



# What Do We Mean by Non-Institutional?

Brownsburg Church of Christ

by Edwin Crozier

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PM Assembly



## Introduction:

It would be nice if every church that existed taught exactly the same thing. But they don't. Sadly, over the last two thousand years, churches have taught different things and divided again and again. The modern denominational mess stems from this kind of division. Each group has a different name in order to proclaim their difference from other denominations or independent churches. It would be nice if every independent church that just wanted to be a church belonging to Christ taught the exact same thing. Sadly, however, there have been divisions among us as well. In these separations, descriptions and labels are often used to express what side of some issue a particular congregation has taken. For instance, if we spoke of an instrumental church of Christ or a non-instrumental church, we would know very quickly that one believes it is authorized to worship God and edify one another using mechanical instruments of music and the other doesn't. Another term that has been used is Institutional and Non-Institutional. This term is not quite as easily defined. Some of us may have never even heard these terms. In this spectrum, the Brownsburg Church of Christ would be called a Non-Institutional church. But what does that mean? And why do we teach and practice that side of the discussion? I hope this lesson will help you understand the answer to these questions.

## Discussion:

### I. The nature of the church.

- A. To fully understand why we call ourselves a non-institutional church, we need to remind ourselves of the nature of Christ's church. The term church is used in two similar but distinct ways. In **Matthew 16:18**, Jesus spoke of the church He was going to build. In that passage, He spoke of the church universal, that is, the body of believers in Christ for all times and in all places. However, in passages like **I Corinthians 1:2**, Paul wrote to the "church of God that is in Corinth." He was writing to a local group of people who banded together assembling regularly under a common oversight, using a common treasury, performing a common work. Thus we find the universal church and the local church in Scripture.
- B. We remember that the universal church is the universal body of all the saved individuals, not a universal body of all the local churches. In fact, we do not find any kind of organization in which local churches banded together to form associations, organizations, or denominations. Instead we find local congregations who were autonomous, that is, self-governed, as demonstrated by **I Peter 5:2; Acts 14:23**. Because we believe a local congregation should be autonomous and self-governing, we are not linked in any organizational way with any other congregation.
- C. It is reasonable to believe that even though we are autonomous from any other group and that there are numerous groups that hold this same pattern of autonomy, if we are all using the same standard, we will all look relatively the same. We will worship the same way. We will work the same way. We will organize the same way. We will teach the same doctrines. That is exactly how it works so long as each congregation uses the same standard and uses it the same way. That is where the problem lies. While most churches claim to use the Bible as their standard, each one does not use it the same way. Because of that, differences have arisen between churches, even between churches that teach the same gospel message. One of those differences has been labeled "Institutionalism."

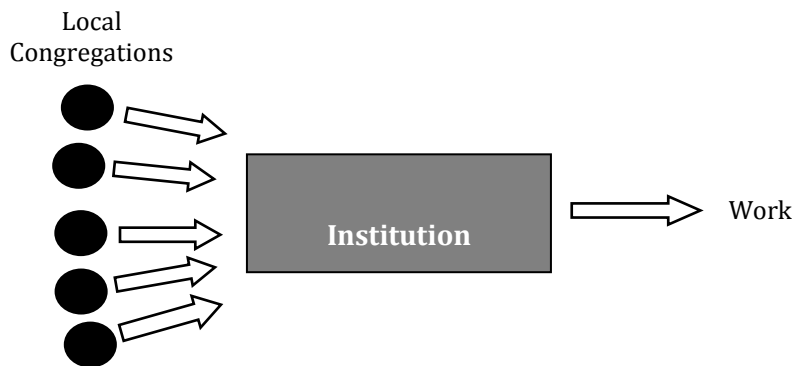
### II. What is institutionalism?

- A. Webster's defines an institution as "an organization, establishment, foundation, society, or the like, devoted to the promotion of a particular object, esp. one of a public, educational, or charitable character." According to that definition, guess what the local church is. It is an institution. It is a body which Christ has established to accomplish His work in this world.
- B. The purpose of the church is to hold up the truth (**I Timothy 3:15**). As we have seen, the government of the local church is a group of elders (**I Peter 5:2; Acts 14:23**). These are men who have met various qualifications (**I Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:5-9**) appointed as overseers, pastors, or bishops within the congregation. Their job is to shepherd the flock of God among them. They are not given authority beyond the borders of the local flock. Further, they are not given permission to pass the church's work off to any other group.

