

What is the I.C., or the Institutional Church?

About seven years ago, Western Christians coined the term "Institutional Church." This term is probably derived from the words "religious institution," but it is not meant to convey something that is all that complimentary. Instead, "institutional" conveys a rather self-limiting structure, which due to its own underlying assumptions, ends up restricting growth, discovery, and creativity.

For instance, if we were to think of a church or fellowship as though it were a high school with a principal, teachers and other staff, we would expect our students to eventually graduate into spiritual adulthood and lead productive lives. When we say "Institutional Church," however, we are describing a place where our hypothetical student is never really expected to graduate. Furthermore, the staff do not consider this a failure, but rather a perfectly acceptable way to run their school.

When it comes to the spiritual well-being of their fellowships, many modern Christians are taught to accept things just as they are and to look no further. Yet when our hypothetical students are "managed" to the point that they become passive observers and no more, it is often already too late. By that time, our most promising "students" and some of our best "teachers" have become demoralized. Such a thing is happening in too many churches, fellowships, cell-groups and even home churches.

Just what exactly are we saying here? If we do not know which road we are traveling on, it means that we are lost. When so many of our fellowships become increasingly troubled with no open accountability and no good prospects for change, it is time to wonder what happened. Did they already start out that way or did they stumble into it later on without noticing? It is important to answer these questions as best we can.

We have found that the Institutional Church typically promotes Old Covenant-style teachings that encourage people to adhere to practices that were originally parts of the Law. Sometimes this is not so obvious, since many Christians unknowingly live under the Old Covenant with some New Covenant added on. Still, our studies and observations over the course of many years have led us to conclude that these teachings play an important role in the making of an "institutional" church.

We believe that whenever we re-enact the Old Covenant, we end up reproducing Old Covenant results. Therefore, we believe it is wise to avoid the following developments:

- Priesthood/laity definitions and practices that resemble more the Levitical Priesthood under the Old Covenant (Heb 7:11-12; Heb 8:13) rather than the priesthood of all believers under the New Covenant (1 Pet 2:5-10; Rev 1:5-6). This starts out with, or leads to, any of the following qualities:
 - a narrow definition of who a Christian "minister" is, using "credentials" that are either unnecessary or restrictive (2 Cor 3:1). As a result, people are excluded or discouraged from opportunities to minister according to their gifts and callings by the leading and direction of the Holy Spirit (Gal 3:28; 1 Cor 14:26).

- an encouraged dependency upon these narrowly defined ministers, resulting in an active clergy and a passive laity (Heb 5:12-14); a corresponding exhaustion of the active clergy often results.
 - the exchange of money for spiritual services; the belief that a few paid professionals or titled ministers are more devoted and/or competent than the untitled and unpaid (Acts 20:34-35; 2 Cor 12:14-18; Matt 23:7-10; John 10:11-13); a corresponding exaltation of those ministers regardless of their true competence, and/or a contempt for the truly dedicated minister (2 Cor 11:5-12:11).
 - a "Law" based tithing teaching or other obligatory or forced giving plan for the support of these paid or titled ministers (2 Cor 9:7).
 - the absence, over control, or disallowance of "open church" (1 Cor 14:26).
 - the assumption that believers are too immature to function in simple gatherings ("simple church")¹ without the guidance and approval of a designated official representative of a church or organization, or that free gatherings or exchanges are illegitimate or inferior to anything that would occur under the "supervision" of a pastor or other paid or titled official leader (Matt 18:20).
 - a pastoral or prophetic leadership who considers themselves indispensable to believer's understanding or interpretation of scripture, or who seeks to replace the leading or witness of the Holy Spirit. Examples might include anything from a Senior Pastor or other who strictly defines the "vision" for a fellowship with the expectation that everyone should follow him or her (1 Cor 1:11-13), to a self-defined scholar, historian, teacher, prophet, apostle, bishop, or leader by a variety of names or titles, or a committee or association or board of the same, who claim or expect intellectual, spiritual, or mystical superiority and authority over others, whether locally, regionally, nationally, or universally (Luke 7:30-35; Luke 11:43-46; Luke 11:52; Matt 24:24; 1 Pet 5:1).
 - "covering" doctrines and other authoritarian practices that establish an abuse of power and the corresponding problems inherent in that abuse (Luke 22:25-27; 1 Pet 5:1-5; 2 Cor 11:1-20).
- A focus on "temple worship" practices (1 Chr 6:32), such as:
 - a de-emphasis of the people as the "temple" of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 6:19; John 4:20-24)
 - inflexibility in meeting place, day, time, or direction (John 3:8; Rom 14:5)
 - the assumption or message that "real" Christian fellowship does not exist outside of formalized meetings (Matt 18:20).
 - the assumption that our walk in Christ is defined or justified by attendance and duty to "approved", that is, regulated, religious services and meetings (Rom 8:14-15).

