

Discipleship amidst Great Institutional Forces

The Institute for Christianity

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I. The Power and Danger of Institutions

Formed in the image of God, man's desire is to create. Institutions are creations of man to capture new ways of being and conducting group activities based on a set of acquired understanding. We are more accustomed to hearing about institutions that conduct the financial and economic processes of our societies in these modern times. However, great institutions have also formed within and around Christian churches and communities. It is these institutions that present the greatest danger to Christianity today. Some have influenced Christian practices for hundreds of years and have formalized into the life of churches. Others are quite new but they have achieved rapid acceptance because of the communication networks of the information age.

Over the years, those who have been caught-up in the contention between branches and denominations of Christianity have mistakenly considered institutional forces as merely being a part of a specific church. In fact, institutions that are corrupted by the limitations of Christians transcend churches. So the formal institutions within the Catholic and Orthodox churches could just as easily emerged within the Protestant and Pentecostal churches. Equally, the informal institutions that stretch across the Protestant and Pentecostal churches are now influencing Catholics and Orthodox Christians everywhere.

Institutions are not inherently bad and useless within the church. Most Christian institutions are initially formed by a group of passionate believers and Christian leaders. The difficulty with institutions is that once a way of being and doing things is legitimized by a group, codified into procedures, and glorified through rewards in participation, the institution immediately draws in followers who just want to be accepted. Then as the institution grows, apathetic people who just want to stay somewhere stable and rebels who just want to protest the popularity of the institution will appear. This sudden expansion and solidification of the institution amplifies the limitations in understanding that existed at the time of institutional formation and allows for the emergence of new misunderstanding as the initial Christian leaders pass on to leave the institution in the hands of spiritually less mature followers. At times, an institution may even fall prey to false teachers who crave power and profit from the Christian community. These false teachers will manipulate and use the founding principles of the institution to lead Christians far away from the will of God.

To restore the purity of institutions and to end institutions lost to confusion, we must explore the nature of effectiveness and fallacy within specific types of Christian institutions. In these days when the dark forces are gaining strength and working toward the

dominion of the earth, everything is at stake. The Christians trapped in the fallacy of institutions must be freed. The Christians spiritually strong enough to see the fallacy of institutions must be brought in from isolation. And, the those who might have become Christians except for the fallacy of institutions must be pursued with greater love. The time of great challenges is near and the Christian community is still so unprepared.

II. Institutional Force of Escape

The most dangerous institution that traps Christians today is that wrapped around the concept of pre-tribulation rapture. Christianity is not easy. Though our salvation is by the grace of God, discipleship in Christ is about the deep spiritual embrace of His teachings that is affirmed through our actions. Thus, discipleship is about following the will of God and carrying the burdens that God places upon us. In the first three centuries of Christianity, God placed huge burdens upon the Christians who faced capture, torture, and horrible means of death. In doing so, the Church actually grew and the faith of Christians became purer through testing. Now as the world drifts into darkness, Christians must ask what burdens God will require of us. In a world that God has shaken through great tribulations, who will pronounce the word of God? Who will shepherd the souls that have turned to God? And, who will face martyrdom to allow God to justly punish the evil? These are the responsibilities of Christians. Yet, so many Christians today fear this future so much that it becomes unthinkable.

Instead, they see God as rescuing them prior to the hard times, delegating the missionary responsibilities to an unknown group of Jews, and abandoning the world to its fate. Yet, these same Christians know that the Apostle Paul has declared that Christians are the true Hebrews and that the genetic blood-

line of the twelve tribes of Israel has been dispersed into the populations of the world through Assyrian, Babylonian, and Roman oppression. Further, they know that God's judgment comes after this life and that God's anger with this world is directed at correcting the path of lost souls. Christians nevertheless still cling to the idea of escape and the belief that they can live easy lives on their way to the Lord.

