

Neo-Institutionalism

(By Truman Smith)

Some forty-five years ago, our brethren became embroiled in the greatest battle of the 20th Century over Institutionalism and Centralized Control of Churches. The same basic arguments that had been used to justify the establishment of the Christian Missionary Society which began in 1849 were brought back into use to defend unscriptural cooperation of local churches to support human institutions, such as the Herald of Truth Radio and Television program and various benevolent organizations. Such institutions had become "sacred cows" to many of our brethren and they were willing to go so far as to divide the body of Christ in order to have them. And they did!

Institutionalism is a concept of denominationalism! Let us consider a case in point: Back in the mid 1970's, brother Bob Vizenat and I teamed up and made a trip to Haiti for ten days, not knowing whether or not a "church of Christ" even existed in that land. One day while conversing with some people at the hotel where we were staying, we were asked what our business was in Haiti. We simply replied that we were preachers of the gospel of Christ and had come to Haiti prepared to preach whenever and wherever opportunity presented itself. Then with a confused expression on their faces they asked: "Where is your mission?" We responded that we had no "mission" in the sense they meant; but that we were simply preachers of the gospel and that if and when we preached and some obeyed, such could result in the establishment of a church of the Lord. But we could tell that this did not satisfy their curiosity. To them this was a very odd situation. Here were people, most of whom were from the U.S., who were perplexed because we had come all the way from the U.S. into a foreign country as preachers and were not working toward the establishment of a school, orphanage, hospital, etc. You see, a number of denominational preachers had entered Haiti as "missionaries" and had begun immediately to build some kind of human institution which was their "mission." And, by the way, this is how the term "missionary" came into use. Now, many of our own brethren have started using this term to refer to a preacher who is preaching in a distant land. It is our candid view that we need to give this term back to the denominations from whence it came! It certainly did not come from the Bible, neither did its concept! Brethren, this is just one of the unpaid bills we owe back to denominationalism! If not, why not?

When any denomination establishes a hospital, school, etc., that human institution becomes their "sacred cow"! They then set out to defend and protect that "sacred cow" with all the resources at their disposal! That human institution becomes their idol! Especially is this true if it is a school. And, when one enrolls in such a school, he soon begins to feel a sense of loyalty to that school even to the point of being defensive about it, particularly if he thinks his vocation might be enhanced by having attended such a school.

Our battle today is a battle over what we choose to call "Neo-Institutionalism."

Think about it. There are some brethren who are pushing for many unscriptural practices for which they use Romans the fourteenth chapter to justify: Unscriptural divorces and remarriages, homosexuality, gambling, social drinking, etc., etc. Many of our brethren who have climbed on the bandwagon for such an erroneous use of Romans 14 are associated in some way with Florida College in Tampa, Florida. Yes, we are aware that it is a "cardinal sin" to say anything against Florida College! That school has become a "sacred cow" to many! Brethren Bob Owen, Ed Harrell, and Harry Pickup, Jr. have been rather vocal in defending brother Homer Hailey in contending that we should accept him into our fellowship in spite of his erroneous teaching on divorce and remarriage. Let us say this: We love brother Hailey and respect him for his great knowledge of the O.T. prophets and the good work he has done through these many years; but he has now started teaching publicly in his later years that the non-Christian is not subject to the law of Jesus Christ, thus regardless of how many times such a person may have been married, he can be baptized and have all his previous wives washed away. Such teaching cannot be allowed to go unchallenged! But, you see, brother Hailey taught at Abilene Christian College (now Abilene Christian University) for some twelve years then served for many years as head of the Bible department at Florida College from which he retired some years ago. Practically all who are associated with Florida College today are in sympathy with Owen, Harrell, and Pickup. Brother Pickup has been associated with Florida College for several years, and Bob Owen served for a while as president of the school. Can you not see the neo-institutionalism involved here? Consider just how much churches of Christ have been influenced by "our schools" through the years! Please remember that it is a matter of recorded history that the schools that have been operated by our brethren all through time have, for the most part, started out on what was thought to be at the time of their establishment by faithful brethren as beneficial organizations that are right and Scriptural for the education of our youth. And, we applaud them for whatever honesty, conviction, and interest they might have had in the education of our young men and women. But, friends, can we not see that, even though such colleges started out as separate from the church, in every case, presumably without fail, they have ultimately come to infringe on the work of the local churches or otherwise influenced the thinking and direction that such churches take on vital issues? Just here one might be ready to exclaim: "Perhaps so, but just look at the influence the 'papers' have had on the churches through the years!" Well, we would be the first to agree. If any of the papers are guilty of this, then we need to have the same concerns about them! But this consideration does not justify either one of them; nor do we believe that papers can be placed on the same level as the schools.

