream Churches of Christ are far along in a falling away that began around the time I was born, and I'm on Social Security! The drift has taken place so slowly that most brethren think the modern innovations from the divine pattern for the church have always been practiced. You can disagree with the positions I espouse concerning the work and organization of the church, but the fact is, on almost all the issues the divide brethren today, I stand where the consensus of members of the church of Christ stood prior to World War II. That certainly doesn't prove I'm right, but it does prove who has changed. But don't take my word for it.

Work of the Church

One of the better known names among brethren in the mid twentieth century was B.C. Goodpasture, editor of "Gospel Advocate" magazine from 1939 until his death in 1977. B.C. Goodpasture represented the consensus among brethren throughout his editorial career. Here's what he wrote about the work of the church in a 1948 "Gospel Advocate" editorial:

It is not the mission of the church to furnish amusement for the world or even for its own members. Innocent amusement in proper proportion has its place in the life of all normal persons, but it is not the business of the church to furnish it.... For the church to turn aside from its divine work to furnish amusement and recreation is to pervert its mission. It is to degrade its mission. Amusement and recreation should stem from the home rather than the church.... If the church will discharge its duty in preaching the gospel, in edifying its members, and in helping the worthy poor, it will not have desire or time merely to amuse and entertain (May 20, 1948).

Overseeing or Sponsoring Churches

Faithful brethren have long recognized the inherent dangers of the sponsoring church arrangement. For example, David Lipscomb warned:

All meetings of churches or officers of churches to combine more power than a single church possesses is wrong. God's power is in God's churches. He is with them to bless and strengthen their work when they are faithful to him. A Christian, one or more, may visit a church with or without an invitation and seek to stir them up to a faithful discharge of their duties. But for one or more to direct what and how all the churches shall work, or to take charge of their men and money and use it, is to assume the authority God has given to each church. Each one needs the work of distributing and using its funds as well as in giving them (David Lipscomb [longtime editor of "Gospel Advocate"] "Gospel Advocate, March 24, 1910), quote sent to me by Bennie Johns).

Brother H. Leo Boles taught: "There is no example in the New Testament of two or more churches joining together their funds for support of the gospel" (Advocate, Nov. 3, 1932). F.B. Srygley, longtime staff writer and adviser for "Gospel Advocate," cautioned:

If two or more churches put it into the hands of a board, though the board may be made up of the elders of one of the churches, we have a very nice beginning of a missionary society to try to take charge of the churches (Ibid, Jan. 11, 1934).

Church Supported Organizations

There was a widespread consensus among brethren prior to the middle of the twentieth century that church support of human organizations was sinful.

The main principle violated by the missionary society is combining of all the congregations to do what God has assigned to one. There is no work that cannot be done by the power of God, . . . That which the church has not the power to do, then, should not be considered. Besides this, we might say this way of a few getting together and saddling on the church of Christ orphan homes and schools or anything else is a very serious thing, and will in the course of time prove to be a curse to the church. . . . All such combines are wrong and in them the man of sin is working, just as in Paul's day, and in the course of time he will be revealed to the sorrow of the church. (2 Thess. 2:3-10.) (C.M. Pullias, "Tidings of Joy". 1910, quoted by Cope. 7).

There were no 'brotherhood colleges,' 'church papers,' 'church orphanages,' 'old folk's homes,' and the like, among apostolic congregations. . . . The churches established by the apostles did not contribute to any organization other than a sister congregation. All 'church' movements should be kept under the local congregation.

History repeats itself. Following the restoration of the ancient order of things, launched by Stone, Campbell, and others, men of worldly ambition crept in among us. . . . Individual Christians, any number, may scripturally engage in any worthy work, such as running colleges, papers, and orphanages, and other individual Christians may properly assist them in every proper way; but no local congregation should be called upon, as such, to contribute a thing to any enterprises. Such a call would be out of harmony with the word of the living God. And if any congregation so contributes, it transcends its scriptural prerogatives (A.B. Barrett [founder of Abilene Christian University] "Gospel Advocate, March 13, 1930. 267. Quoted by Cope. 31-32).

Nothing is 'permissible' as an auxiliary of the church which is not scriptural. And it is not scriptural for the church to delegate its work, either missionary or benevolent, to boards and organizations other than the church. Bible colleges and institutional orphans' homes cannot be made adjuncts of the church, scripturally. The only way the church could scripturally run a school or a home would be for the local church to undertake such work through the local organization — elders and deacons — in which case it would be the work of THAT congregation (Foy E. Wallace, Jr. [editor of "Gospel Advocate"], "Gospel Advocate," July 2, 1931. 804. Quoted by Cope. 32).

Paul directed the church to care for the widows that were widows indeed, and there was nothing said about any institution except the church through which it was to be done. There were famine sufferers in Jerusalem, and their needs were supplied without anything in the way of an institution except the church in Jerusalem (F.B. Srygley, "Gospel Advocate," July 9, 1931. 828. Quoted by Cope. 32).

*No organization is needed to accomplish the work the Lord has authorized the church to do. When men become dissatisfied with God's arrangement and set up one of their own, they have already crossed the threshold to apostasy. Let us be satisfied with the Lord's manner of doing things (Woods, **Commentary**. 341, Quoted by Cope. 34).*

Those of us who oppose church sponsored recreational activities, church support of human organizations, and the sponsoring (overseeing) church arrangement stand precisely where the consensus of Christians in America stood prior to the middle of the twentieth century.