- an inappropriate emphasis on "holy" days, customs, foods, places, buildings, or times (Luke 13:10-17; Col 2:16; Heb 8:1-6).
- buildings, rituals, or other outward trappings become more important than the people they serve, leading to the neglect of those in need (James 2:14-17; Gal 6:2).
- prayer meetings, conferences, and the like become shameless sources of merchandizing and income (Mark 11:15-17).

Since Christianity was never intended to be a reproduction of the Old Covenant (Gal 4:21-31 - Gal 5:1), we believe that these practices take the "Christ" out of Christianity. Perhaps that is why the Institutional Church has been accused of encouraging devotion to man rather than devotion to Christ. Accordingly, many believers or leaders have privately or publicly objected to the following aspects of man- or money-centered religion:

- A pastoral or prophetic "priesthood" who considers themselves separate, and/or superior from their brothers and sisters in Christ by reason of gifting, title, or "outward success" in ministry, such as paid salary or amount of money received, appointment by like-minded peers, lofty revelations, religious education, approval by an official organization, or numbers of followers and devotees (James 3:13; James 4:4-6); the corresponding assumption that no one can be spiritually discerning unless they are part of this priesthood class, pastoral or prophetic "inner circle", or other "big name" Christian. (Heb 5:12-14; Eph 4:14-15).
- Absence of sound, practical teaching about false ministers or false teachings; promoting gifts over character, or titles or status over character (Matt 16:6; Matt 7:15-27).
- Ministers or others who refuse to reprove, chastise or rebuke other ministers publicly, regardless of their error (Gal 2:11-14; 1 Tim 5:20-21).
- Even the mildest public scrutiny, fact-based review, or questioning of a "successful" or favored minister or ministry over verifiable public acts and teachings is discouraged or disallowed in some way (2 Tim 3:12-17; Acts 20:30). This sometimes results in separation or expulsion from the group.
- A leadership that is above approach, reproof, or accountability; Hero worship (Deut 5:7).
- The belief that a minister or ministry should be protected and maintained at all costs, including deep sacrifices in mental, emotional, spiritual, physical, or financial health in order to perpetuate said ministry rather than re-examine it, restructure it, let it run on its own, or close it down (temporarily or permanently) (Deut 11:16).
- An emphasis on money; bondage to the god of mammon (Matt 6:24); manipulations to gain financial support or other gain (Rom 16:18).
- Favoritism is shown toward those who are wealthy or those who donate or "pay" more than others can toward projects, leaders, or organizations (James 2:1-9).
- "Ministers" or "religious corporations" accumulate personal or corporate wealth off of tithes, donations, or high-paying salaries (1 Tim 6:3-10).

Many Christian believers and leaders today do not wish to enable or participate in widespread corruption, yet much to their dismay, they find that religious systems are unwilling to change. In addition to this, many believers have noticed a disintegration of the "family life" in their fellowships. Examples include:

- An expectation of perpetual spiritual childhood is placed on the "sheep" with continued dismissal of their needs, concerns, or talents, and/or a disrespect or disregard is shown for the older, wiser workers (Rom 15:14; Eph 5:21; 1 Tim 5:17-19; 1 Cor 12:23-25).
- No apology or restitution is expected from some, while apology over minor offences is expected from others (Phil 2:1-6).
- Maltreatment of those who confess sin or weakness (1 Cor 13:1-2; Gal 6:1); messages of condemnation instead of love and hope (Phil 1:6).
- Toleration of immoral, unethical, or abusive behavior without appropriate concern expressed or action taken (1 Cor 5:1-2; 2 Tim 3:1-8).
- Examination of one's own beliefs discouraged; questions, concerns, or challenges ignored or deemed intolerable (Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 4:1-3).

Misdirects (Eph 4:14-15) may include the following:

- shaming, confusing, or threatening the conscientious objector into silence or submission (guilt trips or intimidation).
- baseless attacks against the motives, character, or spiritual state of objectors (irresponsible judgmentalism; false accusation).
- misrepresentation of the original objections or reports (bearing false witness).
- assurances to loyal followers that if they continue their allegiance to a leader or the movement they represent, they will somehow fulfill the will of God, or warnings that if they do not, they will miss out on a promising move of the Holy Spirit, or that they will somehow be punished by God (the carrot/stick approach).

As fellowships begin to resemble religious social clubs rather than loving families of believers, the following qualities or practices generally emerge:

- A self-righteous contempt toward the secular or other "inferiors" (Luke 18:10-14; Rom 12:16).
- Membership required to attend a church or fellowship (Rom 15:7).
- An elitist mentality which leads to open or subtle refusal to fellowship (as brothers in Christ) with those who are not loyal followers or members of a certain religious leader, club, sect, denomination, or an alliance of fellowships or churches. (Matt 22:35-40; James 4:6).
- Shunnings and/or secret expulsion (excommunication) commonly employed against those who, purposely or not, break the unspoken rules of the church family, group, or "club" (3 John 1:9-10).
- A forced, false unity under a leadership who are expected to be in full agreement on everything, with "sheep" who are expected to follow and agree for the sake of "unity". This is maintained through silencing of differences,

various manipulations to "convert" dissenters, and expulsion. (Eph 4:1-3). False unity may also be found where believers temporarily "set aside" their integrity under false pretenses (Gal 2:11-13; Eph 4:25).

