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To Serve The Lord!*

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An Examination of “Non-Institutionalism” (With a View Toward Restoring Fellowship) **Part 2**

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In Part 1 of this article, we discussed the terms “liberal” and “non-institutional” (sometimes called “anti”). Liberalism (loosing what God has bound, as per Mt. 16:19; 18:18) is at one extreme, while non-institutionalism (binding what God has loosed) is at the other. We examined the verbs and participles in Matthew 16:19; 18:18 to ascertain the meaning of those verses. We also examined some common elements, albeit different sides of the coin, between liberalism and non-institutionalism. In this article, we will examine expediency, a major principle often misunderstood but at the heart of the issue.

Expediency

In English, the word “expedient” means that which is “useful for effecting a desired result; suited to the circumstances or the occasion; advantageous; convenient” (Webster’s). There is also a negative sense in which the word is used (such as getting gain for oneself regardless of what is right or just), but the basic meaning of the term is that which gives advantage. The English word “expedient” is found two times in the New King James Version (Jn. 11:50; 18:14). The Greek word *sumphero* (συνφέρω), from which “expedient” is translated, occurs in thirteen other places, where it is translated “profit,” or “profitable” (Mt. 5:29, 30; 1 Cor. 12:7; 2 Cor. 12:1; Heb. 12:10); “helpful” (Acts 20:20; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23); “better” (Mt. 18:6; 19:10); “advantage” (Jn. 16:7; 2 Cor. 8:10); and “brought ... together” (Acts 19:19).

Of particular interest are the references in First Corinthians: “All things are lawful for me, but all things are not helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be brought under the power of any” (1 Cor. 6:12); and “All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify” (1 Cor. 10:23). In these verses, the Greek word translated “helpful [expedient, KJV]” (from *sumphero*) means “to help, confer a benefit, be advantageous or profitable or useful ... something that is useful or helpful” (Arndt, 960). Two truths about “expedience” must be realized. First, no unlawful action can be done expediently. That is, there is no circumstance that God allows a person to advantageously do something sinful (cf. Rom. 3:8). Second, merely because an action is lawful does not mean it is always expedient. All lawful actions do not necessarily edify (1 Cor. 10:23 cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-13). Furthermore, the unlawful pursuit of a lawful thing constitutes bondage, and thus results in sin (1 Cor. 6:12 cf. Rom. 6:16).

Expediency & Authority

The principle of expediency applies as follows. All actions must have Bible authority (Col. 3:17 cf. 2 Jn. 9-11). The Bible authorizes by its explicit statements, revealed examples, and implication. These avenues of authority must be ascertained by “handling aright the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15, ASV). In most, if not all, God-authorized actions there are areas of

expediency. For example, the Bible authorizes Christians to partake of the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week, and that unleavened bread and “fruit of the vine” are to be used (Mt. 26:26-28; Acts 20:7). However, the Bible gives no exclusive pattern as to what time on the first day of the week the Lord’s Supper must be done. Thus, the time of day at which the congregation partakes of the Lord’s Supper on the first day of the week is a matter of expediency. There is just as much authority for partaking of it at 9:30 a.m. as there is at 2:30 p.m. The congregation (elders, if there are any) must determine which time gives the most advantage to their situation. Expediency is also involved in other God-authorized actions such as in what body of water a repentant believer should be baptized (a baptistry or a natural body of water), singing (with song books or by memory), preaching the gospel (in the pulpit or on the internet), etc. Where there is no exclusive pattern given for fulfilling a God-authorized obligation, and as long as the obligatory action is not altered or omitted, any expedient action (that is not inherently sinful) may be used. Remember, an “expedient” is that which gives advantage.

An example of how “anti-Biblical expediency” brethren bind what God has loosed may be seen in the following real life illustration. Several years ago, I engaged in an email debate with a non-institutional brother over whether it was Scriptural for a local church

to support the Florida School of Preaching (hereafter referred to as FSOP). The “informed” non-institutional brethren think it is a sin. Although FSOP is used specifically, the principles of the following argument would, of course, apply to other good works. This was the argument used:

1. All Scriptural efforts to train preachers are efforts that can be supported by all Christians (individually and/or congregationally).
2. FSOP is a Scriptural effort to train preachers.
3. Therefore, FSOP is an effort that can be supported by all Christians (individually and/or congregationally).

Since this argument is valid in its form (in logic, this categorical syllogism figure is known as AAA-1), if both premises are true, the conclusion must necessarily be true!

Premise 1 is true: All Scriptural efforts to train preachers are efforts that can be supported by all Christians (individually and/or congregationally).

