

# Why the Division Among Brethren?

*The Underlying Issue Between Institutional and  
Non-Institutional churches of Christ*

---

Paul Hainline

NOBLEMIND PRESS

**Why the Division Among Brethren?**

*The Underlying Issue Between Institutional and Non-Institutional  
churches of Christ*

Copyright © 2026 Paul Hainline. All rights reserved.

Published by NobleMind Press • [noblemind.study](http://noblemind.study)

All Scripture quotations are from the  
New American Standard Bible® (NASB),  
Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020 by The Lockman  
Foundation.

Used by permission. All rights reserved. [www.lockman.org](http://www.lockman.org)

This book may be freely shared and distributed for  
the purpose of teaching and study.

First Edition

*A position must stand or fall based  
on what the Scriptures actually teach.*

— the thesis of this booklet

# Contents

## Preface

## Part One: Background

CHAPTER 1	.....	Why This Matters
CHAPTER 2	.....	A Short History of the Division

## Part Two: The Foundation

CHAPTER 3	.....	The Question of Authority
CHAPTER 4	.....	The Work God Gave the Church
CHAPTER 5	.....	The Church and the Individual

## Part Three: The Four Questions

CHAPTER 6	.....	Church-Supported Institutions
CHAPTER 7	.....	The Sponsoring Church Arrangement
CHAPTER 8	.....	The Treasury and Benevolence
CHAPTER 9	.....	Fellowship Halls and Social Meals

## Part Four: What It Means

CHAPTER 10	.....	What's Really at Stake
------------	-------	------------------------

.....

## PREFACE

This booklet exists because a division took place in the churches of Christ more than seventy years ago, and most of the people who live with its consequences today have never had the division fairly explained to them.

The division became hard in the 1950s. By about 1970 it was effectively complete. Congregations had separated; fellowship had been broken; families and friendships had been strained or cut. The generation that fought the division on both sides is now largely gone. The generation after them is fewer in number. And the members of the churches of Christ today — institutional and non-institutional alike — are mostly people who were not born when the separation happened. What most of them know about it, they have been taught by the side that raised them. They have rarely read the other side in the other side's own words. They have rarely been shown a fair statement of the question that was actually in dispute. They have often been given labels instead of arguments.

That is what this booklet is for. It is a short, patient attempt to do what ought to have been done more often over the last half century: to lay out the division honestly, state both positions in the way their best advocates would state them, walk through the relevant Scriptures, and let the text speak. The thesis of the whole work is stated plainly and is meant to

hold the writer to his own standard: a position must stand or fall based on what the Scriptures actually teach. If the Scriptures teach one side, that side is right. If they teach the other, that side is right. If they are genuinely silent or genuinely unclear at some point, honesty requires saying so.

I should be plain about where I stand, because a reader deserves to know it. My name is Paul Hainline. I have been a member of a non-institutional congregation since my baptism into Christ in December 2000, and I believe the Scriptures teach that position. I have tried in what follows to show why. But the goal of this booklet is not to win an argument. The goal is to let the reader — institutional, non-institutional, or simply curious — see the question whole, see it fairly, and do his own thinking in front of the text. If I have done my work well, an institutional reader should be able to read this booklet through and say, “He has represented my position accurately. I do not agree with his conclusions, but he has given me my own case fairly.” If that is possible, then the conversation Scripture calls for can begin. If it is not possible, the conversation never begins at all.

A word about the larger aim that both sides of this division have always shared, though they have disagreed about how to pursue it.

The churches of Christ, from the beginning, have tried to do something simple. We have tried to read the New Testament for what it actually establishes — the plan of salvation, the

work and worship of the local church, the organization and pattern of the early churches — and to follow that pattern without adding to it what men have added since. We have tried to be Christians only. We have tried to call the church by the names the New Testament itself uses. We have tried to sing in the way the apostles authorized — vocal music from the heart, without addition. We have tried to observe the Lord’s Supper on the day the apostles observed it, and to be baptized in the manner and for the purpose the apostles commanded. When the churches of Christ have been at their best, they have been a conscious attempt to let the first-century pattern — as the Scriptures show it — be the pattern still.

There is, as I write this, a growing interest among younger believers in something they call restoring the New Testament church. House churches, simple-church gatherings, people weary of institutional religion and looking for something that feels more like what they read in the book of Acts. I welcome that interest. What I want those readers to know is that the churches of Christ have been pursuing this aim for more than two hundred years. A congregation identifying itself as a church of Christ is not claiming a denominational brand. It is attempting a description — *a local assembly that belongs to Christ and is trying to be what the New Testament shows a church to be*. That aim is older than the label for it. It is apostolic.

The division this booklet examines is not a quarrel between two denominations. It is a disagreement among brethren who share that aim about how it is faithfully carried out. Specifically: what does the local church, as a collective body, have authority from Christ to do, and what has Christ assigned to the individual Christian to do in his own sphere? That question sounds narrow. It is not. The answer shapes what a congregation builds, who it supports, how it uses its funds, what work it undertakes and what work it leaves to its members. Over a generation, a different answer to that question produces a different kind of congregation.

A brief word on method. Each chapter on a contested issue follows the same pattern: state the question plainly; state the institutional position as its own best advocates would state it; state the non-institutional position in the same way; walk the relevant Scripture text by text; and let the text carry the conclusion. The method is the same for every issue because the same discipline is owed to each, and because the reader ought to be able to trust that no issue has been handled with greater or lesser care than any other. Each chapter closes with questions for reflection and discussion. They are written for Wednesday-night Bible class use, for small-group study, for family discussion, and for private reading with a pencil and the Book open. They are not rhetorical traps; they do not lead the reader to an assumed answer; where the text supports more than one honest conclusion, the questions say so.

I write the book assuming the reader is sincere. I assume he wants to know what the Scriptures teach. I assume that if the Scriptures teach something he has not been taught, or teach it differently than he has been taught, he would rather know than not know. I treat him as I would want to be treated if the positions were reversed.

I write the book assuming the Scriptures are what they claim to be — the inspired Word of God, complete and sufficient, the sole authority in matters of faith and practice. If a reader does not grant that premise, this booklet will not persuade him, because the whole method of the booklet rests on it.

Scripture quotations in this booklet are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB), 1995 edition, unless otherwise indicated. The NASB is used for its careful word-for-word rendering of the original languages. Where comparison with another translation is useful for clarity, the other translation is named at the point it appears. Where a translation choice itself is part of the argument, the underlying Greek or Hebrew is brought in directly. Every verse quoted has been checked against the actual text of the translation named.

My prayer for the reader is simple. Read with the Book open. Check what I have said against what the Scriptures actually say. Where I am right, accept it on the Scriptures' authority, not mine. Where I am wrong, reject it for the same reason. *A position must stand or fall based on what the*

*Scriptures actually teach.* That applies to every page of this booklet, and to every conviction you and I hold.

— *Paul Hainline*

PART ONE

# Background

---

*The division among brethren did not begin in the 1950s. To understand the question that came to a head then, the reader has to begin earlier — and has to ask why the question matters now.*

## CHAPTER ONE

# Why This Matters

A reader who has come this far is owed a plain answer to a plain question: why should he care?

The division this booklet examines is more than seventy years old. The men who fought it are mostly gone. The specific events that brought it to a head — a 1957 debate in Birmingham, Alabama; editorial wars between two brotherhood papers; the blackballing of congregations; the firing of preachers — belong to a generation before most current members were born. It would be easy for a young Christian in 2026 to read the first paragraph of a book like this and decide that the question is antique. Let the old men quarrel about the 1950s. Let him pursue his own walk with the Lord without bothering with it.

The trouble with that posture is that the division is not in the past. It is the present shape of the churches of Christ in the United States. Roughly two thousand congregations today hold the non-institutional position. Roughly ten thousand hold the institutional. The two groups rarely share preachers, rarely cooperate in meetings, and rarely marry across the line without tension. A Christian moving to a new city still has to

decide which side of the division his new congregation falls on before he walks through the door. Most members on both sides were born into their position rather than chose it, and most have never had the other side explained to them in the other side's own words. The division is not settled. It is inherited, unexamined, and live.

That is the first reason the question matters. A Christian is responsible for what he believes and practices. Inheriting a position is not the same as holding it by conviction. The young person who attends a non-institutional congregation because his grandparents did, without ever having opened the Scriptures on the underlying question, is in the same position as the young person who attends an institutional congregation for the same reason. Both have inherited a practice. Neither has tested it. The Scriptures call both, at some point in their lives, to do the testing.

“Examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). Paul’s word to the Thessalonians was not a casual recommendation. It is the ordinary discipline of a faithful disciple. A man who never examines what he has inherited has not failed at a technicality; he has failed at something closer to the center of what Christ asks of His disciples. The Bereans, when Paul himself preached to them, “received the word with great eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so” (Acts 17:11). Luke calls them noble-minded for doing it — and they

were examining the preaching of an apostle. If the Bereans examined Paul, a modern Christian may certainly examine what he was told by his parents, his preacher, or his elders.

The second reason the question matters is that what is at stake is larger than the specific practices that brought the division to a head.

Those specific practices can be named plainly. **Church-supported institutions** — may a local church take money from its treasury and send it to a separate human organization (an orphan home, a Christian college, a home for the aged) to do a work on the church's behalf? **The sponsoring church arrangement** — may one congregation take oversight of a work too large for any single church, while other congregations pool their contributions and send funds to the overseeing eldership? **The scope of the treasury in benevolence** — may the local church use its collective funds to relieve anyone in need, or is that collective work limited to needy Christians, with the broader obligation resting on individuals? **Fellowship meals and social activities** — may the church as a collective body use its funds and facilities for common meals, recreation, and social events, or is the common meal a work of the home rather than of the church?

These four questions cover most of the ground the division covered then and covers now. A reader who has been on only one side of it may recognize some of the questions and not others; may have been given an answer to some and never

heard the others asked. All four will be examined in this booklet, each in its own chapter, with both sides stated fairly and the relevant Scriptures walked through.

But these four questions, as specific as they are, are the surface of the division rather than its core. The core is a more fundamental question, and until it is settled, the specific questions cannot be answered the same way by the two sides. The more fundamental question is this: **how does a congregation know what it may and may not do?**

That is a question about authority. It is a question about what makes a practice right and what makes a practice wrong. Both sides of this division would agree that a congregation operates by the authority of Jesus Christ, and that the authority of Christ is found in the inspired Scriptures. The two sides do not disagree about *whether* Scripture is the authority. They disagree about *how that authority is established* — about the role of direct statements, apostolic examples, and necessary inferences, and particularly about what the *absence* of Scripture's instruction means. Is the silence of Scripture a permission or a restriction?

The answer a congregation gives to that question shapes every specific answer it will give to every specific question. It shapes whether it will or will not build an orphan home into its budget, fund a sponsoring arrangement, extend its benevolence beyond needy saints, or build a fellowship hall. More fundamentally, it shapes whether a congregation will test new

practices as they arise over time. A congregation with one answer will, over a generation, drift in one direction. A congregation with the other will drift — or hold — in another. The division in this booklet is about three or four practices on its surface. Beneath the surface it is about one hermeneutic, working its way out over seventy years into two different kinds of congregations.

That is why the question matters, and why a member of either side is doing himself a disservice if he settles his position on the practices without settling his position on the hermeneutic beneath them. A man can decide he is institutional because he has always been institutional, and he can decide he is non-institutional because he has always been non-institutional. What he cannot do, if he wants his position to stand before the Lord, is hold either position without examining the Scriptures the position claims to rest on. The thesis of this booklet is the test by which that examination is done: *a position must stand or fall based on what the Scriptures actually teach.*

The remaining chapters are the examination. The next chapter traces how the division actually came about, so the reader understands what he has inherited and from whom. The chapters that follow in Part Two lay down the hermeneutical foundation — the question of authority itself — because the specific questions in Part Three cannot be honestly examined until the foundation is in place. Part Three then takes the four

specific questions in turn, each in its own chapter, each with the same method: state the question, state the institutional position as its own best advocates have stated it, state the non-institutional position the same way, walk the Scripture, and let the text carry the conclusion. Part Four pulls the threads together and asks what the question, answered faithfully, asks of the reader.

The reader is invited to read with the Book open. If what follows in this booklet is right, he will see it in the Scriptures themselves. If it is wrong, he will see that in the Scriptures too. Either way, the work of reading has to be his.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. 1 Thessalonians 5:21 commands the Christian to “examine everything carefully” and “hold fast to that which is good.” What is the difference between inheriting a position and holding it by conviction? Which of your present convictions have you examined from the Scriptures personally, and which have you accepted because of who taught them to you?
2. The Bereans in Acts 17:11 were called “noble-minded” for examining the Scriptures to test what Paul himself preached. If they examined Paul, what should a modern Christian be willing to examine? What would keep him from doing so?

3. Four specific questions divide the two sides of this division (church support of institutions, the sponsoring church arrangement, the scope of the treasury in benevolence, fellowship meals). Before reading further, write down what you currently believe about each. At the end of the booklet, revisit what you wrote. Where, if anywhere, did a Scripture you had not considered change your thinking?
4. This chapter argues that beneath the specific practices lies a single underlying question about how a congregation knows what it may and may not do. Do you agree that this underlying question is the real division? If yes, why has it so often been treated as a quarrel about practices instead? If no, what do you think the real division is?

## CHAPTER TWO

# A Short History of the Division

The division examined in this booklet is often spoken of as if it began in the 1950s. In one sense that is true: the separation became hard, congregational, and irreversible during that decade. In another sense it is not true at all. The question underneath the 1950s was older than the 1950s. It had already divided the fellowship twice before, each time at a new flashpoint, each time over the same fundamental issue: what does the local church, as a collective body, have the authority from Christ to do?

A reader who starts the story in the 1950s will misunderstand it. The men who took the non-institutional position in 1957 were not drawing a new line. They were standing on a line drawn by earlier brethren in 1849 and again in the 1880s. To understand the 1950s, the reader has to begin earlier.

### *The Missionary Society*

In 1849, in Cincinnati, Ohio, a group of brethren organized the American Christian Missionary Society. The stated purpose was good and unobjectionable: to send and support

missionaries to preach the gospel at a scale no single congregation could achieve. Alexander Campbell himself served as its first president. The reasoning was straightforward. The church was commanded to preach the gospel to all the world. Individual congregations were too small to do that work alone. A cooperative organization — a society — could pool the resources of many congregations and accomplish what none could accomplish separately.

The reasoning carried many; the objection of others was not a quarrel with missions but a quarrel with the arrangement. Where did the New Testament authorize the local church, as a collective body, to fund a separate human organization to do its work? Where was the pattern of such a society in the practice of the first-century churches? The objectors argued that the New Testament showed churches cooperating in a different way — each congregation doing its own work under its own eldership, with relief funds sometimes sent directly from one congregation to another in time of need, but never pooled under a central organization. Preaching the gospel was the church's work. The society was not the church. Adding the society was adding what Scripture did not authorize.

The controversy divided the fellowship. By the latter half of the nineteenth century it had produced two distinct bodies that had begun as one movement: what would become the Christian Church / Disciples of Christ on one side, and the

churches of Christ on the other. The churches of Christ, as they emerged, were a fellowship that had rejected the missionary society on the hermeneutical ground that Scripture does not authorize it.

### *Instrumental Music*

The second dividing question arose at roughly the same time and hardened somewhat later. Instrumental music was introduced into the worship of some congregations during the latter half of the nineteenth century, and it became a settled feature of others by the 1880s and 1890s. The defense was, again, that of expediency: the New Testament did not expressly forbid instruments, the instrument aided the singing, and aiding an authorized work was within a congregation's liberty.

The objection, again, was hermeneutical. Where did the New Testament authorize the use of instruments in the worship of the church? Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 specified the kind of music God wanted — singing, vocal music from the heart. Specification is itself a form of restriction. The congregations that would continue as churches of Christ rejected instrumental music on the same reasoning by which they had rejected the society: Scripture had not authorized the practice, and silence was not permission.

By 1906 the division was formally recognized by the United States Census Bureau. The Disciples of Christ were counted separately from the churches of Christ. The mission-

ary society and the instrument had produced two different bodies from what had once been one.