How to Settle Issues in the Church

Several years ago I was returning from a preaching engagement in Indiana, and a preacher friend in Ohio asked me to spend Sunday with the congregation where he preached and speak to them. The church was in danger of splitting, and he hoped I would be able to help calm the situation. I don't know if I was much if any help there, but I did diligently study to put together material on how to settle issues that threaten the peace and unity of the church. The following material is the result of that study and of a parallel only worse problem later in American Samoa. How should we resolve doctrinal issues in the church?

Background Principles

We need to realize how important it is to maintain scriptural peace and unity. Only purity of doctrine and practice should come ahead of peace and unity (James 3:17). Not only does the Lord desire peace and unity among His people (Ephesians 4:3; Philippians 1:27), those who foment division are carnal and condemned (Proverbs 6:16-19; 1 Corinthians 3:1-3; Romans 8:6).

If we are to have peace and unity, we must demonstrate the attitudes that promote these blessed qualities. Above all else, we must be submissive to divine authority, determined to follow the Lord's will in everything (Colossians 3:17). In our relationships with brethren, we must exhibit humility, gentleness, longsuffering, and forbearance (Ephesians 4:1-3). We must be "first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy" (James 3:18). We must not "have bitter envy and self-seeking in" our "hearts" (James 3:16). Love for our brethren should be manifested in every word and deed.

Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice.

And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you.

Therefore be imitators of God as dear children.

And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given Himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma (Ephesians 4:31 - 5:2).

Nevertheless, causes of division will arise (1 Corinthians 11:18-19). What shall we do when this happens?

How to Handle Controversy

Just such a problem arose in the first century church, and the way they handled this crisis is a model for us. Acts chapter 15 records this event, and the apostle Paul mentions it in Galatians 2:1-10. The two passages reveal a seven step process the Lord wants a congregation to follow when issues of faith threaten to divide the local church.

Please read Acts 15:1-2. Some teachers from Judea taught the brethren in Antioch that they had to be circumcised as Moses taught in the Law in order to be saved. This made conversion to Judaism essential to salvation. If they had not been stopped the Law of Moses would have been added to the Gospel as necessary to salvation, and the church of Christ would have become a sect of the Jews. So Paul and Barnabas had a big dispute and argument with them.

Now please read Galatians 2:3-5. These false brethren had come in secretly and even tried to force Titus, a Gentile, to be circumcised, but the apostle Paul refused to allow this. The teaching had come from Judea, the source of the Gospel, so the brethren in Antioch wanted to know if the church in Jerusalem, where there were apostles and elders, approved this teaching. It is alright for the congregation to seek advice from respected Christians outside the local church. But the first principle is this: **In issues that involve the faith we must not yield.**

Now, please read Acts 15:4-6 and Galatians 2:1-2, 6-10. When Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, they met privately with the apostles and elders about the issue before they took it before the whole church. They wanted to make sure there was unity in the leadership of the church, so their work with the Gentiles would not be ruined. So, **the leaders of the church first met privately to make sure they were united.**

Next, please read Acts 15:6-7,12. But the congregation was divided over the issue. So the leaders of the church disputed with the false teachers before the whole multitude of the disciples. No uninspired leader can tell people what they must believe. Each person should hear both sides and decide for himself what the truth is. Truth has nothing to fear from open investigation. Only false teachers want to keep a divisive issue from being openly discussed. **The whole church should come together to hear the issue discussed.**

Please read Acts 15:7 and Galatians 2:4. The leaders were united, but there was much disputing before the whole church. This implies the members of the church were divided. The leaders allowed the false teachers to present their side even though these false teachers had not been honest in their approach. **Both sides of every issue should be fairly considered by the whole congregation.**

Next please read Acts 15:7-18 and Amos 9:11-12. When the false teachers had said all they had to say, the apostles and elders answered them. They did not have to receive any new revelation from God, because the Holy Spirit had already made known that Gentiles were saved by the Gospel without being circumcised or keeping the Law of Moses. So the apostles simply reminded the church what they should have already known. **They appealed to divine revelation to settle the issue.**

Now read Acts 15:19-21 and Galatians 1:19. Then James, the brother of the Lord, whom Paul called an apostle, stated the position of the church on the matter. After the issue has been thoroughly discussed before the whole church, **a leader of the church should state the position of the church.**

Finally, please read Acts 15:22-29. The whole church agreed with James, and this brought peace, unity, and joy. The elders in Jerusalem could only speak for that congregation, whereas the apostles, who spoke by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, stated the truth on this issue for all Christians in every age. The letter they sent, since it was from the Holy Spirit through apostles, became the very first portion of New Testament Scripture. This does not mean a church, elder, missionary, or evangelist from America can tell you what you must believe. You, as the brethren in Jerusalem, have the right and obligation to hear both sides and to decide for yourselves what the truth is. But if we will follow this divine model for settling doctrinal issues in the church with the same attitude the Christians in Jerusalem had, **peace, unity, and joy in the church will follow.**

Thus, we have a divine, seven step model for settling differences regarding the faith in the congregation.

(1) **In issues that involve the faith we must not yield.**

(2) **The leaders of the church should first meet privately to make sure they are united.**

- (3) The whole church should come together to hear the issue discussed.
- (4) Both sides of every issue should be fairly considered by the whole congregation.
- (5) Divine revelation should settle the issue.
- (6) A leader of the church should state the position of the church.
- (7) Peace, unity, and joy in the church should follow.

By following this apostolic approved example we will show our faith in divine wisdom and truth, respect the freedom of conscience of every Christian, and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.

Brethren, I am open to discussion of the issues covered in this book at any time. Do you love the Lord, the truth, and your brethren enough to join in such studies?

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