



The Harvester

*Preparing Souls
To Serve The Lord!*

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An Examination of “Non-Institutionalism” (With a View Toward Restoring Fellowship) **Part I**

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I do not always prefer the terms “liberal” and/or “conservative.” I would rather simply refer to biblical or unbiblical. However, at times, these designations are helpful. Liberalism (which may be defined briefly as “loosing where God has bound” cf. Mt. 16:19; 18:18) is an enemy to efforts “endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). While liberalism is at one extreme, non-institutionalism (sometimes referred to as “anti-ism”) is at the other. Both approaches to religious practice, when taken to the extreme, are sinful. It seems from conversations I have had with preachers who were active in the Lord’s church when the division exploded (in the 1960’s) that envy and arrogant power struggles were the major cause of non-institutionalism among churches of Christ. Nevertheless, because non-institutionalism still teaches that Christians and local churches of Christ who do not accept its every position are in sin, a discussion of non-institutionalism is relevant. This article will examine various aspects of the controversy with a view of encouraging further discussion with the hopes that fellowship can be restored.

“Binding” and “Loosing”

Shortly after Peter’s monumental confession that Jesus was “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16), Jesus told him, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Mt. 16:19).

Later, the same instruction of “binding and loosing” was given to the rest of the apostles (Mt. 18:18). Understanding the tense of the verbs in these verses is necessary to understanding what Jesus taught. It is not the case that Jesus was saying that whatever Peter and the apostles “bound” or “loosed” would be later ratified in heaven, as if they were the ones deciding. Rather, the main verbs of being (future middle indicative of *eimi*, εἶμι), “will be,” are coupled with perfect passive participles from *deo* (δέω) and *luo* (λύω) behind the translation, “will be bound in heaven ... will be loosed in heaven.” Participles are verbal adjectives and do not give time of action. The main indicative mood verbs give the time of action. To translate with the full force of the verbs and participles, the verse reads, “Whatsoever you may bind on earth will have already been bound in heaven, and whatsoever you may loose on earth will have already been loosed in heaven” (cf. NAS95).

By using this future form of being with the perfect participle construction, the Lord was giving Peter and the other apostles the authority only to teach and preach the God-given terms by which people were admitted or excluded from the kingdom. The apostles had no right to communicate anything different from what God had already determined. For this reason, they were given the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit to guide them into “all truth” (Jn. 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:13). Their being inspired to communicate all truth, of course, did not guarantee their

sinlessness (cf. Gal. 2:11-14), but it did guarantee their message was one hundred percent accurate, the word of God (1 Cor. 2:6-15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The “will have already been bound in heaven, and ... will have already been loosed in heaven” principle was so serious, as Paul stated, that “even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed” (Gal. 1:8-9)! If not even an apostle or an angel could teach something different from what God had already decreed in heaven, then we can be sure no preacher, elder, Bible class teacher, or human being living today has a right to bind what God has loosed or to loose what God has bound.

“Non-Institutionalism”

Why religions in general and brethren in particular “bind” and “loose” what they do is at the heart of any study concerning liberalism and/or non-institutionalism. The word “liberal” in religious academia is usually reserved for those “Biblical scholars” who deny the supernatural inspiration of the Scriptures. In this article, however, the word will refer to members of the church of Christ who loosen what God has bound. Liberals, or progressives, therefore, are those who loosen the standards that God has set through His inspired word (cf. 2 Tim. 1:13; 3:16-17; Heb. 8:5).

In contrast to liberalism, “non-institutionalism” may be defined as “binding what God has loosed.”

Non-institutionalists, therefore, are those who make stricter the standards of God by binding doctrines that God has not bound. The doctrines they seem to always bind are in the area of expediency (discussed later). Thus, perhaps a more accurate label for these brethren would be “anti-Biblical expediency.” For the most part, these brethren take optional matters involving judgment and bind their opinion as if it were what God had already bound in heaven! These matters of judgement may include whether to build a kitchen in the church building, whether to support a benevolent work involving “non-saints” from the church treasury, or whether to cooperate with other local churches of Christ in supporting a missionary or an evangelistic work.

To further illustrate taking optional matters involving judgment and binding opinions as if they were God’s law, consider the point about having a kitchen in the church building. Surely, all Bible students would agree that God has authorized a church building. Inherent in God’s requirement to assemble is a place to assemble (cf. Heb. 10:24). A building, of

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course, is not necessary (a church can assemble by the river, under a tree, etc.), but a building is authorized. Why a local church would want a kitchen in the church building is an optional matter involving judgment. The Bible authorizes members of the church to have fellowship (Acts 2:42; 1 Jn. 1:3), and eating together is one way to show fellowship with one another (cf. 1 Cor. 5:11). Inherent in eating together is food being prepared. Therefore, a church building is authorized to have a kitchen by the authority to have a fellowship meal with one another. Also, when we consider that the first century church often met in Christians' houses (Rom. 16:3-5; 1 Cor. 16:19), and these houses may have had places where food was prepared, we realize that the place of assembly is not the sacred part about worship, but rather the "in spirit and truth" process in which it is practiced (Jn. 4:23-24). Is a kitchen necessary? Of course not! However, to say a kitchen in the church building is always sinful is anti-biblical expediency, or "binding" where God has "loosed."