These two earlier divisions matter for the present one because the question is the same. May the local church, as a collective body, undertake an arrangement or a practice that Scripture does not authorize, on the reasoning that Scripture does not forbid it and need invites it? In 1849 the arrangement was a missionary society. In the 1880s it was a keyboard. In the 1950s it would be something new again. The fault line was the same each time.

### *The Pre-War Background*

The first church-supported orphan home among churches of Christ was the Tennessee Orphan Home, chartered in 1909 and opened in September 1910 in Columbia, Tennessee. From the beginning, the arrangement was controversial. Opposition was present in the same publications and among the same preachers who had opposed the missionary society a generation before, and on the same ground. Caring for orphans was a good work; no one disputed that. But was it the local church's work, to be funded out of the collective treasury and administered through a separate human institution, or was it an individual obligation, to be met by Christians in their own spheres as God had always assigned relief of the needy to the individual?

Through the first half of the twentieth century, the practice of churches contributing from their treasuries to such institutions grew, but so did the opposition. Foy E. Wallace Jr., one of the most widely read preachers of the 1930s and 1940s, warned in the *Bible Banner* in 1939: “The church is about to become the unwitting and unwilling victim of institutionalism... Institutionalism was the taproot of digression.” The younger Guy N. Woods — later to become the most prominent institutional defender of his generation — wrote in 1946 that “there is no place for charitable organizations in the work of the New Testament church.” Woods’s later reversal on this question is a historical fact of the period and will be addressed in its proper place in Chapter 6. For the purposes of the present chapter, it is enough to note that the opposition to church-supported institutions in the 1940s was not a fringe view. It was the view of leading preachers on both sides of what would, a decade later, become the division.

What changed after the Second World War was scale. The number of institutions multiplied. Radio emerged as a medium for mass evangelism, and then television. The cost of such work was far beyond the reach of any single congregation. The older arrangements — a local orphan home supported by a few local churches — began to give way to larger ones, and the larger arrangements raised the old questions in sharper form.

### *The Flashpoints*

Two arrangements in particular brought the controversy to a head in the 1950s.

The first was the **Herald of Truth**, a radio program launched in February 1952 by the Highland congregation in Abilene, Texas. The program was conceived from the beginning as a nationwide evangelistic effort. The Highland eldership provided oversight; congregations across the country were invited to send contributions to Highland, which Highland then used to fund the program. The reach was substantial; within a few years the Herald of Truth was broadcasting on hundreds of radio stations, and the television expansion followed. The question the arrangement raised was not whether radio evangelism was legitimate. It was whether the arrangement — one congregation's eldership overseeing a work funded by many congregations — was itself Scripturally authorized.

The second was **church-supported benevolent institutions**, which had existed for decades but which now expanded rapidly. Orphan homes, homes for the aged, and Christian colleges received funds from church treasuries across the brotherhood. The defenders argued these institutions were expedients: the church was commanded to care for orphans and to teach, and institutions were simply efficient means by which the church accomplished its work. The objectors argued that the institutions were themselves separate organizations —

each with its own board of trustees, its own charter, its own officers — and that the New Testament neither authorized such institutions nor provided any pattern for the church's funding of them.

### *The Defining Debate*

The most thorough public exchange of the period took place November 18 to 23, 1957, in the municipal auditorium of Birmingham, Alabama. Roy E. Cogdill represented the non-institutional position. Guy N. Woods represented the institutional position. Over five nights the two men debated two propositions: first, the Scripturalness of church support for benevolent institutions such as orphan homes; and second, the Scripturalness of the Herald of Truth and similar sponsoring church arrangements.

The Cogdill–Woods Debate remains, more than sixty years later, the single most important document of the controversy. Both men were able advocates. Both represented their positions at full strength. A reader today who wants to understand what each side actually argued — in their own words, under the discipline of cross-examination by the other — can do no better than to read the debate in full. The most serious study will begin there.

### *The Journals*

If the debate was the most visible exchange, the journals were the more continuous battlefield. The *Gospel Advocate*, published in Nashville and edited during this period by B. C. Goodpasture, advocated the institutional practices and defended them week by week in the homes of its subscribers. The *Gospel Guardian*, published in Lufkin, Texas, and edited by Yater Tant, defended the non-institutional position and reached its own readership by the same weekly rhythm. A congregation's orientation could often be predicted by which paper its preacher and elders read. For most members on both sides, the journals did more to shape conviction than any single debate ever did.

### *The Hardening*

The historian David Edwin Harrell, who has written extensively on this period, distinguished between two styles within the institutional movement. Foy E. Wallace Jr., in an earlier generation, "scorched heretics"; B. C. Goodpasture, in the 1950s and 1960s, "warned them they would lose their position within the brotherhood." The distinction matters. What Harrell documents is a deliberate move, on Goodpasture's part, from persuasion to isolation. Preachers who took the non-institutional position were to be dismissed; their meetings at institutional congregations were to be canceled; members who held the position were to be expelled from existing congrega-

tions; and congregations that resisted conforming were to be blackballed from fellowship lists.

The ten years between roughly 1955 and 1965 produced sharp pain on both sides. Preachers lost their livelihoods. Long friendships ended in silence or in print. Members who had sat on the same pews for decades found themselves unwelcome in the buildings they had helped to build. Congregations went to court over property. Communities that had supported one congregation now supported two — one institutional, one non-institutional — with the same name on the sign and nothing else in common.

It is only honest to say that harsh words appeared on both sides of the division. The non-institutional brethren were sometimes intemperate in their writing; the institutional brethren sometimes used their institutional advantages as weapons. Men on both sides later regretted specific things they had said and done. A historian writing from any position has to acknowledge that a division this serious rarely produces only one kind of failure. But the documentary record of the period makes the particular strategy of isolation clear, and the effect of that strategy — on congregations, on families, and on the course of the division — cannot be honestly left out of an account of what happened.

## *The Aftermath*

By about 1970 the division was effectively complete. Fellowship lines had hardened; the two bodies rarely shared preachers or meetings; the journals had largely stopped engaging across the line. A generation of younger members began to grow up in one world or the other, most of them knowing only the one they were raised in.

The non-institutional congregations today number approximately 2,055 in the United States, with an estimated 120,000 members. By Mac Lynn's long-running compilations, that represents roughly fifteen percent of churches of Christ congregations and about nine percent of members. Institutional congregations represent the clear majority. Both groups have, over the past several decades, declined in overall size along with most of American religious life; churches of Christ as a whole peaked in the 1980s and have been in gradual decline since. The division is no longer expanding, but it is far from healed.

Recent years have seen the first sustained conversations across the line since the 1950s. A meeting at the Gospel Advocate offices in Nashville in May 2016 brought non-institutional and institutional brethren into the same room for the first time in decades. The Exploring Current Issues Conference, hosted annually in Cullman, Alabama since 2011 under Jim Deason's leadership, has continued that conversation. Whether any significant reconciliation will come of these exchanges remains to be seen. What they demonstrate is that at

least some on both sides believe the conversation is worth having.

That is the history. The chapters that follow examine the Scripture on which the division actually rests.

A reader who wants to go deeper into the history itself will find recommended sources in Chapter 11. The standard modern histories, the primary debate texts, and the journal archives are all still available. This chapter has given only the outline. The serious student will want the detail.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. The 1849 missionary society, the 1880s introduction of instrumental music, and the 1950s institutional controversies are often described as three separate divisions. This chapter argues that they share a single underlying hermeneutical question. State that question in your own words. Do you agree that it is the same question in each case?
2. Why do you think the defense of each innovation — the society, the instrument, the church-supported institution — turned to arguments from expediency and unmet need? What does that pattern suggest about how authority from Scripture is being established, or not established, in those defenses?
3. Read the quotations from Foy E. Wallace Jr. (1939) and from the younger Guy N. Woods (1946) in this

chapter. Both men were warning against “institutionalism” before the 1950s controversy became a division. What does the existence of these earlier warnings tell you about the view that the non-institutional position was a new or reactionary development?

4. This chapter acknowledges that harsh words appeared on both sides of the division. Is it possible to hold a strong conviction on a matter of Scripture and still write and speak about those who disagree with charity? What does Scripture teach about how a Christian is to conduct himself when contending for the faith (consider Jude 3; 2 Timothy 2:24–26; Ephesians 4:15)?
5. Whichever side of the division you were raised in, how much of what you currently believe about the other side comes from reading the other side in its own words, and how much comes from hearing your own side describe it? What would change about your convictions if you read the Cogdill–Woods Debate straight through without deciding in advance who won?

PART TWO

# The Foundation

---

*Before any specific practice can be examined, three foundational matters have to be settled: how Scripture establishes authority, what work the local church has been given, and how that collective work is distinguished from the work of the individual Christian.*

## CHAPTER THREE

# The Question of Authority

Before any specific practice can be examined — orphan homes, sponsoring churches, the use of the treasury, fellowship meals — a more fundamental question has to be settled. How does a congregation know what it may and may not do? What makes a practice right? What makes a practice wrong? The answer given by Christ and recorded by His apostles is still the answer today: a congregation operates by the authority of Jesus Christ, and that authority is found in the inspired Scriptures. Both sides of the division we are examining would agree with that sentence as a matter of principle. The disagreement is not whether Scripture is the authority. The disagreement is over how that authority is established — and particularly over what the absence of Scripture’s instruction means.

### *The Foundation*

Paul writes to the Colossians: “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Col. 3:17). To act “in the name of” someone is to act by their authority. A policeman acts in the name of the law. An ambassador speaks in the name of

his government. One who is baptized “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19) is baptized by the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. When Paul says “whatever you do in word or deed,” he is not leaving a category of activity outside that fence. Everything — every word, every action, every decision of the individual Christian and every decision of the collective church — is to be done by the authority of Jesus Christ.

That raises the obvious next question: where is that authority found? Paul’s second letter to Timothy answers it: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work” (2 Tim. 3:16–17). Scripture equips *completely*. The man of God is *adequate* — the Greek word is *artios*, meaning complete, thoroughly fitted out. He is equipped for *every good work*. If Scripture equips completely for every good work, then anything Scripture does not equip for is not a good work Christ has given us. The reverse is worth stating too: if we find ourselves doing work for which Scripture has not equipped us, we are doing work God has not required — and whose work, then, is it?

## *How Authority Is Established*

How does Scripture actually authorize a practice? There are three ordinary ways, and these are not peculiar to any tradition — they are the ordinary tools of reading any authoritative text.

**Direct statement.** The clearest form of authority is a direct command or statement. When Jesus says “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19), no inference is required. The command is explicit. When Paul tells the Corinthians to put away the immoral brother (1 Cor. 5), the direct statement leaves no doubt. Most of our practice rests on direct statements.

**Approved apostolic example.** The second way Scripture authorizes a practice is by recording what the apostles and early churches did under apostolic oversight — examples the apostles clearly approved as the pattern to follow. On what day of the week did the disciples gather to break bread? “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread” (Acts 20:7). This is not a direct command to assemble on the first day. It is an example. But it is an approved example, repeated across the New Testament churches (1 Cor. 16:2 — “on the first day of every week”), and there is no alternative example in Scripture. The apostles practiced and approved the first-day assembly for breaking bread, and no other pattern is offered. The example is binding because apostolic approval

carries the authority of Christ who sent them (John 13:20; Matt. 18:18).

Not every example in Scripture is approved. When the Corinthians abused the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:17–34) the narrative records what they did, but Paul's response shows the practice was condemned. An approved example is one the apostles sanctioned, not merely one the text happens to report.

**Necessary inference.** The third way authority is established is by what the text necessarily requires us to conclude. When Philip preached Jesus to the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:35) and the eunuch immediately asked, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” (v. 36), we necessarily infer that Philip's preaching of “Jesus” included the requirement of baptism — because the eunuch knew to ask for it. The text does not directly say “Philip taught him to be baptized.” But the conclusion is forced by what the text does say. Nothing else explains the eunuch's question.

Necessary inference is not the same as *speculative* inference. If the text permits two conclusions, we cannot bind either one. What the text *requires* — what must be true for the text to make sense — we are obligated to accept.

### *The Question of Silence*

Here the two sides of the division we are examining part ways.

When Scripture does not authorize a practice — when there is no direct statement, no approved example, and nothing

necessarily inferred — what does that silence mean? Does the absence of authorization permit the practice, or does it restrict the practice?

The institutional argument tends to reason this way: if Scripture does not forbid a practice, and if the practice can be defended as an expedient to an authorized work, it may be done. Buildings are not directly authorized, but they expedite assembly. Song books are not directly authorized, but they expedite the command to sing. By this reasoning, an orphan home expedites the command to care for orphans; a fellowship hall expedites the command to build up the saints; a sponsoring church arrangement expedites the command to preach the gospel. Silence permits where need invites.

The non-institutional argument is different. If Scripture does not authorize a practice, the practice is unauthorized — and the burden is on the one who proposes it to show where the authority lies. Silence restricts.

The question cannot be resolved by casual reasoning on either side. It must be resolved by asking how Scripture itself treats silence. And Scripture's own handling of the matter is consistent.

**Nadab and Abihu** (Lev. 10:1–2). “Now Nadab and Abihu, the sons of Aaron, took their respective firepans, and after putting fire in them, placed incense on it and offered strange fire before the Lord, which He had not commanded them. And fire came out from the presence of the Lord and

consumed them, and they died before the Lord.” The sons of Aaron were not told they could not do what they did. They were simply not told they could. The text’s indictment is precise: “fire ... which He had not commanded them.” Silence was not permission. Silence was restriction, and violating it cost them their lives.

**Hebrews 7:13–14.** The writer of Hebrews argues that Jesus could not have been a priest under the Mosaic law because He was descended from Judah, “a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.” Moses said *nothing*. Moses did not forbid Judean priests — he simply did not authorize them. And the Hebrew writer treats that silence as conclusive. If Moses said nothing about priests from Judah, then under the Mosaic law there could be no priests from Judah. This is an apostolic application of the principle that when God specifies, silence on everything else excludes.

**The principle of specification.** When God told Noah to build the ark of gopher wood (Gen. 6:14), He did not forbid oak, cedar, or pine. He simply specified gopher wood. Specification is itself a form of restrictive silence. Noah was not at liberty to choose oak because oak was not on a list of prohibited woods. The specification of gopher wood excluded every alternative not specified. This principle operates throughout Scripture. When God tells His people what to do, He is — by the same act — telling them what not to do. The command to sing (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) is, by specification, a

restriction against adding instrumental music — not because an instrument is forbidden by name, but because God specified the kind of music He wanted. The same principle operates wherever Scripture specifies.

One more observation is worth making. The “silence permits” argument proves too much. If silence permits any practice that is not directly forbidden and can be defended as expedient, then virtually every practice that divided the churches of Christ from the Christian Church in the nineteenth century — the missionary society, instrumental music, and similar innovations — is defensible on the same reasoning. Each was defended in its day as an expedient to an authorized work. The hermeneutic that permits one permits all. The hermeneutic that restricts one restricts all. A consistent reading of Scripture has to come down one way or the other, and the reader will have to decide which way Scripture itself actually comes down.

### *The Use of Old Testament Examples*

One more piece of ground needs to be cleared before we move to the specific issues, because the arguments that follow will draw on the Old Testament.

We are not under the Law of Moses. Paul is explicit: “having canceled out the certificate of debt consisting of decrees against us, which was hostile to us; and He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross” (Col. 2:14). The

Hebrew writer says the same: “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete” (Heb. 8:13). The Mosaic law as a legal code — its sacrifices, its feast days, its priesthood, its dietary restrictions, its civil regulations — is not binding on the Christian.

But the Old Testament is not discarded. Paul writes to the Romans: “For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction, so that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). He writes the same to Corinth: “Now these things happened as examples for us ... these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (1 Cor. 10:6, 11). And it is worth remembering that when Paul tells Timothy “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tim. 3:16), the Scripture Timothy had from his mother and grandmother (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:15) was the Old Testament. The Old Testament is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.

The distinction is between *binding law* and *instructive pattern*. We are not bound to keep the Sabbath, to offer sacrifices, or to leave the corners of our fields for the poor. But when we observe *how God ordered His people* — the distinction between the tabernacle and the household, between the priesthood’s work and the individual landowner’s responsibility, between the temple treasury and the field — we are

observing the character and method of God. Those patterns reveal how God has always distinguished between what a collective body does through its appointed institution and what individuals do in their own sphere. That distinction carries into the New Testament, because God's character does not change (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17).