The following are the key Bible passages pertaining to the concept of rapture. They talk about the return of Jesus from the clouds, the raising of the dead, and then the lifting of Christians still alive to join the dead in meeting Jesus in the clouds. Revelations places the return of Jesus and the first raising of the dead squarely at the end of the tribulations. Matthew affirms that the rest of the world will weep as God's people, the Christians that have remained true, are gathered. Here is all the evidence for post tribulation rapture with the transform of the bodies of those Christians who have endured the persecutions of the final days into immortal bodies to be with Christ. And, there is no evidence of Jesus coming first before tribulations and then after tribulations. Even more alarming, Revelations further suggests that only those who have died in the name of Jesus are worthy of being resurrected without judgment to be kings. The others who have tried to follow Christ will have to be resurrected after Christ's millennial reign. This incredibly high standard for the first resurrection implies that the standards for rapture might be equally as high. How many Christians can withstand the persecution ahead in a world given to the Beast and remain true to serving the will of God? How many Christians will give into the mark of the Beast out of fear, hunger, and pain? We know that two great churches (lamps) will oppose the Beast during the end of days but

which Christians will be a part of those churches remain to be seen.

1 Thessalonians 4: 15 -17: *What we are teaching you now is the Lord's teaching; we who are alive on the day the Lord comes will not go ahead of those who have died. There will be the shout of command, the archangel's voice, the sound of God's trumpet, and the Lord Himself will come down from heaven. Those who have died believing in Christ will rise to life first; then we who are living at that time will be gathered up along with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will always be with the Lord.*

Matthew 24: 30 – 31: *Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky; and all the peoples of earth will weep as they see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. The great trumpet will sound, and he will send out his angels to the four corners of the earth, and they will gather his chosen people from one end of the world to the other.*

Revelation 20: 4 – 5: *I also saw the souls of those who had been executed because they had proclaimed the truth that Jesus revealed and the word of God. They had not worshiped the beast or its image, nor had they received the mark of the beast on their foreheads or their hands. They came to life and ruled as kings with Christ for a thousand years. The rest of the dead did not come to life until the thousand years were over. This is the first raising of the dead.*

To all the Christians who are joyously embracing the pleasures of life and awaiting the miraculous escape from Christian duties, please wake-up. Christianity is already under attack from all sides and the days of great persecution and great works is coming. The army of Christ is forming and every

Christian mature in spirit is needed. There is so much to do and no for relaxation.

III. Institutional Force of Servitude

The Christian spirit wants to serve the will of God even though it may not have the maturity of understanding how to serve. Thus, many Christians become trapped in institutions of servitude that hinders their spiritual growth. And, there are those who would preach the concept of servitude without clear visions of the will of God. As a result, all too often Christian institutions start to adopt all or part of the following set of perspectives in living Christian life:

- It is not about you but about God
- Life is about the worship of God
- Care not about worldly things
- You are for the pleasure of God
- Trust in the Bible regardless of understanding
- Temptation is a normal feeling
- Accept your spiritual gifts and limitations
- Humility means maintaining a low profile
- Focus your love on Christians
- Worldly Christians are still saved, so just try
- Evangelize as a service to God

These perspectives which sound quite good are subtly skewed from true Christian understanding in a manner that prevent Christians from actually serving the will of God. Unfortunately, even incorrect service can give people a sense of satisfaction and whole churches a sense of purpose.

The Christian purpose is about our relationship with God as His children, accepting His love, and working for Him out of love. If we focus on God to the point that we lose ourselves, then we will not be able to spiritually see His plan for us. If we worship Him to

the point that His voice is drowned out by our songs, then we will have strayed from His will. Actions must follow the understanding of the spirit, but actions for many in the institutions of servitude bind the spirit. This world is created to test and grow our spirits, and so we should care about the world but in ways that is according to Christian understanding.

The Buddhists hid in their temples of peace while the world often sank into turmoil, the people starved, and the nations warred. But, they will not be resurrected on the day of Jesus. Christians must accept the love of God and listen. God did not give us a Bible so thick so that we can quote a few lines without knowing their full meaning. As God's children we must continuously ask for understanding, ask for more spiritual gifts, and ask to do great works. Humility is not to shy away from great work but to embrace greatness and credit it to the glory of God. Temptation has no place in the Christian heart that understands the way evil tugs at us. And, the love of Christians must pour out to all people because everyone that can be saved will be spiritually one with us in the Kingdom of Heaven. It must absolutely be this love that drives our evangelical efforts and not merely a sense of duty to the Lord. It is love and not servitude that tells us that merely crying the name of Jesus is not enough, living as the slaves of God is not enough, and accepting the Bible without understanding is not enough. In love our spirits yearn for the Lord and in touching the Lord through the Holy Spirit our life has unique purpose – not a false purpose that is simple but a purpose that is as complex as the way the Lord made us.