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The Great Commission passages include all Christians, whether individually or congregationally (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk. 16:15-16). Certainly, training others to teach the lost would be included in “teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you” (Mt. 28:20) and “the gospel” (Mk. 16:15). No rational person would deny that both the individual Christian and the local church has a responsibility in fulfilling the Great Commission. To illustrate the irrationality of non-institutionalism, to be consistent with their often unnecessary distinction between “individual action” and “collective action,” they would have to say that the Great Commission only applies to the individual, not to the local church. What passage explicitly tells a local church to “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”? Timothy (an individual) was explicitly told, “And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2). If it is the case that fulfilling the Great Commission is a responsibility of both individual Christians and local churches (which it is), and if it is the case that training preachers is part of fulfilling the Great Commission (which it is), then it is the case that training preachers is an authorized responsibility of both individual Christians and local churches.

Premise 2 is also true: FSOP is a Scriptural effort to train preachers. The following argument was used: All total situations the component parts of which are Scriptural are total situations which are Scriptural. The “component parts” of FSOP are all Scriptural (i.e., faithful teachers, Bible as main text, class rooms, civil government compliance, etc.). Since all “component parts” are Scriptural, the “total situation” is Scriptural. So far as this writer is aware, there are only three “components” which non-institutionalism says are unscriptural. First, they say that because FSOP is governed by a board of directors rather than a local church eldership that it is unscriptural. The God-approved right of people doing good works that are not overseen by a local church eldership will be examined in more detail later, but for now the question is relevant: Where does the Bible teach that all good works must be done under the oversight of a local eldership? Second, because the school is not overseen by a local church eldership, they say the acceptance of money from local churches is unscriptural. To put it another way, they say if FSOP were solely supported by individuals, then it would be Scriptural. Third, they say that since FSOP

is doing the work that God authorized for the local church to do, then a local church supporting it is sinful because it is supporting a work that usurps God’s plan for the local church. To show the ridiculousness of that idea, note the following: if it is true that FSOP usurps God’s plan for the local church, then why would it be Scriptural for an individual to support a work that supposedly usurps God’s plan for the local church? How true is what Shakespeare is often credited as saying, “Consistency, thou art a jewel!”

The latter two objections (and to some extent the first) are attempts to draw people away from the gist of the main argument—training preachers is the responsibility of all Christians (individually and/or congregationally). That third objection assumes God has only given authority to local churches in training preachers, but consider again the proof of the premises. Since both of the main argument’s premises are true, the conclusion must necessarily follow: FSOP is an effort which can be supported by all Christians (individually and/or congregationally).

Biblical Examples Of Denying What God Allows

Binding what God has loosed is nothing new in religion. A Biblical example of what may be termed non-institutionalism is found in First Timothy 4:1-4. There were some in Paul’s day who were “Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats” (1 Tim. 4:3a). These two “anti” doctrines were not necessarily a response to liberalism. Rather, Paul was likely referring to some form of incipient Gnosticism, which held that all flesh was evil and only spirit was good. Thus, the more one denied oneself of fleshly appetites, the more spiritual he or she became (cf. Col. 2:20-23). However, God never bound celibacy on Christians (except on the guilty of fornication spouse in a Scriptural divorce, Mt. 19:9). To the contrary, God said that “Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled” (Heb. 13:4). True, there were some circumstances in which it was best not to marry (1 Cor. 7:7-8, 26, 28), but even if one married in those unfavorable circumstances, “you have not sinned ... she has not sinned” (1 Cor. 7:28)! It is one thing to say that it is better not to marry (1 Cor. 7:38), but it is non-institutionalism to say that one must not marry.

Likewise, the eating of “meat” from which Paul said some were commanding to abstain (1 Tim. 4:3) was allowed by God. In the same context, Paul said

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that God created meat to “be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth,” and then added, “For every creature of God is good, and nothing is to be refused if it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:3b-5). It took a heavenly vision for Peter to learn that truth (Acts 10:9-16), but truth it is! True, there are some circumstances in which a person sins by eating meat; namely, if eating causes a brother to stumble (1 Cor. 8:7-13), or if eating meat violates a person’s own conscience (Rom. 14:20-23). However, it is one thing to say there are certain occasions where a person ought not to eat meat, but it is non-institutionalism (binding what God has loosed) to say that a person must never eat meat.

Conclusion

Liberalism is a serious threat to the well being of the church of Christ, but so also is non-institutionalism. As with liberalism, the only sure way to protect

the church against non-institutionalism is to diligently study the Bible and make sure what is believed and bound on earth has already been bound in heaven (Mt. 16:19; 18:18). Now, more than ever, Christians must study the Bible for themselves. The pat answers of the past must not be blindly accepted. We must compare them with what the Bible teaches, not what some preacher has said or written. Sometimes, the answers of the past were no more than pendulum, knee-jerk reactions against liberalism, not what the Bible truly taught. May God help all of us to “Be diligent [Study, KJV] to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth” (2 Tim. 2:15).

Works Cited

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“Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.” (Romans 12:10)