This is the difference between trying to reinstate the Law of Moses and learning from the Law of Moses. The first is error (Gal. 3:23–25). The second is Paul's own command (Rom. 15:4).

### *Why This Chapter Matters*

Everything that follows in this booklet depends on what has been laid down in this chapter. If Scripture is the authority; if authority is established by direct statement, approved apostolic example, and necessary inference; if silence restricts rather than permits where God has specified; if the Old Testament furnishes instructive patterns we are obligated to learn from — then the specific questions we turn to next can be examined honestly. Each question will be the same. Where does Scripture authorize this practice? What does the text actually say?

If the reasoning of this chapter is wrong, the chapters that follow will be wrong with it. If it is right, the specific issues become matters of patient textual work rather than rhetorical victory. The point of this booklet is not to win an argument. The point is to read the Book.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. Colossians 3:17 says “whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Are there any activities of the church that this verse does *not* cover? Explain your answer.
2. 2 Timothy 3:16–17 says Scripture equips the man of God “for every good work.” What does that imply about practices for which no Scriptural authority can be produced?
3. Read Leviticus 10:1–2 carefully. What exactly was wrong with the fire Nadab and Abihu offered? Does the text say it was forbidden, or does it say something more specific than that? Why does the distinction matter?
4. Genesis 6:14 specifies gopher wood for the ark. If Noah had built with oak instead, what precisely would have been his sin? What does that tell us about the principle of specification — and about silence?
5. Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:11 tell us that things written earlier were written “for our instruction.” In light of Colossians 2:14 and Hebrews 8:13, how do we use the Old Testament without placing ourselves under the Mosaic law?

## CHAPTER FOUR

# The Work God Gave the Church

Chapter 3 established that the church operates by authority — that every word and every deed must be done in the name of the Lord Jesus — and that the authority of Christ is found in the Scriptures. Chapter 5 will establish that what Christ authorized the individual to do is not necessarily what He authorized the local church, as a collective body, to do.

Between those two chapters sits a question that cannot be avoided: *what did Christ actually authorize the local church to do?* Not what does the individual Christian do in his own sphere — that is a separate question. Not what might seem good for a congregation to undertake — the whole point of Chapter 3 was that seeming good is not enough. The question is what the New Testament actually assigns to the local church, as the collective body, for its collective funds to accomplish.

The question matters for a simple reason. The chapters ahead will examine whether a local church may fund a separate institution, may participate in a sponsoring arrangement, may extend its treasury to general benevolence, or may operate a fellowship hall. Every one of those questions rests on a prior

one: what is the work the church has been given? If a proposed practice falls within that work, it remains only to ask whether the specific method is authorized. If the proposed practice falls outside that work, it does not matter how well-intentioned or how widely practiced it is — it has not been assigned to the church.

### *The Pillar and Support of the Truth*

Paul writes to Timothy: “I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:14–15).

The phrase is worth dwelling on. The church is identified not as one institution among many in the culture, not as a general-purpose religious organization, not as a charitable enterprise, and not as a social club. It is “the pillar and support of the truth.” Its central identity is to hold up, support, and make known the revealed truth of God. Every other aspect of its collective work proceeds from that identity.

A pillar holds something up. A support keeps something from falling. Paul’s image is architectural: the truth is the structure, and the church is what holds the structure in the world. If the church fails at that work, the truth is not held up. If the church takes on work that distracts it from that identity, or that dilutes its energy across projects God did not assign it,

the pillar function weakens. Paul does not say the church has many pillar-like functions. He says the church is *the* pillar and support.

With that identity established, Scripture describes four broad categories of work that the local church, as a collective body, is authorized to undertake. Each of the four serves the identity of 1 Timothy 3:15. None of them is outside that identity. And any work not falling within these four is not work the New Testament has assigned to the local church.

### *Worship*

The first and most visible work of the local church is the collective worship of the assembled saints. When the early disciples came together, they came together to worship.

Luke describes the pattern of the Jerusalem church: “They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42). Four elements of the collective assembly are named: teaching, fellowship among the saints, the Lord’s Supper, and prayer. Later in the same chapter we are told they were “praising God and having favor with all the people” (v. 47). Singing is not specifically named in this passage but appears elsewhere as an ordinary element of the assembly (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16; 1 Cor. 14:15). Giving is added as a directed weekly act: “On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper” (1 Cor. 16:2).

The day of the assembly is established by Acts 20:7: “On the first day of the week, when we were gathered together to break bread, Paul began talking to them.” The pattern is not a command in the form of a direct statute, but it is an approved apostolic example, repeated across the New Testament churches (1 Cor. 16:2), and no alternative is offered. The first day of the week is when the local church gathered to worship.

The content of that worship is likewise specified. Prayer. Singing — vocal music from the heart, as Ephesians 5:19 and Colossians 3:16 describe. The Lord’s Supper, in remembrance of the death of Christ until He comes (1 Cor. 11:23–26). The preaching and teaching of the word. The regular giving of the saints into the treasury.

This is the work of worship as the New Testament describes it — specified, ordered, and central to the life of the local congregation. It is not a vague category into which a congregation may pour any activity that can be called reverent. It is a defined work, and its elements are named.

### *Edification of the Saints*

The second work of the local church is the building up of its own members — what the New Testament calls *edification*. The local church exists not only to worship God but to help its members grow into Christ.

Paul writes to the Ephesians: “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and

some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ” (Eph. 4:11–13).

The purpose of the gifts Christ gave the church was “the equipping of the saints.” The direction of the work is inward toward the members of the body. The goal is maturity — every saint grown up into the stature of Christ. Paul continues in verse 16: the whole body, “being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.”

Peter describes the same work in different language: “You also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5). The local congregation is not a random gathering; it is a structure being built. Every member matters. Every teaching, every encouragement, every correction either contributes to the building or detracts from it.

Edification is done through teaching, through preaching, through the mutual care and admonition of the members, through the exercise of discipline when it is needed (1 Cor. 5; 2 Thess. 3:14–15), and through the oversight of elders who are to “shepherd the flock of God among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). The

work is inward, directed toward the saints themselves, aimed at their growth and their faithfulness.

It is important to see that edification is aimed at *the saints*. Ephesians 4:11–16 does not describe the building up of the community at large, or the spiritual formation of those outside the body. It describes the equipping of saints, the building up of the body of Christ. A work that would edify a saint is within the church’s charter. A work that aims instead at general community benefit is aimed elsewhere — not wrong for an individual Christian to undertake in his own sphere, but not assigned to the local church as its collective work.

### *Evangelism*

The third work of the local church is the preaching of the gospel to those who have not yet obeyed it. Worship is directed toward God; edification is directed inward toward the saints; evangelism is directed outward toward the lost.

Jesus’s commission in Matthew is the central text: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you” (Matt. 28:18–20). The work is preaching, making disciples, baptizing those who believe, and teaching them to observe what Christ commanded.

The book of Acts is the record of the early churches carrying out this commission. Paul writes to the Thessalonians: “The word of the Lord has sounded forth from you, not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place your faith toward God has gone forth” (1 Thess. 1:8). A faithful congregation sends the word of the Lord outward. That sending is its evangelistic work.

The New Testament pattern shows local churches supporting the preaching of the gospel in various ways. Philippi sent financial support directly to Paul while he preached elsewhere (Phil. 4:15–16; 2 Cor. 11:8–9). Local churches selected men to travel with funds (2 Cor. 8:16–24). Paul and his companions preached in cities and established congregations who in turn preached to their own communities. The activity was energetic and widespread, and it was funded out of the treasuries of local churches.

What the New Testament does not show is a local church funneling its evangelistic funds through a separate human organization, or through another congregation that administers the work for it. The pattern of cooperation will be examined specifically in Chapter 7. For the present chapter, it is enough to establish that evangelism — the preaching of the gospel to the lost — is one of the authorized works of the local church, done out of its own treasury and under its own oversight.

### *Benevolence to Needy Saints*

The fourth work of the local church is the relief of needy Christians. The New Testament shows local congregations extending collective benevolence to other Christians who are in material need.

The pattern is consistent. Acts 2:44–45 describes the Jerusalem church distributing possessions “as anyone might have need” — and verse 44 identifies “anyone” as “all those who had believed.” Acts 4:32 describes “the congregation of those who believed” selling possessions and sharing so that “there was not a needy person among them” (v. 34). Acts 6:1–6 records the appointment of seven men to serve the daily distribution to Hellenistic widows — widows who were themselves disciples. Acts 11:27–30 describes the Antioch church sending “relief to the brethren living in Judea.” Paul describes the collection from the Gentile churches as being for “the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom. 15:26), as “the collection for the saints” (1 Cor. 16:1), and as a “ministry to the saints” (2 Cor. 8:4; 9:1, 12).

Every one of those passages specifies that the recipients of collective church benevolence were saints — Christians — brothers and sisters in the body. Chapter 8 will walk through each of those passages in more detail, along with the two passages commonly cited to extend the scope (James 1:27 and Galatians 6:10), both of which will be shown on closer

examination to address the individual rather than the collective treasury.

For the present chapter, the relevant point is that benevolence *to needy saints* is one of the authorized works of the local church. The New Testament specifies the recipients, which means the New Testament also specifies the limit. The individual Christian's benevolence is broader — he is to do good to all people, as Galatians 6:10 describes — but the collective benevolence of the local church, drawn from its treasury, is aimed at its own brothers and sisters in need.

### *What Is Not in the Description*

These four categories — worship, edification of the saints, evangelism, and benevolence to needy saints — are the work the New Testament assigns to the local church as a collective body.

It is equally important to see what is *not* in the apostolic description. Several kinds of activity, common in congregational life today, are not described anywhere in the New Testament as the collective work of a local church.

**General humanitarianism** — the feeding, clothing, or material relief of the community at large, regardless of faith — is assigned to the individual Christian (Gal. 6:10; Eph. 4:28; Matt. 25:35–40 speaks of individual conduct in the judgment), but is nowhere described as the collective work of the New Testament church. The apostolic churches did not operate

soup kitchens for their cities. They preached the gospel in their cities and cared for their own needy.

**Recreation, entertainment, and social life** — activities oriented toward the enjoyment or the social bonding of the members — are not described as the work of the church. Meals, in the New Testament, are the work of the home (1 Cor. 11:22, 34). Fellowship among Christians is real and important, but the apostolic record shows it occurring naturally in homes and alongside the worship and the work of the church, rather than as a distinct activity funded out of the church's treasury and conducted on the church's property.

**Education as an end in itself** — academic instruction, vocational training, cultural development — is not described as the collective work of the local church. The teaching the church is commanded to do is the teaching of the gospel and the equipping of the saints. A Christian college, a private Christian school, or a cultural institute may all be worthy undertakings supported by individual Christians, but they are not assigned in the New Testament as the collective work of the local congregation.

**Civic and political engagement** — the attempt to shape society through the church's collective voice or funds — is likewise absent. Paul did not direct the Corinthian or Ephesian churches to organize against the pagan institutions of their cities. He did not direct them to lobby Caesar. He directed

them to preach the gospel, edify the saints, worship rightly, and care for their needy brethren.

None of this is to say that individual Christians may not engage in humanitarianism, social life, education, or civic action. The New Testament is clear that individual Christians will do many of these things in their own spheres, and some of them they are commanded to do. Chapter 5 draws the distinction between the individual and the collective in full. For the present chapter the point is simply this: the collective work of the local church, as Scripture describes it, is defined and limited. Adding to that work on the grounds that the addition seems good is the very move Chapter 3 identified as operating outside authority.

### *Why This Chapter Matters*

Every specific question examined in the chapters ahead comes back to this one.

Chapter 6 asks whether the local church may send money to a separate human institution — an orphan home, a home for the aged, a college — to do a work on the church's behalf. Before that question can be answered, one has to ask: what work? Is it worship? Edification of the saints? Evangelism? Benevolence to needy saints? If the proposed work falls within the church's charter, the question becomes whether the specific method (a separate institution) is authorized. If the proposed work falls outside the church's charter, the question

of method does not arise — the work itself has not been assigned.

Chapter 7 asks whether one congregation may oversee a work funded by many congregations. Before that question can be answered, one has to know what work is being undertaken and whether it is within what the New Testament assigns to the local church.

Chapter 8 asks the scope question that this chapter has already previewed: to whom may the local church's treasury extend benevolence? The answer will come from examining every New Testament example, not from extrapolating what an individual is commanded to do.

Chapter 9 asks whether common meals are the work of the church or the work of the home. The answer begins with asking what Scripture actually describes as the work of the church.

The New Testament has not left the church's work to the imagination of each generation. It has told us what the work is, and in doing so, it has also told us what the work is not. A congregation that confines itself to what Christ has assigned it will not find itself short of work; the four categories above are more than enough to occupy the full energy of any faithful congregation. What it will not do is take on work that Christ did not assign — and that restraint, as Chapter 3 has already established, is not stinginess. It is faithfulness.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. Paul calls the church “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15). In your own congregation, would an outsider looking at the activities funded from the collective treasury identify the congregation primarily as a truth-holding, truth-proclaiming body? If not, what else would he identify it as, and why?
2. Ephesians 4:11–16 describes the purpose of the gifts Christ gave the church as “the equipping of the saints” for the building up of the body. Where in this passage does Paul speak of the building up of the community at large or of those outside the body? What does the direction of the work — inward toward the saints — tell us about how the local church’s edifying energy is meant to be spent?
3. Consider the four categories of the church’s work as described in this chapter. Name one activity your own congregation currently funds from its treasury. Under which of the four categories does it fall? If none, what is the Scriptural basis on which the activity has been added?
4. The chapter argues that “adding to the work of the church on the grounds that the addition seems good” is operating outside authority. In your own experience, have you seen activities added to a congregation’s life on

the basis that they “seemed good”? What happens over a generation when many such additions accumulate?

5. Compare the life of a first-century congregation as Acts 2:42–47 describes it with the life of a modern congregation familiar to you. Set aside questions of culture and technology and focus on the work being done. Where do the two match, and where do they diverge? What does the comparison suggest?

## CHAPTER FIVE

# The Church and the Individual

The question this chapter settles is simple in its statement and large in its consequences. Are the individual Christian and the local church the same actor under different names — so that whatever the individual is commanded to do the collective body may also do — or does Scripture treat them as distinct, each with its own work and its own charter?

The question is not academic. It is the hinge on which several chapters of this booklet turn. A great many institutional arguments begin by treating the church as “just individual Christians acting together,” and once that framing is accepted, almost any work the individual is commanded becomes a work the collective body may undertake. If the framing is right, those arguments have force. If the framing is wrong, they have none. Scripture itself decides.

### *The Cornerstone Text*

Paul writes to Timothy: “If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must

not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed” (1 Tim. 5:16).

Three observations arise from the text itself before any outside reasoning is applied.

First, the individual believer has an obligation the church does not carry. The believing woman with dependent widows in her family “must assist them.” That is her responsibility. The church is not instructed to relieve her of it.

Second, when the individual’s obligation is loaded onto the church, the apostle describes the result with a specific word: the church is “*burdened*.” This word is doing real work in the sentence. If the individual and the church were the same actor with the same list of obligations, there would be no burden — the obligation would already sit on both at once. Paul’s language presumes a distinction. The church has a charter of its own, and that charter can be weighed down when obligations outside it are added.

Third, the church does have a benevolence obligation, but it is specified and limited: “those who are widows indeed.” What a “widow indeed” is has already been defined in the preceding verses (1 Tim. 5:3–10) — a woman genuinely alone, advanced in years, who meets specific criteria of faithfulness. The church’s benevolence is not open-ended; it is aimed at a defined recipient within a defined class. The individual’s benevolence, by contrast, has no such limit placed on it in Scripture.

If the church and the individual were the same actor, this verse is incoherent. Paul would be telling an individual to carry a responsibility she already shares with the church, while warning her not to transfer it to a body that already holds it. The verse only makes sense if the two actors have different lists.

### *The Pattern Beneath*

Chapter 3 established that Old Testament examples and patterns instruct the Christian per Romans 15:4 and 1 Corinthians 10:11 — not as binding law, but as a window into God’s character and method. The distinction Paul draws in 1 Timothy 5:16 is not an innovation. It reflects how God had always ordered the life of His people.

