

For many years now there has been a rift between God's people, specifically between local churches, concerning the idea we commonly call "institutionalism." Many of us have heard this term often (and you should not it is not a derogatory term), but what does it mean?

The idea is pretty simply: there are some very important, man-made institutions around us.

- 1) an institution collecting funds to house battered women and their children
- 2) an institution collecting funds to accept and raise orphaned children.
- 3) an organization collecting funds to build schools in Africa for families.

Okay, everybody supports and sees the need for these to exist. "Institutional" brethren contend that it is authorized by God to use the common fund, our local church contribution, to fund these efforts. There is some question in the way the pool it, i.e. sending it to sponsored local mother churches, but let's leave that out of our discussion tonight. Let's keep it simple.

So, what does it mean to be "Non-Institutional? *By the way, you should note that's what they call us - "N.I.'s" This is not intended to be a derogatory term, just a descriptive one. In times past, we called them "liberals" and they called us "anti's" - I consider these to be derogatory in intent and basically generic and unfair. So, let's use terms that describe but don't deride.*

Well, non-institutional churches still support the existence of the human organizations. We want to see battered women housed, orphans raised, and schools built. And, within our opportunity we ought to be supporting those things whenever we can (more on that later). But we do not believe it is authorized by God to use the contribution to financially support such institutions.

So, to put it simply, when all the definitions are out there, and labels are corrected, and examples are put on the table, it really just comes down to the answer to one question

Do we have authority from God to use the common fund, the local church contribution, to financially support man-made social institutions?

First thing is first - let's make a list of every single time the contribution was used in the New Testament record. The sum total of God' word on a topic is pattern, so what have we got?

BIBLE PASSAGES

Funds used to Assist Needy Saints

(Acts 2:43-45; 4:32-35; 6:1-2; 11:27-30; Rom. 15:26; I Cor. 16:1-2; II Cor. 8:1-5, 9)

- Note - this is not conclusive - Examples INCLUDE they do not EXCLUDE. It is peculiar that the famine had affected many people, but the common believer's fund was used for believers.)

Funds used to Support Spiritual Workers

(Phil. 1:15-19; I Cor. 9:14; I Tim. 5:9-12, 18)

- Note - Again, this does not mean we can do nothing else. It simply means we can use the funds for these things. But to say, "examples are exclusive" would exclude ANY other financial usage.

These passages indicate that fund were used for:

- a) needy saints, even when non saints were also in the area and in need
- b) evangelistic support to preachers and bishops in their spiritual work

This does not mean that God has no concern for non-believers, only that this weekly fund, set aside by believers, has a two fold purpose: aid believers and help garner more believers through teaching.

Example: Children's Cancer Society Box - money in that box has a defined purpose. It doesn't mean we don't care about older people with heart conditions, but there's an AHA box for that. God knew the local contribution would only consist of so much, and He refined and specified its usage.

Now, we need to find out if there are any commands for the churches collective work. If a passage indicates God's instruction for collective work, we can use the collective fund to achieve it.

Okay, well, anything else? I should hope so, otherwise the funds we are using on this building are unauthorized and we should sell this thing tomorrow. Well, there are also commands as to what the local church must do. If a local church is demanded to do something, as a collective, then we believe collected funds can be used to accomplish that thing – hence – **I Corinthians 14:26**.

A local church must assemble – and – **Acts 2:42** – do some things. So we use funds to build this building, not as a multi purpose facility, but to accomplish the authorized/commanded thing.

So, to be clear, you do not need to have an example of the money being used a certain way to use it that way – but you must either have that (above list of verses) or a command for the local church (assemble). QUESTION: Was the local church, as a collective, ever commanded to support or fund the well being of non-believers?

Answer: No. That is not its purview.

Some will argue differently. For the most part this comes down to three passages:

- **John 12:6; 13:29** – A fund was collected for the purpose of taking care of these men during their travels, but included in that is the support of the poor. So, perhaps, while we have no reference to helping the poor in the NT for the contribution, we may do so.

There are a few issues here. First, this is not the NT church or contribution of a local church. Second, here we see it was noted that the poor among them were served from it, we don't have that for the common church fund. It might also be added that we do not know if the poor they helped were of any ilk, or specifically disciples.

- **James 1:27** – Some view this as authority for local churches to expand their work to general benevolence and institutions for the poor, based on instruction concerning widows and orphans.

The issue here is simple. This letter is addressed to brethren, but deals almost exclusively with individual Christian living. It is not about church work, church purpose, or the usage of the local church fund. Note “anyone” v.23,26 and “one” v.25. This is an important point about individual responsibility (and should be preached more) but is not authority for contribution usage.

- **Galatians 6:10** – Some view “do good to all people” to be justification for local church work in general benevolence, including support of good-deed institutions.

The issues with that are apparent. Firstly, there is nothing in this text about collective church work, local church purpose or the common fund. In fact, there is not even a reference to money at all. Secondly, this text is likely speaking to the attributes of **5:22-23**. Do this with brethren and actually with all men. Thirdly, this text is about individual action (see “anyone” “each one” in **6:1-10**).

So, what does it mean to be “Non-Institutional” – in short, it means we do not believe God has authorized us to use the contribution of a local church to do social work outside of helping needy saints. Therefore, man-made institutions with that in view are not supported by our treasury.

NOTE: This does not absolve us of helping those people with the other funds in our pockets! In fact, a warning – do not make any argument you have seen today with an “institutional brother” unless you are ready for him to ask: “So, are you using your own money to help widows & orphans, or battered women or build schools in Africa?”

Now, even if we aren't, that does not justify Institutionalism. Only God can justify a practice. But it makes a valid point: not doing a wrong thing does not cover for not doing a right thing! So, let's not be “anti's” on a personal level, but support anything we can to help mankind.

But let's also agree to let the Lord's church be what He made it to be and do what He designed it to do. Then, maybe, and with great hope do I say this, unity among brethren can be restored again!

P.S. Note – There is a second question in this study – If the man-made institution is doing an authorized work (supporting needy saints, supporting Gospel preachers), can we send our funds from under our local oversight over to their oversight? I contend we have no such example of giving up local autonomy. In Scripture, funds went directly from the church to the person in need of assistance or support. This is another study we can embark upon another time. However, in my studies, “institutionalism” issues are more hinged upon using church funds to support organizations engaged in “General Benevolence” programs.