- C. Institutionalism, in our context, is the establishment of other institutions supported by a church or churches to accomplish work. Institutionalism, we might say, is the instituting of a middle-man organization between the local congregation and the work the congregation is accomplishing as demonstrated in the following chart:



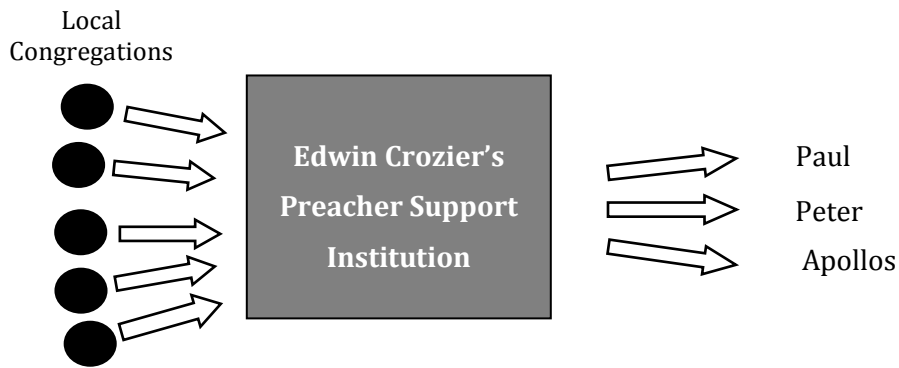
- D. Typically the purpose behind setting up such an institution is the claim that one local church cannot possibly do all the work that is needed. Therefore, we will set up an institution that can solicit resources from multiple congregations to accomplish the work. It looks like the following:



### III. What is the problem with institutionalism?

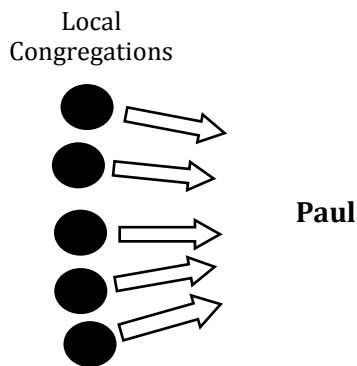
#### A. What is not the problem with institutionalism?

1. First, the problem is not that an institution was established to do some work that the church is authorized to do. The church is authorized to teach the Bible. So are you. If you want to teach the Bible separate from the congregation's direction, you are free to do so. If you want to organize an institution that produces and distributes materials, you are free to do so. If you want to gather together a group of teachers, develop some administrative staff, charge tuition, and set up some institution that does nothing but teach the Bible, feel free to do so. As an individual Christian you are allowed to teach the Bible just as the church is.
  2. Second, the problem is not whether or not there is authority for the local church to perform the work that the institution is performing. Certainly, the church should not do any work which is not authorized by scripture whether through a middle-man organization or otherwise. But even if the work is authorized for the church, that is not the issue here.
- B. The issue is that God never authorized man-made, middle-man institutions to come between the church and its work. God instituted local congregations to accomplish His work. The elders of a congregation are to oversee the work. They are not to set up some board or organization separate from the church to oversee the work or determine how the church's funds are going to be used in any aspect of the work.
- C. For instance, I like preachers. I want to support preachers. I want to do more than support preachers, I want to encourage all kinds of other people to support preachers. So I set up my non-profit 501(c)(3) organization and start motivating people to give to me to support preachers. Then it occurs to me, I can actually tap into groups of people, instead of one individual at a time, by getting churches to contribute money to my Preacher Support Institution. The chart below demonstrates what that looks like.



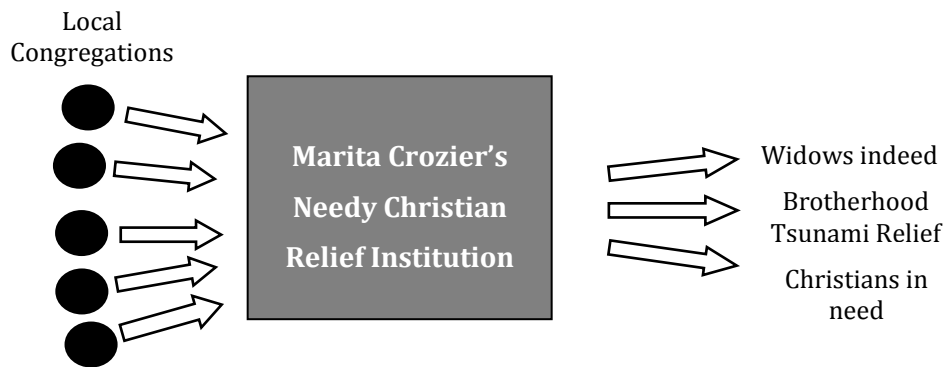
Notice what is happening in this situation. The elders of these local congregations want to do the important and authorized work of supporting preachers. But instead of just doing the work, they send my institution the money, and I decide how the money is going to be spent and which preachers are going to be supported. This all sounds good until we start looking for scriptural support for this kind of organization.