Under the Mosaic law, God set up what amounted to parallel systems. The tabernacle — and later the temple — was funded by the tithe of the whole nation (Num. 18:21–24; Deut. 12:5–14). That tithe supported the priests and Levites in their work of worship and of teaching the law. It was, in effect, the treasury of the collective body doing the work God had assigned to that collective body.

Poor relief was funded differently. The individual landowner was commanded to leave the corners of his field unharvested (Lev. 19:9–10). He was to leave the forgotten sheaf in the field (Deut. 24:19). He was not to glean his olive tree or his vineyard a second time; what remained was left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow (Deut. 24:20–21). Every

seventh year the land was to lie fallow, “so that the needy of your people may eat” (Ex. 23:10–11).

These were not temple functions. The priests did not collect the gleanings and redistribute them. The tabernacle treasury did not fund a welfare system. Each Israelite landowner, in his own field, at his own cost, obeyed his own command.

God could have designed it differently. He could have funneled everything through the tabernacle — collected all relief in the treasury and distributed it through the priests. He did not. He distinguished what the collective body did through its appointed officers from what the individual did in his own sphere. Two spheres, two funding streams, two sets of commanded actions. Both were required; neither was optional.

When Paul writes to Timothy twelve hundred years later and distinguishes the individual’s obligation from the church’s, he is not drawing a new line. He is carrying a line God had drawn from the beginning.

### *A Picture from Ruth*

The principle becomes concrete in the narrative of Ruth 2. Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem in poverty. Ruth goes out to glean, and “she happened to come to the portion of the field belonging to Boaz” (Ruth 2:3).

What she finds there is not temple charity. It is a man — an individual Israelite — obeying the commands God had

placed on him as an individual landowner. Boaz goes beyond the minimum: he instructs his young men, “Also you shall purposely pull out for her some grain from the bundles and leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her” (Ruth 2:16). He invites her to eat with his workers at mealtime (v. 14). He ensures her safety in the field (v. 9).

Notice what is absent from the narrative. No priest intervenes. No tabernacle offering is made. No collective Israelite body acts on Naomi and Ruth’s behalf. Their need is met because God built individual responsibility into the fabric of Israelite life, and one individual — Boaz — was faithful to what God had placed on him personally. The text tells us plainly that Ruth’s provision came from one man’s field, one man’s obedience, one man’s willingness to go beyond the bare minimum.

This is what individual benevolence looks like in practice. It costs the individual something. It happens in his own sphere, with his own resources. It is not administered through a collective treasury. And when the collective body was functioning rightly in its own sphere — the tabernacle was staffed and supplied, the priests were teaching the law — individual benevolence and collective worship were both happening at the same time, without either replacing the other.

### *The New Testament Keeps the Distinction*

If this pattern were only in the Old Testament, we might ask whether it carried over into the age of the church. But 1 Timothy 5:16 has already answered that question. And other New Testament passages corroborate.

When Jesus teaches on giving in Matthew 6:1–4, He addresses the individual: “But when you give to the poor, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (v. 3). The giving is individual, personal, and done in a way that excludes any collective arrangement by its very manner. “*Your*” appears eleven times in those four verses. The person addressed is the individual disciple.

Paul writes to the Ephesians: “He who steals must steal no longer; but rather he must labor, performing with his own hands what is good, so that he will have something to share with one who has need” (Eph. 4:28). The working, the earning, and the sharing are all individual acts. The individual labors with his own hands; the individual shares from what he has earned. The church treasury is nowhere in view.

Galatians 6:10 will receive full treatment in a later chapter, but it belongs in this survey: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” The “us” of verse 10 is established by the opening of the chapter: “Brethren . . . you who are spiritual, restore such a one” (Gal. 6:1). Paul is writing to individual Christians about individual conduct. The

“good to all people” is the individual’s scope, not the collective treasury’s.

Across the Testaments, the same pattern holds. The individual has one list; the collective body has another; both are required; they are not the same list.

### *The Principle Stated*

The individual Christian carries a broad obligation. He is to do good to all people (Gal. 6:10). He is to share with anyone who has need (Eph. 4:28). He is to visit orphans and widows in their distress (James 1:27). He is to bear his brother’s burdens (Gal. 6:2). The scope of individual responsibility reaches to every person God places in his path, whether saint or stranger, neighbor or enemy.

The local congregation operates within a narrower charter. Its authorized work — to be developed more fully in Chapter 4 and in the specific chapters that follow — includes worship, the edification of the saints, the preaching of the gospel, and benevolence to needy saints. This charter is defined not by human judgment of what seems good but by what Scripture authorizes. Where Scripture speaks, the church acts. Where Scripture does not authorize, the church has not been given the work.

This is not a doctrine of stinginess. It is a doctrine of order. God assigned specific work to specific actors. The faithful congregation does the work God gave it. The faithful

Christian, in addition, does the work God gave him as an individual — in his own life, with his own hands, from his own resources. Both are commanded. Neither substitutes for the other.

It is worth noting what happens when the distinction collapses. If the individual transfers his personal obligation to the collective treasury — if he hands his duty to visit the widow to the church's benevolence committee and considers himself discharged — he has not obeyed. He has delegated. And the New Testament does not permit him to delegate what God placed on him personally. A church cannot visit a widow; only a person can visit a widow. A church cannot labor with its hands; only an individual can labor. When individual duty is routed through collective action, it is not magnified. It is quietly abandoned.

### *Why This Chapter Matters*

The specific issues this booklet examines in the chapters ahead — orphan homes, the sponsoring church arrangement, the scope of the treasury, fellowship meals — all turn, at one point or another, on the distinction this chapter has drawn.

In each case, a familiar argument will appear. Because the individual is commanded to care for orphans, the church may build an institution to do it on a larger scale. Because the individual is commanded to preach the gospel, the church may fund a sponsoring arrangement to preach at a reach no

individual could manage. Because the individual is commanded to do good to all people, the church may feed the neighborhood. Each of these moves depends on one assumption: that the individual and the collective body have the same list.

If the distinction is real — and Paul makes it explicit in 1 Timothy 5:16 — then every one of those arguments has to be re-examined on its own Scriptural merits. It is not enough to show that the individual is commanded to do the work in question. One must show that the collective body has been given the work, from the Scripture’s own direct statement, approved apostolic example, or necessary inference. Without that showing, the argument fails not because it is too generous but because it is acting outside authority.

The remaining chapters are that examination, question by question.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. Read 1 Timothy 5:16 slowly. Paul says loading the individual’s obligation onto the church would “burden” the church. If the individual and the church were the same actor, how could the word “*burden*” apply here at all?
2. Under the Mosaic law, the gleaning commands governed private fields, not the tabernacle treasury. What does that arrangement suggest about how God

distinguished collective worship from individual benevolence? What does its presence in the law reveal about God's method?

3. Read Matthew 6:1–4 and Ephesians 4:28. Are these passages addressed to the individual Christian, the collective church, or both? What specifically in the text tells you?
4. If the individual transfers his personal obligations to the collective treasury and considers himself discharged, has he obeyed or has he delegated? What is the practical difference?
5. Consider Boaz in Ruth 2. What did his obedience cost him personally? What would have been different — about Boaz, and about Ruth — if the obligation had been funneled through the tabernacle treasury instead of being carried on his own field?

PART THREE

# The Four Questions

---

*The four chapters of this part take up, one at a time, the four specific questions on which the institutional and non-institutional positions divide. Each chapter follows the same shape: state the question, state both positions at full strength, walk the Scripture, and let the text carry the conclusion.*

## CHAPTER SIX

# Church-Supported Institutions

Chapters 3, 4, and 5 have laid the foundation. The church operates by the authority of Christ, which is found in Scripture. The church has a defined charter of work that God assigned it. And the individual Christian and the local church are distinct actors with distinct — though overlapping — obligations. With that foundation in place, the specific issues that divided the churches of Christ in the mid-twentieth century can now be examined one at a time. The method will be the same for each: state the question precisely, state the institutional position as its own best advocates have stated it, state the non-institutional position the same way, walk the Scripture, and let the text carry the conclusion.

The first of those questions is whether a local church may take money from its treasury and send it to a separate human organization — an orphan home, a home for the aged, a Christian college, or any similar institution — so that the institution may do a work on the church's behalf.

### *The Question, Stated Precisely*

Several questions must be set aside before the real question can come into view.

The question is not whether orphans should be cared for. They should. Scripture commands their care (Ex. 22:22; Deut. 14:29; James 1:27), and every Christian of good conscience honors that obligation.

The question is not whether individual Christians may support benevolent institutions. They may. An individual Christian may give of his own means to any legitimate charitable work, and many institutions have been built and sustained by the voluntary support of individual Christians over many generations.

The question is not whether institutions exist that do good work. Many do.

The question is specifically this: *may the local church, as a collective body, take funds from its treasury and send them to a separate human organization — an orphan home, a home for the aged, a Christian college, or any similar institution — so that the institution may do a work on the church's behalf?*

The distinction between individual and collective, drawn carefully in Chapter 5, is the first test this question must pass through. The individual Christian's obligation to relieve the needy is broad. The local church's obligation is specified in Scripture and limited to what Scripture authorizes. A work an individual is commanded to do is not automatically a work the

collective body may take up. That was the whole point of 1 Timothy 5:16 — Paul’s explicit warning that the individual’s obligation, when transferred to the church, is a *burden* on the church. If individual and collective were the same actor, the warning would be incoherent.

The question is also about the *how*, not the *what*. Both sides of the division agree that orphans need help. Both sides agree that the church is commanded to care for the needy in certain Scripturally defined cases. The disagreement is whether the church’s collective money may flow through a separate human organization — one with its own charter, its own board of trustees, its own officers distinct from the eldership of any local church — to accomplish that work. It is an organizational question, not a benevolent one. A reader who confuses those two questions will read what follows uncharitably, which is not what the writer wants and not what the text requires.

Finally, the scope of the beneficiaries — whether the church’s benevolence may extend to those outside the body of Christ — is a separate question, taken up in Chapter 8. The present chapter restricts itself to the organizational question.

### *The Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The institutional argument, stated by its own best advocates, runs along these lines.

**The work itself is authorized.** The church is commanded to care for the needy. Care for orphans, for widows,

and for the aged is unquestionably good work, and work the New Testament recognizes. No serious institutional defender argues that the church may spend its money on anything it pleases. The argument is that the work is authorized by Scripture, and the only question is the method by which the authorized work is done.

**An institution is a method, not a separate work.** Guy N. Woods stated the argument clearly in his 1956 affirmative at the Porter–Woods Debate in Indianapolis: “Now, what is the orphan home, my friends? Basically, the orphan home is that which simply results when the church restores that which (the natural home) no longer exists. God has ordained two divine institutions — the church and the home” (*Porter–Woods Debate*, p. 53). On this reasoning, the orphan home is not a separate organization at all, but a restoration of the home — the natural, God-ordained institution that has been disrupted by the death or absence of parents. The church, in funding it, is simply restoring what God Himself ordained and what the providence of death has taken away.

**The church’s organized capacity is limited to financial support; the work of care must be done by someone.** Woods developed this in his 1960 Freed–Hardeman Lectureship booklet *A Defense of Orphan Homes*: “But, when the church, in its organized capacity, does all that it is authorized to do — that is, supply the money for the needy — the work of actual care must yet be done” (p. 14). On this reasoning, the church’s

collective work ends at supplying funds. Someone still has to receive the money and do the actual caring. That someone, Woods argued, is the institution.

**The New Testament does not specify an exclusive method of cooperation.** Woods's defense at Birmingham in 1957 was that when only one method is revealed in Scripture, it is exclusive; but where multiple methods are revealed, no single method is exclusive. He argued that the New Testament shows several types of cooperation between Christians and concluded that the church has liberty in the method of its authorized work so long as no revealed principle is violated.

**Benevolent work and evangelistic work are not analogous.** At Birmingham, Woods argued that an orphan home is “a means of caring for the needy, hence a means which the church uses to do its own work,” and distinguished this from a missionary society. His formulation — reported in quotation marks by James W. Adams in the *Gospel Guardian* — was: “The church is its own missionary society, but not its own orphan home.” On this reasoning, the church directly preaches the gospel (and therefore needs no missionary society), but does not directly house orphans in its building (and therefore may properly use an institution whose work is housing and caring for orphans).

This is the institutional argument at its full strength, stated by its leading defender. A reader who holds this position should recognize it here. It rests on real Scriptural concern —

orphans need help, the church is commanded to give, and something has to be done. It treats the institution as an extension of the home rather than a rival to the church. And it honors the fact that no ordinary local eldership is equipped to run a full-time residential facility for children.

The non-institutional answer does not deny any of these concerns. It asks a different question: is the mechanism Scripturally authorized?

### *The Non-Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The non-institutional argument begins where Chapter 4 ended. The church is God's own organization for the work He gave it. Paul writes that it is "the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). And he writes that the manifold wisdom of God is made known "through the church" (Eph. 3:10). The church is not one option among several vehicles for accomplishing God's work. It is the vehicle God Himself ordained. Adding another organization alongside it, to do the work God gave the church, is to add what Scripture neither commands, nor exemplifies, nor requires by necessary inference.

The argument does not claim that institutions are inherently evil, that those who run them are wicked men, or that the work being done is bad work. Most of the brethren involved in building and operating church-supported institutions in the twentieth century were men of good conscience

doing what they believed was good. The argument is narrower and more serious than that. It is that the local church's collective money is not authorized to flow to a separate human organization to do a work on the church's behalf.

This position is sometimes described today as an invention of the 1950s — a reaction of hardliners resisting progress. The historical record says otherwise. The leading institutional defender of the 1950s himself made the non-institutional argument, in print and from the lectureship platform, for many years before he changed his mind.

In 1939, speaking at the Abilene Christian College Lectures, Guy N. Woods said:

The ship of Zion has floundered more than once on the sandbar of institutionalism. The tendency to organize is a characteristic of the age. On the theory that the end justifies the means, brethren have now scrupled to form organizations in the church to do the work the church itself was designed to do. All such organizations usurp the work of the church, and are unnecessary and sinful.

Seven years later, in the Gospel Advocate's *Teacher's Annual Lesson Commentary for 1946*, Woods developed the argument at greater length. Commenting on the New Testament pattern of inter-congregational relief, he wrote: "It should be noted

that there was no elaborate organization for the discharge of these charitable functions. The contributions were sent directly to the elders by the churches who raised the offering. This is the New Testament method of functioning. We should be highly suspicious of any scheme that requires the setting up of an organization independent of the church in order to accomplish its work” (p. 338). In the same volume: “The church is the only organization authorized to discharge the responsibilities of the Lord’s people” (p. 338). And in what has been most often quoted from the book: “There is no place for charitable organizations in the work of the New Testament church. It is the only charitable organization that the Lord authorizes or that is needed to do the work the Lord expects his people today to do” (pp. 340–341).

Woods’s later position, defended publicly at Birmingham in 1957 and in numerous later writings, differed at every point from what he wrote in 1939 and 1946. He appears to have begun the shift by the *Gospel Advocate* of November 18, 1954, where he argued that the messengers who carried contributions from church to church constituted an organization — the opposite of what he had written in 1946. By Birmingham, he defended church-supported institutions as expedients. Eight years earlier he had denounced them as “unnecessary and sinful.”

These observations about Woods are not offered as the argument. A man’s earlier or later convictions are not the

standard. Scripture is the standard. Woods, whether in 1939, 1946, 1954, or 1957, was a fallible man — and so was every brother he debated, every man who wrote against him, and every reader of this booklet. The writer of these pages is fallible. The argument stands or falls on what the Scriptures actually teach, not on which brother held which position in which year. A reader is not asked to take Woods-of-1946 as authoritative over Woods-of-1957, or vice versa. The reader is asked to open the text and read it.

What the 1939 and 1946 Woods statements do show is historical: the non-institutional argument is not a late or reactionary development. It was the position of serious men inside the fellowship for decades before the 1950s hardening. When the institutional movement's own leading eventual defender once argued at full strength that the church is the only charitable organization the Lord authorizes, the burden of explaining a change in position lies with the man who changed. The Scripture did not change between 1939 and 1957. Either the earlier statements were wrong, or the later ones were. Both cannot be right. That observation applies with equal force to any reader tempted to hold one position at one season of life and a different position at another. Scripture is what settles the question.