IV. Institutional Force of Organization

Organization is essential to the health of the church for nothing can be accomplished through chaos. The Kingdom of Heaven is

organized as a perfect hierarchy with God as the supreme ruler and Jesus being one with God. Churches, however, are sustained by human organizations and all human organizations embody human weaknesses as they try to exploit human strengths. The strengths and vulnerabilities of each type of human organization are quite easy to identify as shown below. Christian branches and denominations have over the years embraced the strengths of their organizations and criticized the weaknesses of others' organizations. The institutional force of organization sits above the debate over which organization type is better because all human institutions of organization formalize a set of principles for participation that can easily be regarded as laws. The desires for Christians to belong compel them to follow the rules of law. The immaturity of Christians prevents them from correcting the weakness sustained by laws. And, the power of organizations rewards and punishes in a way to preserve the existing structure.

Thus, institutional force creates self-sustaining, self-proliferating, and self-protecting Church organizations. This force traps Christians within the weakness of each organization and traps churches in states of rigidity, stagnation, and detachment. Therefore, when churches and Christian communities start to lose their ability to examine themselves and their approaches for carrying out the mission of Christ, the growing force of institutionalism must be challenged. When power is abused, Christians must be there to correct it. When churches are divided, Christians must attack the institutional barriers between them. When the immaturity of the Christian community has consumed the church, the clergy and scholars must bring understanding. When church leaders are not true, Christians must replace them. And, when the laws on behavior has suppressed the spiritual freedoms of the

church, the right of Christians to profess what the Holy Spirit has led to understanding must be sustained as declared by the Apostle Paul. No matter how long and how deeply the institutional forces in the following types of organizations have taken hold, Christians must endeavor to bring each organization back to the truth of Christianity. All the following organizations may help churches serve the will of God but only if the Christians in those organizations stay firm in their personal relationship with the Lord through prayer, scriptural studies, and love.

Organization Type 1: Absolute Hierarchy – reflects the organization of Heaven, sustains the unity of the Church, constrains variations in Christian understanding, perpetuates Christian understanding, and allows for the immature use of authority.

Organization Type 2: Oligarchy of Leaders – offers a level of check and balance between leaders, allows for region variations in worship and practices, retains localized characteristics of hierarchies, encourages easy separation of Christian regions, dilutes the sense of accountability in major Church decisions, and dilutes the sense of responsibilities for the totality of the churches.

Organization Type 3: Representative Democracy – responsive to the changing needs of Christians, bridges the gaps between lay and clergy, encourages discipleship among all Christians and the assumption of responsibilities, creates more avenue for new Christian insights, elevates the immaturity of the Christian masses, allows for the growth of personal ambitions, dilutes the authority of the clergy, and weakens the legacy of Christian learning.

Organization Type 4: Cult of Personality – reflects the concept of God's chosen

leader, provide people with a comfort of being shepherded, rallies Christians to a single voice, vastly amplifies the limitations of a single leader, hinders the Christian responsibility of self will, and allows for the rise of false prophets.

Organization Type 5: Legal and Procedural – reflects the early obedience of the Jews, hinders the corruption of the spirit through constrained actions, limits spiritual growth, discourages love and the free expression of love, and allows for great misinterpretations over the course of time.

Organization Type 6: Pure Democracy – reflects the freedom of will the God has granted to man, opposes the abuse of power, challenges the endurance of Christian understanding, vastly amplifies the weaknesses of the Christian masses, immobilizes the church through non-concurrence, destroys the benefits of legacy, and eliminates the power of guidance and accountability.

V. Institutional Force of Hope

So far, we have addressed institutions that are sustained by Christian fears of hard testing, guilt in not serving the Lord, and yearning for acceptance by a church order. However, immature Christians may be most vulnerable to institutions that peddle false hope to feed into Christian struggles in this world. Christians are often guided by the Lord to endure great hardships of the body, heart, and quality of life. This is so that our spirits can grow through trials, our strengths can help bring others to the Lord, or our miraculous restoration can be a symbol of faith for others. The Lord's ways are complex and can simultaneously train us and eventually free us. Yet, we must seek to clearly understand His will. If Christians cannot accurately see the duration of testing which could last for the entirety of our lives until we join the Lord, then blind hope for mira-

cles could give deceivers the opportunity to steal God's people.