Common Elements Between Non-Institutionalism and Liberalism

As strange as it may seem, non-institutionalism and liberalism have two interesting characteristics in common. Individuals in both groups would probably deny upholding these positions, but on a practical level, there is no escaping their adherence to them. First, both non-institutionalism and liberalism teach that explicit statements are the only way the Bible teaches. The liberal will affirm that since there is no explicit Bible statement that says "thou shalt not __," a Christian has authority to perform any action. For example, the liberal will say, "Since the Bible does not say, 'Do not clap hands while singing during worship,' we are free to clap hands in praise to God." Of course, "Where does the Bible say I cannot?" is asking the wrong question. The question should be, "Where does the Bible teach I can?"

The non-institutionalist, on the other hand, will affirm that since there is no explicit Bible statement that says "thou shalt __," a Christian has no authority to do something. For example, the non-institu-

tionalist will say, "Since the Bible nowhere explicitly commands the local church to support an orphan home, a local church is not free to support an orphan home from its treasury." Of course, the non-institutionalist does not realize (or will not admit) the Bible nowhere commands a local church to have a bank account, pay a utility bill, utilize a social media platform, etc. In fact, none of the Bible was explicitly written to any local church existing today. This is not to say the Bible was not written for local churches today. It was (cf. Rom. 15:4). However, if only explicit statements authorize, then how can a person say the Bible applies to the local church today?

A second common element to both non-institutionalism and liberalism is that both are easy to apply, at least in their extreme states. Faithful living requires diligent studying and "handling aright the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15, ASV). Studying is hard work (cf. 1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 4:5). However, it is easy to say, as does the liberal, "Anything goes unless the Bible explicitly says 'thou shalt not,'" or, as the non-institutionalist would say, "Nothing goes unless the Bible explicitly says 'thou shalt.'" Learning what God actually binds and/or looses is not always easy. The faithful Christian must study, learn, and grow (2 Pet. 3:18). He or she must be humble enough to receive more thorough instruction as did Apollos when he was wrong about baptism (Acts 18:24-28). For the most part, the Bible is easy to understand and follow (if we are willing, Jn. 7:17). However, there are still some parts and applications that are "hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16). Studying is what God requires to come to the knowledge of truth (1 Thes. 5:21), but because some are lazy (or perhaps do not want to know the truth cf. 2 Pet. 3:5), they will take the easier approach of claiming to go by only what the Bible explicitly teaches (non-institutionalism) or by what it does not explicitly forbid (liberalism).

Conclusion

Whether individually or collectively, our goal should be to glorify God, which can only be done by applying His revealed word (1 Cor. 10:31; Col. 3:17). In Part 2 of this article, we will take a closer look at the principle of expediency, how it applies to non-institutionalism, and how unity can be restored.

"Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1)

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Phoebe

was a faithful sister in Christ and a “servant of the church in Cenchrea” whom Paul commended (Rom. 16:1). The apostle spoke very highly of her, both directly and indirectly. Here are a few encouraging truths about Phoebe. First, she was a “servant” of the church. Although some have tried to put her in an official “deaconess” category, the word (*diakonos*, διάκονος) from which “servant” is translated simply means servant in a general sense (Mt. 22:13; Jn. 2:5; Rom. 13:4), unless the context demands otherwise (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). All Christians are to be the kind of servant Phoebe was (cf. Mk. 9:36; 10:43)! Second, Phoebe was to be “received,” which is from a word (*prosdichomai*, προσδέχομαι) that means to be welcomed, accepted (Phil. 2:29). Third, her reception “in a manner worthy of the saints” (Rom. 16:2) reveals that Phoebe was a precious child of the true, impartial God (cf. Gal. 3:28)! Fourth, Phoebe was “worthy of assistance” because she was a “helper of many and of myself [Paul] also” (Rom. 16:2). Phoebe was indeed a remarkable Christian sister and is worthy of further study and imitation (cf. Phil. 3:17). Phoebe is the namesake of a wonderful work started by women connected with FSOP. The **Phoebe Group** was created to help provide support for FSOP students through various activities. Phoebe Group members volunteer their time, provide encouragement to students, and help raise funds for students, while at the same time raising awareness about FSOP and its needs. If you would like to help the school through this group, see our website (fsop.net/ladies) for more details!

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