### *Expedient vs. Separate Organization*

The institutional argument often treats an orphan home, a home for the aged, or a Christian college as analogous to a building, a song book, or a bus used to carry members to services. The reasoning is that all of these are expedients — aids the church uses to accomplish its own authorized work — and that if the expedients of a building and a song book are permissible under the general authority to assemble and to sing, an orphan home is equally permissible under the general authority to care for the needy.

The analogy fails at the crucial point. An expedient is an aid to the church's own work, owned and controlled by the church itself. A building is the property of the congregation. The song books in its pew racks belong to that congregation. A bus used to transport members is titled to the congregation or contracted by it. In each case, the church owns the expedient, the church controls the expedient, the church disposes of the expedient, and the expedient exists solely to serve the church's own direct work.

A separate human institution is a different thing. It has its own charter, filed with the state as a distinct entity. It has its own board of trustees, selected by the institution itself or by its original founders, not by any local church. It has its own officers, its own employees, its own real estate, its own bank accounts, and its own existence apart from any congregation. Churches do not own it. Churches do not control it. Churches

cannot dispose of it. The institution exists as its own organization, with its own life, accountable to its own board rather than to any congregation's eldership.

The distinction can be tested simply. If every congregation currently contributing to the institution withdrew its contribution tomorrow, the institution would continue to exist as an institution — its charter intact, its board intact, its identity intact — even if it were financially diminished. If every congregation currently using a given building withdrew tomorrow, the building would remain, but the institution called “the church meeting in this building” would not. The building is an expedient. The separate organization is not.

This distinction is not a technicality. The New Testament knows of churches, of elders in those churches, and of saints within those churches. It does not know of a third kind of organization — one that is not a church, not an individual Christian, and not an expedient serving a church — receiving church funds to do a church work. When an orphan home is treated as analogous to a building, a category that Scripture addresses (the church) is quietly replaced by a category Scripture does not address (a separate benevolent organization), and the reader may not notice the substitution.

### *What the Scripture Actually Shows*

With the question properly framed, the Scriptural question can be asked directly. Where does the New Testament authorize the

local church, as a collective body, to fund a separate human organization to do a work on the church's behalf?

**The church acting as the church.** In Acts 6:1–6, the Jerusalem church faced a real benevolent need: the Hellenistic widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. The apostles did not propose the creation of a separate benevolent organization to receive funds from the congregation and administer them to the widows. They called the congregation together, had the congregation select seven men of good reputation, and the apostles themselves appointed those men. The men served under the apostles' oversight, within the congregation, using the congregation's own resources. No charter was filed. No separate board was assembled. No distinct organization was created. The church acted as the church.

This is the most extended New Testament narrative of collective benevolence being organized. Every element of it cuts against the separate-institution model. The workers were selected by the congregation, not appointed by an outside board. The oversight was apostolic, not the oversight of some institution's trustees. The work was done within the congregation, not transferred to an outside entity. The funds never left the church's own control. (The separate question of who specifically was helped in Acts 6 — whether the widows were all Christians, and whether the church's benevolence was restricted to saints — is the scope question taken up in Chapter 8. Here the narrower point is the organizational one: the

church itself did the work, through men it itself appointed, under oversight it itself recognized.)

**The care of widows is direct work of the local church.**

Paul's instruction to Timothy in 1 Timothy 5:3–16 is detailed and specific. The church is to honor widows who are widows indeed (v. 3). A criterion list is given for who qualifies (vv. 9–10). An age is specified (v. 9). The church is instructed about younger widows and their situations (vv. 11–15). And, as Chapter 5 has shown, Paul distinguishes between what the individual believer must carry and what the church carries (v. 16). What Paul does *not* do anywhere in this passage is direct the church to send its widow-care funds to a separate widow-care institution. The oversight is the church's. The criteria are applied by the church. The money is the church's, disbursed by the church, to widows within the church's own sphere.

**Support for preaching flows directly.** Paul reminds the Philippians that from the first preaching of the gospel after he left Macedonia, no church shared with him in giving and receiving but Philippi alone, and that even in Thessalonica they had sent more than once for his needs (Phil. 4:15–16). He writes similarly to the Corinthians about the support he received from other churches while laboring among them (2 Cor. 11:8–9). The Philippian church sent support directly to Paul. The funds did not flow through an intermediary organization. The same direct pattern appears in inter-congregational relief, where the disciples at Antioch sent contributions for the

brethren in Judea through Barnabas and Saul, directly to the elders (Acts 11:27–30). No intermediary organization sits between the contributing church and the receiving work. In the New Testament pattern, church funds flow directly: to the preacher they support, to the needy saints they relieve, to the elders of the church in need. Nowhere do they flow through a third organization that is neither church, nor individual, nor expedient.

**The church is God’s organization for the work.** Paul’s description of the church as the pillar and support of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15) and as the instrument through which God’s wisdom is made known (Eph. 3:10) is central. The church is God’s chosen means for the work God gave it. When the institutional argument places the church alongside a separate human organization and treats both as instruments of the same work, it describes an arrangement the New Testament does not describe. The church’s sufficiency for the work God gave it is not a Scriptural weakness to be supplemented by human organizations; it is a feature of God’s design.

**The silence of Scripture.** Chapter 3 established that where God specifies, silence excludes what God has not specified. The specification of the church as God’s organization, and of direct church-to-preacher and church-to-church patterns, carries the same weight of silence as every other Scriptural specification. The New Testament specifies that the church does its authorized work. It does not authorize the

church to transfer that work to an organization distinct from itself. Silence on a separate benevolent organization is not permission to create one. It is restriction.

A reader who accepts the silence-restricts principle in Chapter 3 — the principle by which Nadab and Abihu stood condemned, and by which the Hebrew writer excluded priests from the tribe of Judah under the Mosaic law — will apply the same principle here. A reader who rejects that principle will find the inconsistency difficult to defend. The hermeneutic that permits a separate benevolent organization because the New Testament does not directly forbid it also permits, on the same reasoning, every other addition that can be defended as an expedient to an authorized work. That is the pattern of arguments that admitted the missionary society in 1849 and the instrument in the 1880s — the same hermeneutic, worked out to its conclusions. Either the principle holds at all three points or it fails at all three.

### *Letting the Text Carry the Conclusion*

The specific question of this chapter admits a specific answer. The local church, as a collective body, has not been authorized by the New Testament to send funds from its treasury to a separate human organization to accomplish a work on the church's behalf. The church has been given the work, and given the means. It has its own eldership, its own members, its own resources, its own treasury. It may act as the church,

through men the church appoints, under oversight the church recognizes, using resources the church controls. What it has not been authorized to do is hand its work — and the funds that accompany the work — to an organization that is not the church.

This is not a restriction on good work being done for orphans, for the aged, or for anyone else. Individual Christians are free to support any institution of good conscience they choose. Men and women of means have built and sustained institutions for the care of children, the aged, and the sick for generations, often at great personal sacrifice, and their work has blessed many. The restriction in view is a narrower one: the flow of church treasury funds to organizations separate from the church. The question is not whether the work gets done. It is whether the church, as the church, does it — as Scripture has patterned — or whether the church routes its work through a separate human organization that Scripture does not pattern.

A brother who reaches a different conclusion from the Scripture walked above is owed the dignity of a fair hearing and patient Scriptural conversation. The fellowship of saints is not so fragile that disagreement on a matter like this ends it in an instant. But the question must be answered from the text, not from expediency, not from consensus, not from what other brethren across the country have always done, and not from what any one defender held at any one year of his life. Where

does Scripture authorize the practice? What does the text actually say?

Chapter 7 takes up the next of the specific questions — the sponsoring church arrangement. The method will be the same. State the question, state both positions fairly, walk the Scripture, and let the text carry the conclusion.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. Read 1 Timothy 3:15 slowly. Paul calls the church “the pillar and support of the truth.” If the church is God’s pillar and support, what does the New Testament suggest about the creation of other organizations alongside the church to accomplish the church’s own work? Would any such organization rival or supplement the pillar function Paul describes?
2. Walk through Acts 6:1–6 and list every organizational step the Jerusalem church took to meet the need of the neglected widows. How many of those steps involved the creation of a separate organization with its own charter and board? What does the narrative’s silence on that point suggest about the organizational pattern the apostles approved?
3. Consider the distinction this chapter draws between an expedient (owned and controlled by the church) and a separate organization (with its own charter and board). Apply the distinction to one current

practice familiar to you. Into which category does it fall? Does the distinction make a Scriptural difference, and if so, where?

4. Philippians 4:15–16 and 2 Corinthians 11:8–9 describe the Philippian church supporting Paul’s preaching directly. If the New Testament pattern of inter-congregational support is direct rather than channeled through an intermediary organization, what principle does that establish about the flow of church funds to separate organizations in other kinds of work?
5. In 1946, Guy N. Woods wrote that the church is “the only charitable organization that the Lord authorizes or that is needed to do the work the Lord expects his people today to do.” By 1957 he defended church-supported institutions as expedient. The Scripture did not change between 1946 and 1957. If a brother — any brother, not only Woods — holds different positions at different times, how should a careful reader decide which of the two, if either, is right?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The Sponsoring Church Arrangement

Chapter 6 examined whether a local church may route its funds through a separate human institution to accomplish a benevolent work. The present chapter takes up a related but distinct question. Both questions are about the flow of the local church's funds. Both questions rest on the same hermeneutical ground established in Chapter 3. But the arrangement examined in this chapter is not a separate human institution. It is a second local church.

### *The Question, Stated Precisely*

May one congregation oversee a work too large for any single church to undertake alone — the preaching of the gospel by radio or television, for example, or the support of foreign missionaries on a large scale — while other congregations across the country pool their contributions and send funds to the overseeing eldership to support that work?

Several questions must be cleared away before the real question can come into view.

The question is not whether a congregation may preach the gospel on radio or television. It may. A local church may use any medium of communication to proclaim the gospel, so long as what is proclaimed is the gospel and the expense is the church's own. A small rural congregation that broadcasts its Sunday morning preaching on a local AM station, paid for out of its own treasury, is doing its own evangelistic work with its own funds. No question arises.

The question is not whether congregations may cooperate. They may. The New Testament shows congregations cooperating in several ways, which are surveyed below.

The question is not whether large works are legitimate. They are. The preaching of the gospel is not restricted in Scripture to the reach of a single congregation's budget. The Great Commission is worldwide in scope (Matt. 28:19–20), and the pattern of the apostolic churches shows the word going forth into regions far beyond the churches' own local communities (1 Thess. 1:8).

The question is specifically this: *may the local church, as a collective body, send money from its treasury to another local church so that the receiving church's eldership may oversee and direct an ongoing work in which many other congregations are participating at once?*

The arrangement in view has particular features. It is not a one-time relief gift. It is not temporary assistance to a church in distress. It is an ongoing, structured arrangement in which one

eldership — the “sponsoring” eldership — takes oversight of a work whose scope exceeds what that eldership’s own congregation could fund alone. Other congregations across the country, sometimes numbering in the hundreds or even thousands, send regular contributions to the sponsoring eldership, which then administers those pooled funds in the conduct of the work.

The clearest twentieth-century example, and the one that brought this question to a head in the 1950s, was the Herald of Truth. Launched in February 1952 by the Highland congregation in Abilene, Texas, the Herald of Truth was a nationwide radio program (later expanding to television) conceived and administered by the Highland eldership. Congregations throughout the country were invited to send contributions to Highland, which used the pooled funds to pay for air time, production, and staffing. Within a few years, the program was reaching hundreds of radio stations, and the scope of its operation far exceeded what the Highland congregation itself could have funded.

The question is not whether the message preached on the Herald of Truth was the gospel. Through most of its history it was. The question is not whether good came of it. Many heard the gospel through its broadcasts who otherwise would not have. The question is narrower: was the *arrangement itself* — one eldership overseeing a work funded by many congregations — authorized in the New Testament?

### *The Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The institutional argument for the sponsoring church arrangement proceeds along these lines.

**The work itself is authorized and necessary.** The church is commanded to preach the gospel to the whole creation (Mark 16:15). In the twentieth century, new media made it possible to reach audiences on a scale impossible in any previous generation. A nationwide radio or television program can preach the gospel to millions in a single broadcast. To forgo such an opportunity would be to refuse a providential means of accomplishing the Great Commission.

**No single congregation could undertake such a work alone.** The cost of nationwide air time, production, and ongoing operation is beyond the budget of any ordinary local congregation. If the work is to be done at all, it must be done cooperatively — many congregations pooling their resources to accomplish what no single one could accomplish alone.

**Cooperation is a New Testament principle.** The New Testament shows churches cooperating. The Macedonian churches cooperated in sending relief to the saints in Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8–9). The Philippian church cooperated with Paul’s preaching in Thessalonica and Corinth (Phil. 4:15–16; 2 Cor. 11:8–9). Cooperation between churches is not an innovation of the 1950s; it is an apostolic pattern.

**A sponsoring arrangement is simply cooperation at scale.** Since churches cooperated in the New Testament, and

since the new scale of twentieth-century media requires pooled resources, a sponsoring church arrangement is simply the modern expression of the New Testament principle of congregational cooperation. The Highland eldership oversees because someone must oversee; the other congregations participate because no other mechanism permits them to reach this scale of audience.

**The sponsoring eldership oversees its own work, not the work of contributing churches.** On this reasoning, the Herald of Truth is Highland's work. The other contributing congregations are simply helping Highland do what Highland has determined to do. No contributing church is relinquishing oversight of its own work; it is choosing to fund Highland's work. The elders at Highland exercise oversight only over their own elder-ship's program. The elders at the contributing churches exercise oversight over their own churches' decisions, one of which is the decision to contribute to Highland.

**The arrangement is expedient.** The New Testament does not specify the method of cooperation in detail. Where Scripture is silent on method, expediency governs. A sponsoring church arrangement is an expedient method of accomplishing an authorized work — the preaching of the gospel — at a scale that authorized work requires in the modern era.

This is the argument in its strongest form. A reader who has defended the Herald of Truth or similar arrangements

should recognize the reasoning here. It rests on the legitimate Scriptural concern to preach the gospel widely. It draws on genuine New Testament examples of cooperation. And it treats the method as a matter of expediency where Scripture has not directly spoken.

The non-institutional answer does not dispute the goodness of preaching the gospel, nor the legitimacy of cooperation, nor the reality of expediency. It asks a narrower question: is *this specific form of cooperation* — one eldership overseeing an ongoing work funded by many — what the New Testament actually exemplifies?

### *The Non-Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The non-institutional argument begins by looking carefully at what the New Testament pattern of cooperation actually is. The argument is not that churches did not cooperate. They did. The argument is that the *form* of cooperation shown in Scripture is consistently different from the form required by a sponsoring church arrangement.

**The New Testament pattern is direct support to preachers.** Paul tells the Philippians that from the beginning of his preaching after Macedonia, no church shared with him in giving and receiving but Philippi alone, and that even in Thessalonica they had sent more than once for his needs (Phil. 4:15–16). He tells the Corinthians that other churches supported him while he labored among them (2 Cor. 11:8–9).

In both cases the support flowed directly from the contributing church to the preacher. No intermediate church received the funds and disbursed them. No sponsoring eldership took oversight of Paul's preaching. Paul was not Philippi's missionary, in the sense of operating under Philippi's direction with funds others sent to Philippi. He was his own preacher, supported directly by the churches that chose to fellowship his work.

**The New Testament pattern of inter-church aid is relief to a church in need.** When Paul and Barnabas carried funds from Antioch to the brethren in Judea, the funds went directly to the elders *of the churches suffering the need* (Acts 11:27–30). The Antioch church did not send money to one church in Judea which then oversaw the distribution to other churches. The funds went where the need was. The same pattern appears in the great Jerusalem collection. Paul writes that Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution “for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Rom. 15:26). The contributing churches sent directly to the church in need, not to a sponsoring eldership that then distributed to other places. The instructions for the collection in 1 Corinthians 16:1–3 confirm the pattern. Each church was to lay by in store on the first day of the week, and when Paul arrived, the church would select messengers to carry the contribution to Jerusalem. The collection was administered by

each contributing church until it was delivered to the church in need.