Mark it down, brethren, as the schools go, so goes the church! How many times do the Lord's people have to go down that road before we learn our lesson? We should learn from history! Think of the apostasies of the past! Our brethren a hundred and fifty years

ago suffered a major apostasy involving The Missionary Society --Institutionalism. Another apostasy occurred fifty years ago over Herald of Truth and benevolent organizations -- institutionalism. Now, the matter of which we are concerned at this time rears its ugly head as a threat -- neo-institutionalism.

The same attitude toward Bible authority that the denominational churches had for the existence of their "institutions: were observed among those who pushed for "our" human institutions. They were like Israel of old who desired to have a king so they could be like the "nations about us" (see I Samuel 8); except our brethren wanted these human institutions so they could be like the denominations about us. Now there is a vast number of "churches of Christ" that have become just like the denominational churches about us! One such church is the Fifth & Highland Church of Christ in Abilene, Texas which became the home of the "Herald of Truth" back in the 1950's. Via e-mail recently we learned that the October 2, 1999 issue of the Abilene Reporter News, in the Religious section, contained an announcement from the Fifth & Highland church that on Tuesday night (10-5-99) they would show the video "Walk to Emmaus" and that "the remainder of the meeting would include singing, preaching, and communion." You read it right, communion on Tuesday night! The preacher for the Bangs Church of Christ, brother Michael Light, attended the service and obtained a video of it. The service also included a full-blown band on stage, an all woman quartet, hand clapping , and hands raised in the air with arms and bodies swaying back and forth. They also had a speaker, Eddie Sharp of the University Church. Brother Light said that Eddie Sharp read from a book supplied for this "Walk to Emmaus," and then the audience would respond from the book (like many denominations). He said that the gist of the rest of his speech to these Emmaus walkers was that "Church and religious heritage and tradition does not matter. In essence, you can be a member of a denomination, and that is acceptable in God's eyes. Just let Jesus lead you to a church that is right for you." Brethren, there are many other "churches of Christ" that have gone into apostasy in recent years! Let us remind you that human institutionalism is responsible for much of this! When will our brethren learn? It is time that we all realize that there is no orphanage, school, hospital or any other human institution that is more important than the church for which our Lord gave His life (Acts 20:28).

Brother Robert F. Turner wrote a series of articles in the Preceptor Magazine, Vol. 11, April, May, June, July, September and October, 1962, in which he gave a history of Educational Institutions Among Brethren. I would urge the reader of this article to go back and read those articles. My brethren, it is later than you think! Furthermore, it has gotten to where if a young man today aspires to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, he is expected to enroll in Florida College or else he will be made to feel that he is an outsider looking in. Remember, it is the business of the local church to make preachers, not some human institution, such as Florida College! The college must never supersede the

church! Brother Turner concluded his series with these words: "And finally, we must love the Lord and His church enough that when we see the school encroach upon and overshadow the Lord's own institution, we will renounce the school rather than seek to change the church so that the contradiction can be removed. If loving the Lord and His church more than I love the school is a crime, then I must plead guilty" (Preceptor, Volume 11, October 1962).

My beloved brethren, it will serve no purpose for anyone to cry "sour grapes!" But we believe we can now see what brother Daniel Sommer was really objecting to way back in the late 1800's and early 1900's. If only David Lipscomb and James A. Harding had listened a little closer to what Sommer was really saying, perhaps many of the problems churches have had through the years could have been avoided. Now it is time we listen!