For centuries the false prophets have preyed upon the sick and lame hoping for a cure. In exchange for wealth and power, they offer people the belief of a simple Christianity where crying out to Jesus through their aid will lead to the bestowment of miracles. Christians understand that the Lord loves them but often do not understand the Lord's plan for them. They know that there are true servants of the Lord who have been given the power of prayer and healing, but they often lack the ability to discern the truth about people. As a result, even Christians who are a part of supportive caring churches can gradually find themselves lured into institutions of false hope. Their best outcome is to depart from those institutions with only a lost of wealth. But, they often leave with their faith destroyed, hope lost, and capacity for love turned to hate.

Christians struggling with sicknesses and disabilities must still find the strength through the Holy Spirit to be mature. Remember that the Apostle Paul cured the ill but also preached the truth of God. False prophets cannot teach the truth of God. Test their understanding of the Bible by reading and thoroughly understanding every verse they try to use. A leader that puts himself as your only path to the Lord's miracles cannot be true and a leader that showers himself with the offerings of the weak cannot be true.

In these modern times of great materialism, a Christian even in a state of comfort could feel as if he or she is trapped in poverty. The desire for the success of this world can haunt the Christian spirit because Christians have an innate need to succeed. This vulnerability immediately allows false prophets to start institutions that feed the blind hope for success. These false prophets will say that the

Bible teaches us to give to the Lord so that the Lord can return everything in ten folds. They will say that their institutions are doing great works for the Lord but the nature of work cannot be accounted. Christians need to understand that the Lord wants us to give out of love for His plan and for the people of this world. The Jewish laws on giving were for a less mature people that needed to trust the Lord with their future. Christians also need to understand that the Lord wants first a giving of our spiritual dedication that is supported by our financial resources. Thus, we have an inherent obligation to know how our money is being used to further the will of God.

If Christians hunger for success, they should hunger for the success of serving God. If Christians hunger for the wealth of this world, then let them further think about how that wealth can be used to served God and not themselves through luxuries. The comforts and luxuries of this world are for God to give and not for us to dream about. God may give some Christians great luxuries so that they can engage the world on its own terms. God may give other Christian great wealth only to expect them to use the wealth for His works. But, God will seldom give Christians great wealth so that they can use the wealth to shower themselves with luxuries. The Apostle Paul taught us not to indulge in luxuries. Therefore, unlike the physically hurt Christians who may need the help of the right leaders, Christians lacking material wealth should walk away from the hope of worldly success and walk away from success peddlers disguised as Christian leaders. Work hard in this world to support the family and help others, but place our hopes on God's coming kingdom.

Finally, as hard as it may be to believe, Christians can become trapped in a world of solitude even while attending church. The

joy of Christians in a church can create such commonality of behaviors that the troubled Christians are left out. The tendency for all people to form clicks can result in the isolation of those who cannot fit in even in the house of God. Struggling and isolated Christians often lack the understanding to assert themselves for the good of whole church. Instead, they gradually and many times unnoticeably drift from church to church looking for fellowship. In the best of cases, they find a small church that has the energy to focus on their needs or a large church that refuses to lose track of them. However, they very often end-up in institutions that peddle fellowship at the price of Christian devotion. Some of these institutions are actually started by false prophets that seek to trap people in false circles of love. Yet, many times these institutions are merely churches that have lost their way. Instead of bringing the lonely and the lost into the loving ways of God, these churches abandon the challenges and responsibilities of Christianity to achieve fun oriented fellowships. For the lonely, going to church can become just a giant social event where the shy can be em-

braced. Such a force of institution may appear harmless, but forgetting the ways of discipleship is the greatest harm of all. What good is fellowship if we cannot have fellowship within God? The Christian churches cannot let the lonely slip away.

VI. The Challenge of Discipleship

Being a disciple of Jesus Christ in these modern times of powerful institutions is to undergo great testing. It is so easy to simply belong and there are so many false rewards for supporting what have been established. Yet we must be mature and see the strengths as well as weaknesses in institutions. We must understand how whole institutions can be manipulated by false prophets to lead Christians away from the Lord. And, we must fight to both correct the problems in institutions that have fallen into weakness and expose institutions that have emerged to trap Christians in states of spiritual confusion. Stay true to the responsibilities of discipleship, to the ways of love and faith, to the needs of the spirit, and to the mission of the church. As the Apostle Paul declared, we must finish the race.