**The New Testament shows no example of a sponsoring church arrangement.** Nowhere in the New Testament does one church take oversight of an ongoing work, receive regular contributions from many other churches, and administer those pooled funds in the conduct of the work on the other churches' behalf. The pattern is direct, not channeled. The relief goes to the church in need. The preacher is supported directly by the churches that choose to fellowship his work. The sponsoring model, in which one eldership oversees and many contribute, is simply not in the text.

**The jurisdiction of elders is the flock of God among them.** Peter writes, "Shepherd the flock of God among you" (1 Pet. 5:2). The phrase "among you" is not decorative. It marks the boundary of an eldership's shepherding responsibility. The elders of a local church shepherd the flock among them — the members of their own congregation — not the membership of other congregations, not a national audience, and not a pooled operation funded by congregations across the country. Paul's practice confirms the boundary. Elders were appointed in each church, not across churches (Acts 14:23). The elders at Ephesus were charged to "be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). The jurisdiction is local and

bounded. An eldership taking oversight of a work funded by many churches, with participants and activities reaching far beyond its own local flock, has reached beyond the jurisdiction Scripture assigned it.

This is the Scriptural heart of the non-institutional concern. The question is not whether elders are good men. They may be excellent men. The question is whether the oversight of one eldership may lawfully extend to a work whose scope is national, whose funding comes from hundreds of congregations, and whose participants are not members of the sponsoring church. The New Testament's description of eldership authority says it may not.

**The analogy to the missionary society.** When the missionary society was defended in 1849, the reasoning was that the church is commanded to preach the gospel, that the work is larger than any single congregation can accomplish, and that cooperative arrangements are necessary to meet the scale of the work. That reasoning produced the American Christian Missionary Society — a single organization with its own officers, funded by contributions from many churches, overseeing the collective preaching work on behalf of the contributing congregations. The churches of Christ rejected the missionary society on the ground that Scripture had not authorized such an organization.

The sponsoring church arrangement differs from the missionary society in one respect: the sponsoring church is

itself a local congregation with its own eldership, whereas the missionary society was a distinct organization with officers not tied to any local church. That difference is not trivial, and institutional defenders have relied on it. But the structural similarity is striking. In both arrangements, one body of men takes oversight of a work too large for any single congregation, receives pooled funds from many contributing churches, and administers the work on the contributing churches' behalf. The fellowship that rejected the missionary society on the hermeneutical ground that Scripture had not authorized it must, on the same hermeneutical ground, examine whether Scripture has authorized a functionally parallel arrangement when the overseeing body is called an eldership rather than a society.

### *The Question of Expediency*

Institutional defenders have relied heavily on the argument from expediency. The reasoning is that cooperation is authorized, the method is not specified, and therefore any method not specifically forbidden is permissible as an expedient.

Chapter 3 established the principle by which this argument must be tested. Where Scripture specifies, silence on unspecified alternatives is restrictive, not permissive. When God specified gopher wood for the ark, He did not authorize oak as an expedient — even though oak was not on a list of

prohibited woods. When God specified that the priests were to be from the tribe of Levi, He did not authorize priests from Judah as an expedient — and the Hebrew writer appeals to Moses’s silence on Judean priests as conclusive evidence against them (Heb. 7:13–14). The principle is consistent throughout Scripture: specification excludes the unspecified.

Applied here, the principle asks whether Scripture has specified the form of inter-congregational cooperation. And it has. The New Testament shows cooperation flowing directly — from contributing church to preacher (Phil. 4:15–16; 2 Cor. 11:8–9), from contributing churches to the church in need (Acts 11:27–30; Rom. 15:26; 1 Cor. 16:1–3). Each contributing church acts under its own eldership’s oversight. Each receives delivery under its own eldership’s oversight. The sponsoring arrangement — many contributing, one overseeing, pooled funds administered by the overseeing body — is a different form that Scripture does not exemplify.

A reader who holds that the specification of direct inter-church cooperation permits a sponsoring arrangement as an expedient is invited to consider the same logic applied at the other boundary. If specification of direct cooperation permits a sponsoring eldership, then specification of direct cooperation also permits a sponsoring institution — such as the American Christian Missionary Society of 1849. The hermeneutic that permits one must permit the other. The hermeneutic that restricts the missionary society as unauthorized cooperation

must, on the same reasoning, restrict the sponsoring church as unauthorized cooperation.

### *The Practical Consequences*

Scripture does not always tell us in advance what the practical consequences of a departure from its pattern will be. But in several places it warns that departures from the pattern tend to deepen, and that what begins as a modest innovation becomes, over time, a structure difficult to reverse (Gal. 5:9; 2 Tim. 2:17). The history of the sponsoring church arrangement illustrates that pattern.

The Herald of Truth began in 1952 as a single radio program funded cooperatively. By the mid-1950s it had expanded to television. By the 1960s the scale of its operation required a substantial administrative apparatus within the Highland congregation — a staff, offices, production facilities, fundraising infrastructure. The Highland eldership's oversight of the Herald of Truth became, of practical necessity, a substantial part of what that eldership did. Similar concentrations appeared in other sponsoring arrangements. The pattern was not peculiar to any one congregation's character; it was structural. When an eldership takes oversight of a work funded by hundreds of other congregations, the operational demands of that work are not negotiable.

A further consequence, more difficult to document but repeatedly observed, was the informal pressure such arrange-

ments exert on contributing churches. A congregation that contributes substantially to a sponsoring work develops, over time, a financial and emotional commitment to the work's continuation. A contributing eldership that later has questions about the arrangement finds that those questions are difficult to raise without appearing to criticize the sponsoring eldership, or the preachers whose labor depends on the arrangement, or the program itself. The informal pressure is not a Scriptural argument against the arrangement — the arrangement must stand or fall on the Scripture — but it is a practical observation about what these structures tend to produce.

Neither of these observations settles the Scriptural question. A practice could be Scripturally authorized and still produce practical difficulties. A practice could be Scripturally unauthorized and still produce many apparent goods. The point of this section is narrower. It notes that the trajectory concern voiced by the non-institutional brethren in the 1950s — that sponsoring arrangements tend, over time, to concentrate oversight and narrow the circle of what contributing congregations may question — has not been disproven by the subsequent history. Readers of any conviction may weigh that observation for themselves.

### *Letting the Text Carry the Conclusion*

The specific question of this chapter admits a specific answer. The New Testament does not show one congregation taking

oversight of an ongoing work funded by many other congregations. The pattern of cooperation it shows is direct — relief flowing from contributing churches to the church in need, and support flowing from contributing churches to the preacher whose labor they choose to fellowship. In every case, each contributing church acts under its own eldership's oversight, and each receives disbursement under its own eldership's oversight.

The arrangement is not a matter of how much good the preaching accomplishes, nor of how faithful the sponsoring eldership is, nor of how many souls have been reached. A Scripturally unauthorized arrangement may produce many good outward effects, and a Scripturally authorized practice may sometimes appear less productive than an unauthorized substitute. The question is not productivity. The question is authority. Where has the New Testament authorized one eldership to oversee an ongoing work funded by many congregations? What does the text actually say?

If the New Testament pattern is direct cooperation under local eldership's oversight, the pattern is restrictive, not permissive. A congregation that chooses to preach the gospel by radio or television does so from its own treasury, under its own eldership, within its own means. A congregation that chooses to fellowship another preacher's work does so by supporting that preacher directly, not by routing funds through an intermediate eldership. And a church in need

receives relief directly from contributing churches, not through a sponsoring arrangement.

Chapter 8 takes up the third of the specific questions: the scope of the local church's benevolent treasury. Where Chapter 6 asked about the *vehicle* through which benevolence may flow, and the present chapter has asked about the *structure* of inter-congregational cooperation, Chapter 8 asks about the *recipients*. May the local church's collective benevolence extend to all in need, or is it limited to needy saints? That chapter will be the longest of the four, because every relevant New Testament passage requires its own examination.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. Read Philippians 4:15–16 and 2 Corinthians 11:8–9 slowly. How did the Philippian church support Paul's preaching — directly, or through an intermediate sponsoring church? What does the New Testament pattern of direct support suggest about whether a sponsoring arrangement is the apostolic form of cooperation or a later innovation?
2. Read Acts 11:27–30, Romans 15:26, and 1 Corinthians 16:1–3 together. In each passage, identify the direction of the flow of funds: who is contributing, and who is receiving? Do any of these passages show a sponsoring church receiving funds from many congregations?

ations and administering the funds on the contributing churches' behalf?

3. Peter tells elders to shepherd “the flock of God among you” (1 Pet. 5:2). Does the phrase “among you” suggest any limit on the jurisdiction of an eldership? If so, what does that limit imply about an eldership’s oversight of a nationwide work funded by many congregations not under its shepherding?
4. The chapter observes a structural similarity between the sponsoring church arrangement and the American Christian Missionary Society of 1849: in both, one body of men takes oversight of a cooperative work too large for any single congregation, with pooled funds from many contributors. Do you agree that the similarity is real? If so, does it affect your evaluation of either arrangement? If not, what is the relevant difference?
5. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20) is worldwide in scope. A common argument for the sponsoring church arrangement is that the scale of modern media makes cooperative oversight necessary to obey the Commission at all. Does the Great Commission authorize any method that accomplishes its scope, or only the methods Scripture patterns? What Scriptural principle guides the difference between the *command* and the *method* of its fulfillment?

## CHAPTER EIGHT

# The Treasury and Benevolence

Chapter 6 asked whether a local church may route its funds through a separate human organization. Chapter 7 asked whether one congregation's eldership may oversee an ongoing work funded by many congregations. The present chapter asks a third question about the flow of the local church's funds — one that differs from the first two in a significant way. The first two questions concerned the *vehicle* and the *structure* of the collective work. The present question concerns the *recipients*. Having asked how the church's treasury may be administered, the reader is left with a question he has perhaps never had posed to him directly: to whom may the local church's treasury extend material benevolence at all?

This is, in many ways, the question most readers come to a booklet like this for. It is also the question on which the institutional and non-institutional positions appear, at first reading, to turn on a handful of specific New Testament texts. The method of this chapter will therefore differ slightly from Chapters 6 and 7 in its emphasis. After stating the question and both positions, the chapter will walk the text at length —

every New Testament passage describing collective benevolence; the two passages most often cited for an extended scope; and one further practical argument — and let the pattern of the text carry the conclusion.

### *The Question, Stated Precisely*

As in the preceding chapters, several related questions must be set aside before the real question can come into view.

The question is not whether the needy should be helped. They should. The Lord Jesus Himself commanded His disciples to show kindness to every neighbor, even an enemy (Luke 6:27–36; 10:25–37). No faithful Christian disputes that the needy — whether saint or stranger — are to be loved and assisted as God gives opportunity.

The question is not whether an individual Christian may relieve the material need of a non-Christian. He may, and must. Scripture commands it directly in more than one place, as this chapter will show. An individual Christian who confined his benevolence strictly to his fellow Christians would be disobeying the Scripture that governs his own conduct.

The question is not whether the gospel is to be preached to every creature. It is. The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19–20; Mark 16:15) has never been in dispute between the two sides of this division, and nothing in this chapter narrows the reach of the gospel.

The question is not even whether the local church may preach the gospel to the unconverted using its treasury. It may. Every unconverted hearer of the gospel is, by definition, not yet a Christian — and the church’s evangelistic funds are spent on the proclamation of the gospel to those outside the body. Evangelism directed toward the unsaved is one of the four authorized works of the local church, as Chapter 4 showed.

The question is specifically this: *may the local church, as a collective body, use funds from its treasury to supply material benevolence — food, clothing, shelter, financial relief — to those who are not members of the body of Christ?*

The question is about the collective benevolent use of the treasury. It is not about the collective evangelistic use of the treasury, which is a separate category. It is not about whether an individual Christian may relieve a non-Christian’s material need, which the Scripture answers in the affirmative. It is about one specific flow: funds the saints have contributed into the common treasury, disbursed by the congregation as the congregation, for the material relief of persons outside the body.

Chapter 5 has already drawn the line on which this question turns — the distinction between the individual Christian and the local church as two distinct actors with two distinct, though overlapping, lists of obligations. That distinction need not be re-argued here. It applies: the fact that the individual Christian is obligated to relieve any neighbor in

need does not, by itself, settle what the collective treasury is authorized to do. The collective treasury's scope is whatever Scripture authorizes for it — no more and no less. The present chapter asks what Scripture actually authorizes.

### *The Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The institutional answer, stated by its best advocates, runs along these lines.

**The work of benevolence is authorized work.** The local church is commanded to care for the needy. Both sides of the division agree on this point; the disagreement concerns whether that commanded care is restricted in scope to needy Christians or extends to all in need.

**James 1:27 authorizes the church's care for orphans and widows without restriction.** "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world." The verse names orphans and widows without qualification. It does not read "the orphans and widows of saints." On the institutional reading, the verse places on the church the obligation to visit and care for orphans and widows generally, and nothing in the verse limits the recipients to Christians.

**Galatians 6:10 authorizes "good to all people."** "So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith."

The verse is direct. The scope is “all people.” The “household of the faith” receives special emphasis, but the wider scope is expressly named. If this is addressed to the church, the church’s benevolent scope is “all people.”

**The apostolic pattern of evangelism was never merely verbal.** Jesus healed the sick, fed the multitudes, and relieved distress as He preached. The apostolic churches would have done the same. To restrict the local church to verbal proclamation while its members and neighbors suffer material need is to reduce the church to less than the apostolic pattern itself described.

**“Feed the belly, then feed the man.”** As a practical matter, a man who is hungry, cold, or sick is not in a condition to hear the gospel clearly. Material aid opens the door for the preaching. Denying material aid when the church has the means to give it closes that door. The apostolic record shows evangelism and benevolence going together; the modern distinction between them is artificial and unscriptural.

**The individual-collective distinction, if granted at all, does not require that the church’s scope be narrower than the individual’s.** If the church is the community of saints acting together, what each is obligated to do the collective body may likewise do. The reverse — a church forbidden to do what each of its members is commanded to do — makes the church less than its members, and that cannot be right.

This is the institutional position at full strength. Its force rests on James 1:27 and Galatians 6:10 as apostolic authorizations for the church’s benevolent work toward “orphans and widows” and “all people” respectively, on the practical observation that evangelism and benevolence naturally travel together, and on the principle that what the individual Christian must do, the community of Christians ought also to be free to do collectively.

The non-institutional answer does not deny the force of any of these observations until it comes to the one question that governs them all: what does the text actually show of the church’s collective benevolence?

### *The Non-Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The non-institutional argument begins with a single observation, and it is an observation every reader may verify for himself with a concordance and an open Bible. Every New Testament passage that describes the local church engaged in collective material benevolence — without exception, in every book, from every author who addresses the subject — specifies that the recipients were Christians.

The pattern is not subtle, and it is not a matter of selective emphasis. It is uniform. From the first benevolence described after Pentecost to the last of Paul’s references in 2 Corinthians, the collective benevolence of the local church is directed toward the body — “those who had believed,” “the congrega-

tion of those who believed,” “the disciples,” “the brethren,” “the saints.” The recipients are named, and they are consistently named as brethren.

A uniform pattern across nine apostolic descriptions, written by three different authors across four different books over more than twenty years, is not an accident of emphasis. It is a specification. And the principle Chapter 3 established applies here as it applied at every other point: when Scripture specifies, silence on the unspecified is restrictive. If the apostolic churches had at any point extended collective benevolence from the treasury to non-Christians as a pattern of their collective work, the New Testament would have shown it. It shows the opposite, consistently.

The passages the institutional argument reaches for — James 1:27 and Galatians 6:10 — do not describe the collective treasury at all. On close examination, both address the individual Christian. The grammar and context of each are plain on this point once the reader stops and looks at them. Chapter 5 has already shown that the individual Christian’s benevolence is broader than the local church’s collective benevolence; the two passages in question do not cancel that distinction but confirm it.

Finally, the practical argument that evangelism requires material aid as its first step — “feed the belly, then feed the man” — is not the apostolic method. Jesus Himself rebuked a crowd that sought Him for bread rather than for His teaching

(John 6:26–27). Peter, standing at the gate of the temple before a man who begged for alms, did not relieve the man’s material need with silver and gold but healed him in the name of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:6). The apostolic churches preached the gospel directly and relieved the material needs of their own brethren. The material relief of the unconverted, as a collective work of the congregation aimed at drawing hearers to the gospel, is not a pattern the New Testament shows.

