

## **Institutionalizing the Church (4)**

### **From Purposefulness to Institutionalism at the Local Level**

Introduction:

1. For the past few weeks we have given consideration to the topic “Institutionalizing the Church.”
2. The church of Scripture is not an institution or organizational entity that people get into to go to heaven. It is simply the people who confess Christ and make Him the Lord in their life. It is those who call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is those who, having been purchased by the blood of Christ, are the possession of Christ, thus they are the church of Christ.
3. The word “church” is never used in Scripture to refer to an institution. It is a collective noun like group, herd, assembly, thus “the assembly of God.”
4. But the tendency is to move to institutionalize the church, to make it into an organizational entity with an exclusive name and thus people become “Church of Christ Christians” or some other brand or variety.
5. The organizational element of the local church under its own elders is no longer sufficient. “Synods, Dioceses, Presbyteries” are created, things that we cannot read about in Scripture.
6. Before institutionalism “the apostles’ doctrine,” equivalent to the doctrine of Christ, was the standard of belief. With institutionalism the institution defines the doctrines. Scripture itself is no longer sufficient as a statement of beliefs.
7. Folks, loyalties have changed in this process. Jesus was our Lord, now the institution is lord.
8. With such changes there are changes in the purpose of the church. Before the purpose of the church was clearly focused on teaching Christ—evangelizing the lost and training the saved, but when institutionalism is lord churches focus on recreation, entertainment, secular education, and community improvement. Social issues such as poverty, disease, hunger, etc. are the primary works.
9. The N.T. church was purposeful. It was very narrowly focused on seeking the lost and building up the saved. Their every action was focused on the accomplishment of these objectives. But when the objectives change so do the actions.

Discussion:

- I. The structures or forms associated with the N.T. church were designed to accomplish the function.
  - A. It is important for us to define “form” and “function.”
    1. “Function” has to do with the purpose and work of the church. The N.T. church was a functioning organism. Those people were in the business of teaching Christ. That was their function.
    2. “Forms” are the things you do to accomplish the function. For example the N.T. church used singing to accomplish its work of teaching (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). This “form” was prescribed by God and It “functioned” to teach and admonish.
  - B. When the “function” changes inevitably the “forms” change.

1. The purpose of singing to teach and admonish shifts to something else. It may be we sing because we like it. It appeals to our senses.
  2. The focus becomes less and less about teaching and admonishing and more about entertainment (instruments, bands, orchestras, choirs, solos, special singing groups, hired musicians, applause). The shift may become so radical that the preservation of great music becomes a purpose of the institution.
- C. The “forms” contributed to the “function” of the N.T. church.
1. Prayer (Acts 4:23ff).
  2. Giving (Phil. 1:5, 4:15-20; 1 Cor. 16:1-2).
  3. Assembling (Heb. 10:214-25).
  4. Sending (Acts 8:14; Acts 11:22-26; Acts 13:1-3).
  5. Teaching (Eph. 4:11ff).

II. When the church is institutionalized the forms may become lifeless rituals. The forms are carried out as ends within themselves. (I think this is where many young people are lost. They see no relevance in going through various meaningless and purposeless irrelevant exercises.)

- A. Prayer becomes something recited by rote, rather than spontaneous utterance focused on the purpose.
1. People “say prayers” instead of praying.
  2. The things prayed for reveal shifted purpose. Ex. Of fellow who prayed at graduation for the teenagers to have a good time, but not to drink and drive.
  3. Read the prayers of Scripture and see what the N.T. Christians were praying for (Col. 1:9-14; 4:3-4).
  4. Is the purpose of God clear in your prayers?
- B. Study is more about the rehearsal of doctrines and less about learning practical application for the here and now.
1. Are you studying to understand what you need to change or rehearsing what you are already “doing right,” pointing a condemning finger at others?
  2. The teaching of Christ is not new, but there are applications that I need to make to my life that are new to me. We have not “arrived.”
  3. Am I studying to teach or is it just an academic exercise designed to collect information for me? Teaching class on personal evangelism: “If I had any intention of teaching anyone else this class would be good . . . “ Not a bad person! She just does not understand the purpose.
- C. Giving is done as a mere “duty” rather than the expression of a commitment to communicate the gospel and care for needy brethren.
- D. Assembling is more about doing 5 things and less about what the 5 things are to accomplish.
- E. It is more about “going to church” than worshipping God.
- F. People become more focused on themselves (social, recreation) less on the inclusion of others. How is it for you when guests are present in our assemble are you focused more on getting acquainted with them or more on getting to talk to your friends?
- G. Interestingly, leadership becomes more authoritarian less servant/stewardship oriented.

1. The only way to maintain lifeless ritual is through demand.
2. Persuasive teaching has no effect because the connection is lost between form and function.

III. Purposefulness must be restored in the minds of God's people.

- A. Must give ourselves to God's purpose.
  1. Not the maintenance of an institution.
  2. Not to "our" purpose.
  3. Seeking and saving the lost and training the saved must be our focus.
- B. Takes place through teaching, example and work.
- C. Develop an expectation of purposefulness.
- D. Less maintenance oriented and more advancement oriented.
- E. Less self-centered and more others-centered.

Conclusion:

1. Are we clear on God's purpose?
2. Are our forms contributing to God's purpose?
3. Is our purpose evident in our work?