- o The "One True Church" syndrome-- A denial that other ministries or expressions of Christianity is of value, or a refusal to recognize other individual Christians in other sects as saved or in possible good standing in the Kingdom. This assumes that the only true followers of God are found in their group, and denies that there is a larger Family of Christ which includes believers from other groups (Rom 10:9-11; Eph 4:4-6).

The above lists contain qualities that most would agree are disturbing developments in any fellowship or ministry. Yet at the same time, others might consider a few of the above items to be "business as usual". Even so, a careful, thoughtful, inspection of these items would show that a large number of them are interrelated in some way. Does this mean that "business as usual" is not the right way to go?

A Christianity where money and traditions are more important than God has thrown away its godly qualities (Matt 23:23; John 15:9-12). In fact, non-Christians not only notice the items on our list, but often express deep cynicism about them. They have long observed "Christian" con-men becoming rich off of the gullible, and shallow religious clubs full of status seekers, hypocrites, and insecure gossipers. This has become all too often the norm for them and for many others as well. As a result, they want no part of it.

Christians who acknowledge serious error often blame it on the hypocrites, pretenders, and false leaders who are allowed to operate under a shroud of apathy or secrecy (Luke 12:1-3; 1 Tim 5:24) They may also resign themselves to these problems being a sign of the "end times" (Matt 24:11-13; 2 Tim 3:1-5). While these things may be true, resignation is not our best or only option.

Christian fellowships and individuals need to be a source of salt and light (Matt 5:13-16) rather than a source of discouragement and confusion. Do we want to be a part of Jesus-style Christianity, or do we want to follow the well-worn path of just another religious cult of manipulation and pain? Certainly, an atmosphere of spiritual abuse is not God's best for us! It therefore behooves us to examine what practices cause what harms and to steer away from those harms.

Billions of people have been taught for generations that certain traditions or practices are absolutely necessary for the survival of Christianity. Yet Jesus did not say these things were necessary. Indeed, sometimes he preached against them. One thing is for sure, neither He nor His apostles operated according to the latest recommended business model, or had their ministry approved by the religious institutions of their day.

Although we are aware that many people all over the world are forced into a variety of difficult positions and choices due to persecution, we would ask those in the free world (mostly Western countries) to examine the results of their compromises. In a sea of apathy, ambition, greed, and cynical sell-outs, it is the brave man or woman of God who chooses the

"road less traveled" in order to follow the road that Jesus also traveled. Such a person will know God's rewards (Matt 6:1-6).

Just as Christian reformers of the past choose to dig deeper than the assumptions of their day, Christian reformers of the present do as well. They have examined these things not because they wanted to find fault, but because it was crucial for their own spiritual walk. As in earlier times, these new reformers or "revolutionaries"² have found themselves re-examining the foundational beliefs of Organized Religion.

Ultimately the terms "Organized Religion" and "Institutional Church" may mean much the same thing. In any case, since good intentions do not necessarily cancel out or atone for certain harms, there comes a point where even the apostle Paul might say, "your meetings do more harm than good" (1 Cor 11:17). This is because in the end, any false belief system or practice becomes an all-too-willing repository for severe problems.

This writing is a result of this author's efforts to "dig deeper" for the sake of those who have been disillusioned or spiritually stunted by the restrictions of Organized Religion or the problems of spiritual abuse. It is also for those who are discouraged about the love of Christ because of a misrepresentation of Him on earth. We need to care about things instead of pretending they do not exist, because pretending does not make it go away.

All good efforts have the potential to disintegrate and to become less than what they were hoped for or intended to be. Therefore, even some who claim that they are no longer part of "Organized Religion" may fail in their efforts. Because of this, it is our belief that we need to pay attention to our beginnings so that we do not start out on the wrong track. In addition to this, we need to take care that we do not become incapable of self-correction and flexibility ourselves (Matt 9:16-17). Regardless of where or how we fellowship though, it is wise for all Christians to consider these words:

Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain. (Psalms 127:1)

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¹ "This type of worship has various names including "house church," "home church," "organic church," "conversational church" or "simple church." From the article: "*Path to God is nearer than traditional church for some ...*" Oct. 05. 2006 by Lyn Stegemiller, Tribune Staff

² "Revolutionaries" fill "all points on the continuum of [traditional] church involvement." ... "The Revolutionary mindset is simple: Do whatever it takes to get closer to God and to help others do the same. Obliterate any obstacle that prevents you from honoring God with every breath you take." From pg 37 of the book, *Revolution*, by George Barna, © 2005