The non-institutional answer is therefore not a narrow one and not a stingy one. It is the straightforward report of what the New Testament actually shows. And the Scriptural walk that follows is an invitation to every reader to verify the pattern for himself.

### *What the Scripture Actually Shows — The Collective Benevolence Passages*

The New Testament describes nine instances or references in which a local church engaged in collective material benevolence. Each is considered in turn.

**Acts 2:44–45.** After Peter’s Pentecost sermon and the baptism of three thousand hearers, Luke describes the common life of the newborn Jerusalem church: “And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.”

The word “all,” in verse 45, is pronounced in English as if it might refer to all in Jerusalem. The text forbids that reading. Verse 44 defines the “all” of verse 45 before verse 45 is spoken. It is “all those who had believed” — those who had obeyed Peter’s preaching and been baptized that day and the days following. The sharing was among “those who had believed.” The “anyone” who “might have need” was anyone within the community of the believing. The first collective benevolence described in the church’s history was directed to the brethren.

**Acts 4:32–35.** A few chapters later, as the Jerusalem church continues to grow, Luke returns to the same pattern: “And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul; and not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own, but all things were common property to them ... For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need.”

The subject is identified in verse 32 with precision: “the congregation of those who believed.” The distribution in verse 35 is “to each” — “each” meaning each of those just named, the ones whose need was now being met from the common stock. The outcome in verse 34 — “there was not a needy person among them” — refers to the congregation of those who believed, not to the population of Jerusalem. Jerusalem in the first century had many needy persons who were not

disciples. The text does not claim that the church relieved all of them. It claims that no needy person was among the congregation of believers. The scope is the body.

**Acts 6:1–6.** As the disciples continued to increase in number, a real benevolent need arose within the Jerusalem church. “Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food.” The apostles called the congregation together, had them select seven men of good reputation, and appointed those men to the daily distribution. Chapter 6 examined this narrative for what it shows about organizational form. The present chapter asks a different question of the same text: to whom was this serving directed?

The answer is given by the first verse itself. The widows in view were “their widows” — the widows of the Hellenistic Jews who had become disciples. Verse 1 begins by identifying the whole scene as one internal to the disciples (“while the disciples were increasing in number”). The Hellenistic Jews are Hellenistic disciples; the native Hebrews are Hebrew-speaking disciples; the widows on both sides belong to the community of believers. This was not a daily bread program for the widows of Jerusalem generally. It was a distribution within the body, among the body, for widows of the body. A distribution problem had arisen between two groups of Christians over the care of their own widows, and the apostolic answer was to

restructure the church's internal serving so that the widows within the body were not overlooked.

Nothing in the text shows, or hints, that the daily serving extended to widows outside the community of disciples. Everything in the text shows the reverse: "the disciples were increasing," "the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because *their* widows," "the congregation of the disciples," "full of the Spirit and of wisdom." The text describes a church taking care of its own.

**Acts 11:27–30.** A famine predicted by Agabus "over all the world" threatened the brethren in Judea. The disciples at Antioch responded: "And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders."

The contribution had a specified recipient: "the brethren living in Judea." The disciples at Antioch did not send relief to Judea for all Judeans who would suffer in the famine. They sent relief to their brethren, carried by their own chosen messengers, delivered to the elders of the receiving congregations. This is the first inter-congregational relief recorded in the New Testament, and its scope is specified: the brethren.

**Romans 15:25–26.** Paul describes the larger contribution that he himself was in the act of carrying when he wrote to Rome: "but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving the saints.

For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem.”

The phrase is striking in its precision. Not “the poor of Jerusalem.” Not “the poor in Jerusalem.” The poor *among the saints* in Jerusalem. There were many poor in first-century Jerusalem who were not saints. The contribution was not for them. It was for the poor among the saints — the poor who were members of the body in that city.

**1 Corinthians 16:1–3.** Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians about this same contribution begins with an identifying phrase: “Now concerning the collection for the saints.” The recipients are named before the method is described. “As I directed the churches of Galatia, so do you also. On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. When I arrive, whomever you may approve, I will send them with letters to carry your gift to Jerusalem.”

The collection was on the first day of every week. Each member gave as he prospered. The messengers were approved by the contributing congregation. The destination was Jerusalem. And the recipients were “the saints.” The pattern of giving is textbook apostolic church practice in every respect — and the scope of benevolence is textbook too.

**2 Corinthians 8:4.** When Paul commends the Macedonian churches to the Corinthians, he describes what the Macedonians begged for permission to do: “begging us with

much urging for the favor of participation in the support of the saints.”

The Macedonians, themselves in “deep poverty” (v. 2), were not begging to relieve the poor generally. They were begging to participate in the support of the saints. Once again the word is specified.

**2 Corinthians 9:1.** Paul’s next reference uses the same word: “For it is superfluous for me to write to you about this ministry to the saints.”

Here Paul assumes the identity of the recipients as a matter already settled. He does not explain or argue. “This ministry to the saints” is a phrase that needed no clarification to the Corinthian reader. The ministry was the ministry to the saints.

**2 Corinthians 9:12.** The final reference in the passage carries the same specification: “For the ministry of this service is not only fully supplying the needs of the saints, but is also overflowing through many thanksgivings to God.”

The needs being supplied are the needs of the saints. The overflow is into thanksgivings to God, which cost nothing and are not received from a treasury. But the material disbursement — the use of the collected funds — meets the needs of the saints.

### *The Pattern*

Nine passages have been examined. Each was written under apostolic inspiration. Each describes a local church, or a group

of local churches, engaged in the collective use of material resources to meet the material needs of others. And in every one, without exception, the recipients are specified — and specified as members of the body.

The phrases, in the order they appear across the New Testament, are these: *all those who had believed* (Acts 2:44); *the congregation of those who believed* (Acts 4:32); *their widows*, the widows of the disciples (Acts 6:1); *the brethren living in Judea* (Acts 11:29); *the poor among the saints in Jerusalem* (Rom. 15:26); *the collection for the saints* (1 Cor. 16:1); *the support of the saints* (2 Cor. 8:4); *this ministry to the saints* (2 Cor. 9:1); and *the needs of the saints* (2 Cor. 9:12).

Three authors. Four books. A span of more than twenty years in which the apostolic churches, in many cities and across two continents, conducted their benevolent work. And one consistent specification.

Scripture's specifications do not have to be repeated once for every possible alternative reading to be taken as specifications. Scripture does not read, "The church helped the saints only, and never non-Christians, and this was universal, and this is binding." It says, every time, that the helped were saints; and it says nothing of any collective arrangement for anyone else. The pattern is the specification.

At this point the reader has every right to ask the institutional question back: but what of the two passages that the institutional argument reaches for? Do James 1:27 and

Galatians 6:10 — which use broader language — overturn or revise what the nine descriptive passages establish? The two passages deserve careful treatment in their own right.

*James 1:27 — What James Is Actually Describing*

The verse in full: “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

On first reading, the verse can appear to command the church to visit orphans and widows as part of its collective religion. The institutional argument rests on that reading, and it is not a frivolous reading. But the verse lies embedded in a paragraph, and the paragraph is grammatically precise about who is in view. A reader who begins with verse 22 and reads continuously through verse 27 will find that James’s subject — from the first word of the paragraph to its last — is the individual Christian.

The pronouns do the work. Consider the sequence verse by verse:

Verse 22 — “But prove *yourselves* doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude *themselves*.” Plural “yourselves,” but as Paul’s “each of you” does in 1 Corinthians, this addresses each individual reader, not a collective body acting as a collective.

Verse 23 — “For if *anyone* is a hearer of the word and not a doer, *he* is like a *man* who looks at *his* natural face in a mirror.”

The subject has narrowed to an individual — “anyone,” “he,” “a man,” “his natural face.” A single person is being described, looking at his own reflection.

Verse 24 — “for once *he* has looked at *himself* and gone away, *he* has immediately forgotten what kind of *person he* was.” The pronouns intensify: four references to a single individual in one verse.

Verse 25 — “But *one* who looks intently at the perfect law, the law of liberty, and abides by it, not having become a forgetful hearer but an effectual doer, *this man* will be blessed in what *he* does.” The subject is “one” — one person, in distinction from the other person described in verses 23–24. Again, an individual.

Verse 26 — “If *anyone* thinks *himself* to be religious, and yet does not bridle *his* tongue but deceives *his own heart*, *this man’s* religion is worthless.” The grammar is now explicit: “anyone,” “himself,” “his tongue,” “his own heart,” “this man’s religion.” The person in view is a single individual whose religion is his personal religion.

Verse 27 — “Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep *oneself* unstained by the world.” And here — without any grammatical break between verse 26 and verse 27 — the subject carries forward. The “religion” of verse 27 is the same “religion” that was worthless in verse 26. It is an individual’s religion, in the same paragraph, in continuous

argument. The verse closes with “oneself” — the individual’s ongoing obligation to keep himself unstained.

The structure of James 1:22–27 is a single sustained argument about what the individual Christian’s religion consists of. If his religion is real, he is a doer of the word and not merely a hearer. If his religion is real, he bridles his tongue. If his religion is real, he visits orphans and widows in their distress. And if his religion is real, he keeps himself unstained by the world. These four marks — doing the word, bridling the tongue, visiting orphans and widows, keeping oneself unstained — are all things the individual disciple does, or fails to do, in his own conduct. The passage is not a description of a collective treasury’s disbursements. It is a description of what personal religion in the sight of God actually looks like.

If James 1:27 were intended to direct the collective treasury of the local church, the grammar from verse 22 forward would have shifted at some point. It does not shift. The pronouns remain individual from verse 22 to verse 27 without a break. The reader who wants to interpret verse 27 against the church treasury must show where, in the paragraph, the subject ceases being the individual Christian and becomes the collective body. The text does not supply such a shift.

It is worth adding — because no one wishes to diminish the force of the verse — that the individual Christian’s obligation to visit orphans and widows is *real*. Every Christian has this commanded of him. The obligation is not softened by

noting that it is an individual obligation rather than a collective one. It is, if anything, intensified. A Christian who hides behind the church treasury and considers himself discharged because the treasury has given to some institution has not obeyed James 1:27. He has outsourced his religion to a treasury. James places the obligation on him personally.

### *Galatians 6:10 — The Two Spheres Paul Names*

The second passage the institutional argument reaches for is this: “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Gal. 6:10).

At first reading, the verse also appears to widen the benevolent scope. “All people” is an expansive phrase. On the institutional reading, “let us do good to all people” commands a breadth that a church limited to benevolence for its own members falls short of.

As with James 1:27, the verse is embedded in a paragraph whose grammar settles who is in view. Galatians 6 begins at verse 1: “Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.” The subject is the individual Christian, addressed as “brethren” — “anyone” who is caught, “you who are spiritual,” “each one looking to yourself,” “you too.” The work of

restoring a fallen brother is personal work, done by the individual spiritual Christian.

Verse 2 — “Bear one another’s burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.” The burdens are borne individually, Christian to Christian. A treasury cannot bear a brother’s burden; only a person can bear a brother’s burden.

Verse 3 — “For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” Individual.

Verse 4 — “But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.” Individual, with a particular emphasis on the individual’s own self-examination.

Verse 5 — “For each one will bear his own load.” Individual, stated with a universal qualifier: *each one* will bear *his own* load.

Verse 6 — “The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him.” A one-to-one relation; a personal relation between a learner and a teacher.

Verses 7–9 — The passage on sowing and reaping. “Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary.” The “us” is the collective of individuals who have been addressed throughout. The warning applies to each.

Verse 10 — “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” The “us” of verse 10 is the “us” of verse 9, which is the “each one” of verses 4 and 5, which is the “brethren” addressed from verse 1 forward. Paul is speaking to individual Christians about what individual Christians do. The “all people” is the individual Christian’s wider scope.

And then — this is an observation worth pausing over — Paul does not stop at “all people.” He continues: “and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.” The preposition *especially* is doing real work in the verse. Paul marks two spheres and distinguishes them. The individual Christian has a broader sphere (“all people”) and a narrower, more intense sphere (“those who are of the household of the faith”). Both are authorized for the individual. Both are commanded. But they are distinct spheres, and Paul names them distinctly.

This is precisely the distinction Chapter 5 drew from the Mosaic law — the temple treasury and the individual landowner, operating in parallel with different scopes. Paul names the same two spheres in Galatians 6:10. The individual Christian is authorized for both spheres. The collective treasury was authorized for one (the saints), as all nine descriptive passages consistently confirm.

Far from overturning the nine descriptive passages, Galatians 6:10 — read in its context — actually confirms them. The individual’s wider obligation stands; the collective

treasury's narrower specification stands; and Paul himself marks the two spheres in a single verse by the word *especially*.

### *The "Feed the Belly" Argument*

One further argument from the institutional side deserves examination. It is a practical argument rather than a textual one, and it is not without its own force. The reasoning is that material aid opens the door for the hearing of the gospel. A man who is hungry cannot concentrate on eternal things. Feed him first, clothe him, shelter him; then preach to him. The apostolic churches, on this reasoning, would have operated in this way — and a church that refuses to do so today has not truly imitated them.

The argument has to be examined against what the apostolic record actually shows about how evangelism proceeded.

Consider Jesus's own response to a multitude that had been fed. After the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd pursued Him to Capernaum. His greeting to them was not a welcome but a rebuke: "Truly, truly, I say to you, you seek Me, not because you saw signs, but because you ate of the loaves and were filled. Do not work for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give to you, for on Him the Father, God, has set His seal" (John 6:26–27). Jesus did not follow a "feed them first, teach them second" method. He had fed them. They had come

back for more bread, and He corrected them. The correction was that they were seeking Him for the wrong reason. Material bread had, in their case, obscured rather than opened the way to spiritual hearing.

Consider Peter and John at the temple gate. A man who had been lame from his birth sat daily at the Beautiful Gate and begged alms from those entering the temple. As Peter and John approached, he asked them for a gift. “But Peter said, ‘I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene — walk!’” (Acts 3:6). Peter did not apologize for his empty purse and promise to organize relief for him from the Jerusalem treasury the next day. He did not treat the man’s material need as the necessary first step to his spiritual hearing. Peter offered what he had — the power of Christ — and the man rose and walked. The preaching followed in the portico of Solomon, with the healed man clinging to Peter and John, and many who heard the word believed (Acts 4:4).

Consider the pattern of the apostolic ministry more broadly. Paul’s preaching at Philippi, at Thessalonica, at Corinth, at Ephesus, at Rome: in no case does the narrative show him setting up a relief operation in a city as a means of gathering hearers for the gospel. The gospel was preached. Signs accompanied the preaching where God willed. Hearers believed and were baptized. Those hearers, now disciples, gathered into a local congregation and began to care for their

own needy. The order — preaching, conversion, gathering, care for the body — is the apostolic order throughout.

Individual benevolence in the apostolic pattern is illustrated in the account of Tabitha at Joppa. Acts 9 describes her as a disciple who “was abounding with deeds of kindness and charity which she continually did” (Acts 9:36). When she fell sick and died, the widows who stood beside Peter in her upper room wept and showed him “all the tunics and garments that Dorcas used to make while she was with them” (Acts 9:39). Her work was her own. Nothing in the text describes the Joppa church funding Tabitha’s work from a collective treasury or directing it as a church program. She was an individual Christian living out her obligation to do good, with her own hands, from her own resources. This is what the individual’s benevolent work looks like when it is actually lived. It does not look like a line item in a congregation’s budget.

“Feed the belly, then feed the man,” taken as a principle of how the church gathers hearers, is a modern practical strategy. It is not the apostolic strategy. The apostolic strategy was to preach the gospel directly to every hearer, to baptize those who believed, and to care — as the gathered body — for the needy within the body. Individuals within the body then carried the broader obligation God placed on them personally, in their own labor and from their own resources, as every Christian is commanded by Galatians 6:10 to do.