- D. Consider **Romans 15:24; II Corinthians 11:8; Philippians 4:15-16**. All of these passages talk about churches supporting evangelists. **Philippians 1:5** called it a partnership in the gospel. But it doesn't look like the institutionalism chart. Rather it looks like the following:



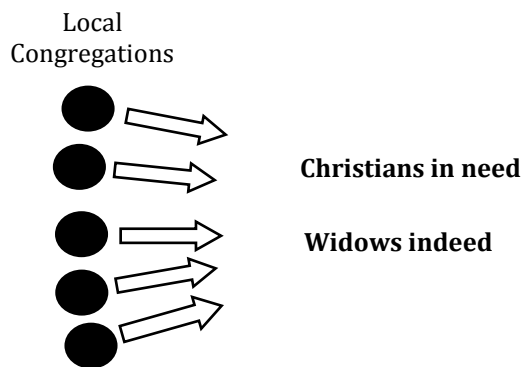
Looks very different doesn't it. It is a great thing when churches want to support preachers. If they want to do that, they need to simply support the preachers. God has never authorized a middle-man organization to solicit funds from churches and support preachers.

- E. Consider another example. Marita has a heart for her brethren. She always wants to help her brethren, especially the ones in need. She loves to provide monetary assistance to brethren in need. Further she likes to help accomplish jobs for people who cannot work easily anymore. So she trains Tessa and Trina to clean houses for the widows and trains Ethan and Ryan to cut their grass. Then it occurs to her that she could do some really good work if she got organized and made it bigger. She starts talking to her friends and they start contributing. She starts the Marita Crozier's Needy Christian Relief Institution. She hires more cleaners, grass cutters, and handymen. She starts sending out funds to Christians in need, especially widows. Then one day she realizes, she could really bring in the funds if she started hitting up churches, groups of people, instead of just individuals. The chart below demonstrates what this look likes.



Notice what is happening in this situation. The elders in these congregations want to do the important work of helping out Christians in need. Instead of just doing the work, they send the money to an institution and let the institution do the work. This all sounds good until we go to the scripture to find authority for this kind of organizational setup.

- F. Consider **Acts 11:27-30; I Corinthians 16:1-4; II Corinthians 8:1-14; I Timothy 5:3-10**. All of these passages talk about churches providing relief to brethren in need. But it doesn't look like the institutionalism chart. It looks like the following:



Looks very different doesn't it. Some will suggest that sending the gifts via Paul and his companions provides the authority for the middle-man benevolent institutions. However, that argumentation falls far short. Paul and his companions were not an institution that solicited funds from a church and then did the work of relieving needy saints. Paul was the messenger, the mailman. Even if you establish an institution, somehow the funds have to get from the churches to the institution and then from the institution to the people who need the relief. Without an institution, the funds must still somehow get from the churches to the needy brethren. That is all Paul did. It is a great thing when churches want to provide relief to needy brethren. If they want to do that, they need to simply relieve needy saints. God has never authorized the use of middle-man organizations to provide relief to needy saints.

#### IV. Why are we called a non-institutional church?

- A. We are called a non-institutional church because we refuse to establish or fund middle-man institutions to accomplish the work which God has given us as a local congregation. Because we believe it is important to do God's things God's way, we will only do what we find authority for in scripture (**II Timothy 3:16-17**).
- B. Therefore, we uphold the truth, supporting it, and proclaiming it. We directly support evangelists both locally and in foreign places as we have opportunity and resources to do so. We directly provide relief to saints in need, locally and in other locations. We do our work. We let other churches do their work. But we refuse to hand the oversight of our funds and our work to anyone else, whether another congregation or some other institution.

#### Conclusion:

I hope this explanation provides insight into what we want to do at the Brownsburg Church of Christ. As with all of my sermons, I realize I might be wrong. If you think I have missed it somewhere, let's get together and talk about that, studying the Word together. If we simply use the Word as our guide, we will be doing what God wants. When we start adding in our own ideas is when we get in trouble.