### *The Old Testament Parallel*

Chapter 5 has already walked the ground this paragraph covers, and it need not be walked again. The Mosaic law distinguished between what was funded through the tabernacle treasury and what rested on the individual landowner. Worship and the priesthood were funded collectively, through the tithe. Relief of the poor, the alien, the orphan, and the widow was funded individually, through the gleaning laws in each Israelite's field, at each Israelite's cost, in each Israelite's obedience (Lev. 19:9–10; Deut. 24:19–21; Ex. 23:10–11).

God did not funnel relief through the tabernacle. He placed relief on the individual. And the New Testament carries the same distinction forward, under the Law of Christ, in the same pattern: the collective benevolence of the local church is for the saints; the broader benevolence of the individual Christian reaches to all in need. The pattern is not new to the New Testament. It is the continuation of how God had ordered His people from the beginning.

### *Letting the Text Carry the Conclusion*

The question of this chapter admits a specific answer from the text itself. Nine New Testament descriptions of collective benevolence from the local church treasury uniformly specify the recipients as members of the body — believers, disciples, brethren, saints. The two passages often cited for an expanded scope — James 1:27 and Galatians 6:10 — address the indi-

vidual Christian in their immediate contexts, and Galatians 6:10 itself names the very distinction between the two spheres (the individual's broader sphere and his narrower one). The practical argument that evangelism requires material aid first is not the apostolic method; Jesus Himself rebuked a crowd that sought Him for bread, and the apostles preached directly. And the Old Testament pattern God established under the Mosaic law — individual benevolence broader than collective benevolence — is the pattern that carries forward under the New.

The local church's treasury, as Scripture authorizes its use, is not narrower than God intended and not broader than God intended. It is exactly what God ordered: the collective work of worship, edification, evangelism, and benevolence to the saints within the body. The individual Christian — with his own resources, in his own sphere, by his own obedience — does the broader work of doing good to all people as God gives him opportunity. Both are commanded. Neither displaces the other. Neither is stinginess. Both are faithfulness.

It follows that a local church that confines its collective benevolence to needy saints is not failing in love. It is doing what Scripture authorized it to do. And a Christian who learns that his collective treasury is not to be used for the broader work has not been relieved of that broader work. He has been reminded that it is his to carry — in his own spending, in his own visits, in his own labor of the hands, from his own

resources. The widow next door is not to be met by a line item in the congregation's budget. She is to be met by a Christian who knows his own obligation.

A brother who reaches a different conclusion from the Scripture walked above is owed patient conversation and charity. The nine descriptive passages may be examined again. The two passages cited for wider scope may be re-read in context. The pattern will be what the reader finds it to be when he reads for himself. That reading, more than any argument a booklet like this can make, is what will settle the matter in any honest student's mind.

Chapter 9 takes up the fourth and final of the specific questions — the fellowship hall and the social meal. The method will again be the same. State the question, state both positions fairly, walk the Scripture, and let the text carry the conclusion.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. The nine New Testament descriptions of collective church benevolence listed in this chapter each specify the recipients in terms that name members of the body (believers, disciples, brethren, saints). Work through each passage yourself with a concordance and confirm the pattern. Is there any passage in which a local church's collective benevolence is described as extending to persons outside the body? If you cannot find one,

what does the absence of such a passage suggest about what Scripture authorizes the collective treasury to do?

2. Read James 1:22–27 aloud without skipping any verse. In which verse, if any, does the grammatical subject shift from the individual Christian to the collective church? If the subject does not shift, what does that imply about who is obligated to visit orphans and widows in their distress in verse 27 — the church treasury, or the individual Christian?
3. Read Galatians 6:1–10 aloud in the same way. The verse often cited is “let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (v. 10). What is the force of the word *especially* in that sentence? If Paul were authorizing a single undifferentiated scope of benevolence, why would the word *especially* appear at all?
4. In John 6:26–27, Jesus rebukes a crowd that had followed Him after He fed them. His specific correction is that they sought Him because they had eaten, not because they had seen signs. Does this narrative recommend a “feed the belly, then feed the man” method of gathering hearers for the gospel, or does it call such a method into question? How would Peter’s words at the temple gate in Acts 3:6 answer the same question?

5. If the individual Christian's scope of benevolence is genuinely broader than the collective treasury's scope — as Galatians 6:10 indicates with its “all people ... especially those who are of the household of the faith” — does that mean the Christian is obligated to less benevolent work toward the needy, or more? What practical difference would it make, in your own life and in the life of your congregation, if each member understood the broader obligation as his own personal responsibility rather than the congregation's?

## CHAPTER NINE

# Fellowship Halls and Social Meals

Three of the four specific issues examined in this booklet concern money — what an institution receives it for, what a sponsoring arrangement does with it, who it may be given to. The fourth concerns something that appears, on first approach, smaller. It concerns food.

It is not a surprise that this question, of the four, is the one many readers care about least at the outset and come to understand as serious only after they have worked through it. The church's common meal is often a warm memory: a potluck after Sunday services, a Christmas fellowship dinner in the fellowship hall, a Wednesday-night supper before midweek Bible study, a wedding or funeral reception held in the congregation's kitchen and dining area. These are not painful memories for anyone. They are often among the most pleasant memories a Christian has of his congregational life. To question them is to question something that feels like family.

The question nonetheless belongs in this booklet for the same reason the other three do. It is a question about what the local church, as a collective body, is authorized to do. Chapter 4

established the four categories of the church's authorized work: worship, edification of the saints, evangelism, and benevolence to needy saints. Chapter 5 established that the individual Christian and the local church are distinct actors with overlapping but different obligations. The present question is whether the common meal, when conducted by the collective body on the collective body's property and from the collective body's treasury, falls within the church's authorized work — or whether it belongs to a different sphere entirely, the sphere of the home.

### *The Question, Stated Precisely*

As in the preceding chapters, several related questions must be set aside before the real question can come into view.

The question is not whether Christians may eat together. They may, and they do, and Scripture shows them doing so. The disciples of the Jerusalem church “were taking their meals together” as part of their common life after Pentecost (Acts 2:46), and the shared meal among brethren is a familiar and approved activity elsewhere in the apostolic record.

The question is not whether hospitality is commanded. It is (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9; Heb. 13:2; 1 Tim. 3:2, 5:10). Every Christian, and especially an elder, is commanded to be hospitable — to open his home, his table, and his resources to other saints and to strangers.

The question is not whether common meals build affection among Christians. They do. Eating together has been a human means of friendship and bonding since the beginning, and nothing in Scripture runs against that ordinary fact of human life.

The question is not whether a congregation may sometimes eat together incidentally. A congregation that shares refreshments in the church building after a funeral, or at the close of a gospel meeting, has not, by that alone, transferred the work of the home onto the church. Incidental hospitality around the edges of an authorized gathering is not the same thing as the establishment of common meals and social events as a continuing part of the church's collective work — and the two should not be confused.

The question is specifically this: *may the local church, as a collective body, use funds from its treasury and facilities owned by the congregation to provide common meals, recreation, and social events for its members as part of its collective work?*

The question is about the collective use of the treasury and the facilities. It is not about whether Christians may gather at a home for a meal. It is not about whether a Christian may invite his brother over to eat. It is about whether the church — the gathered body, acting as the church — has been authorized to take on the provision of meals and social occasions as part of what its treasury pays for and what its property is built for.

### *The Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The institutional argument for common meals and social activities as part of the local church's collective work runs along these lines.

**Fellowship is a New Testament value.** The word *fellowship* (Greek *koinōnia*) appears repeatedly in the apostolic writings. Acts 2:42 names it as one of the four things to which the Jerusalem disciples devoted themselves: "They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." Fellowship is authorized. A common meal is an ordinary expression of fellowship. A congregation that builds facilities to host fellowship meals is simply giving practical expression to a Scriptural value.

**Shared meals build the unity of the body.** The local church is not merely a collection of persons who worship together; it is a family, and families eat together. A congregation that never eats as a body loses a natural means of building affection, knowing one another, and caring for one another practically. To exclude the common meal from the church's collective life is to reduce the local congregation to something cooler and more institutional than the New Testament pattern implies.

**Acts 2:46 shows the early disciples "breaking bread from house to house" as part of their common life.** The disciples of the Jerusalem church took their meals together. That

common life of shared meals was not extraneous to what they were doing as the church. It was part of it. A modern congregation that provides facilities for the same kind of shared meals is simply making space for what the early disciples were already doing.

**Jude 12 refers to “love feasts” — *agapai* — as an established practice in the apostolic churches.** The term is specific. It was not a general word for a meal; it named a particular kind of gathering in which Christians came together for a meal in love. If love feasts were practiced in the apostolic churches, then church meals have apostolic precedent, and a modern congregation that continues them walks in an established pattern.

**The fellowship hall is an expedient, like a building or a song book.** A building expedites assembly. A song book expedites the command to sing. A fellowship hall expedites the meal that builds unity. If the one category of expedient is permissible, so is the other.

**The strict separation of church and home is artificial in the New Testament.** The earliest churches *met* in homes (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). The boundary between home-activity and church-activity was not as sharp in the first century as a later generation’s theology has drawn it. To insist that meals must be a home function and cannot be a church function is to impose a distinction the apostolic record itself does not impose.

This is the institutional argument at its strength. A reader who has worshiped in a congregation with a fellowship hall should recognize the reasoning here. The argument rests on real Scriptural values — fellowship, unity, hospitality — and on the observation that the apostolic church did, in fact, share meals.

The non-institutional answer does not deny any of those values. It asks a narrower question: does the New Testament show the local church, as a collective body, taking the meal *itself* as part of its authorized work, or does the New Testament locate the meal — along with hospitality and the social life of the saints — in a different sphere, the sphere of the home?

### *The Non-Institutional Position, Stated at Full Strength*

The non-institutional argument begins where Chapter 4 left off. The work God gave the local church is specified in Scripture. It is worship, edification of the saints, evangelism, and benevolence to needy saints. Nothing in that specification authorizes the collective provision of meals, recreation, or social events. A congregation that takes these on as part of its collective work has added to what Scripture authorized.

That is the bare structural argument. But the matter is sharper than that, because Scripture does not merely fail to mention the church-provided common meal. It actively locates the common meal elsewhere. When Paul encounters the abuse of the Lord's Supper at Corinth — the one passage in the New

Testament that addresses common meals in the church's assembly directly — his correction is not that the Corinthians were eating incorrectly but that they were eating in the wrong *place*. The meal for hunger, Paul says, belongs at home. The assembly of the church is for something else.

**1 Corinthians 11:17–34 is the key passage.** Paul writes to rebuke a real abuse: when the Corinthian church came together, some were eating and drinking their own meals, some were getting drunk, and the poor among them were being shamed. Paul's response in verses 20–22 is direct: “Therefore when you meet together, it is not to eat the Lord's Supper, for in your eating each one takes his own supper first; and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink? Or do you despise the church of God and shame those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I praise you? In this I will not praise you.”

Three observations arise from the text before any outside argument is applied.

*First*, the correction is not that the Corinthians should eat their meal better, or more reverently, or with more consideration for the poor. The correction is that the meal for hunger does not belong in the assembly at all. “Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?” is not a rhetorical politeness. It is a command in the form of a question. The common meal belongs in the house — in the home — not in the gathered assembly of the church.

*Second*, Paul sets “the church of God” in direct contrast to the house as the place for eating. The eating of the common meal in the church’s assembly *despises* the church. That is strong language, and it is Paul’s language, not an opponent’s. To take the ordinary meal and locate it in the church’s collective gathering is, Paul says, to treat the church as if it were a house. The two are different things with different functions.

*Third*, Paul returns to the point at the end of the passage, after laying down the Lord’s Supper (vv. 23–32), and closes with a specific apostolic directive: “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, so that you will not come together for judgment. The remaining matters I will arrange when I come” (v. 34). The directive is unambiguous. The hungry Christian eats at home. The coming together of the church is for something else. Coming together to eat — in the common-meal sense — is specifically what Paul forbids in the church’s assembly. The absence of such a provision is not a gap in Scripture; it is a positive exclusion.

The institutional argument sometimes replies that Paul is addressing the abuse of the Lord’s Supper specifically, not the common meal generally. The reply is not strong. Paul’s remedy is not a better way to combine the common meal with the Lord’s Supper. His remedy is to separate them and to send the common meal back to the house. Whatever the Corinthians had been doing, Paul’s settled apostolic direction was that the meal for hunger and the meal of the Lord’s Supper belong in

different places — the former at home, the latter in the assembly. That directive stands as a specification. And as Chapter 3 established, where Scripture specifies, silence on the unspecified is restrictive.

**Acts 2:46 confirms the pattern rather than overturning it.** The institutional argument cites “breaking bread from house to house” as evidence that the early disciples ate their meals together as a congregational activity. The text says something more precise than that. “Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart.” Two locations are named in the verse, and they are named separately. The temple was where the disciples continued in one mind, in the work of worship and teaching. The house was where they broke bread and took their meals. Luke does not collapse the two. He distinguishes them. The collective gathering had one location and one purpose; the meal-taking had a different location and a different purpose. The disciples’ common life was *not* a single undifferentiated activity. It was two spheres operating in parallel — the same two spheres Paul later names at Corinth.

The sentence “breaking bread from house to house” is instructive in another respect. The meals did not happen at a church-owned building. The disciples ate at one another’s houses — at the private homes of members. The pattern of the meal is household-to-household hospitality, Christian to

Christian. No common kitchen. No collectively owned dining space. No treasury funding the meal. The meal is a work of the home, carried by individual Christian households, from their own tables, at their own cost.

**Hospitality is commanded; its location is specified.** The New Testament commands Christian hospitality at several points. Paul tells the Romans to be “contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality” (Rom. 12:13). Peter writes: “Be hospitable to one another without complaint” (1 Pet. 4:9). The Hebrew writer urges, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (Heb. 13:2). An elder is required to be hospitable (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). The older widow qualified for enrollment in the local church’s support is one who has “shown hospitality to strangers” (1 Tim. 5:10).

In every one of these passages, the hospitality commanded is the individual Christian’s hospitality. The Greek word is *philoxenia* — literally, love of strangers. It is a private virtue, carried on in the host’s own home, at the host’s own table, with the host’s own resources. It is never described as a work of the collective body drawn from the collective treasury. A congregation that provides meals from its treasury and its collectively owned facilities is not doing what the New Testament commanded when it commanded hospitality. It is doing something different — something the New Testament does not command, and does not describe, and does not

authorize. The collective meal is not merely unauthorized; it also tends to quietly transfer the individual Christian's duty of hospitality to the treasury, where it disappears as a personal obligation.

**Jude 12 does not authorize what it sometimes appears to.** Jude refers to certain false teachers as “hidden reefs in your love feasts when they feast with you without fear, caring for themselves” (Jude 12). The phrase “love feasts” (Greek *agapai*) does describe a kind of shared meal practiced among first-century Christians. Jude mentions them in passing without condemning the practice itself; his concern is the intruders at the meals, not the meals.

But the existence of a practice mentioned in a letter of correction is not, by itself, apostolic authorization of that practice. Jude describes what the readers were doing; he does not prescribe it. The only passage in the New Testament that gives apostolic direction concerning the common meal in the gathered church is 1 Corinthians 11, and Paul's direction there is that the common meal belongs at home. A reader cannot set a single incidental mention (Jude 12) against a direct apostolic directive (1 Cor. 11:22, 34). The Corinthian passage governs. Whatever the “love feasts” were in the congregations Jude addressed — and there is real historical uncertainty on the question, since the term is nowhere explained in Scripture — they cannot be set against Paul's plain instruction that the eating of the ordinary meal for hunger belongs in the house,

not in the assembly. (Second Peter 2:13 is sometimes cited alongside Jude 12 as a reference to love feasts, but the NASB 1995 follows the manuscript reading “deceptions” rather than “love feasts” at that verse, and the parallel is contested. The argument does not need it.)

**The fellowship hall is not analogous to the meeting-house.** The institutional argument classifies the fellowship hall with the auditorium, the baptistery, and the song book — all as expedients to authorized works. The analogy does not survive examination. An auditorium expedites the assembly of the saints, which is a work the New Testament commands the church as a collective body to do (Heb. 10:25). A baptistery expedites the baptism of the believer, which is commanded (Matt. 28:19). A song book expedites the singing, which is commanded (Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16). In each case, the expedient aids a work the New Testament has commanded the church to do.

A fellowship hall expedites the common meal. But the common meal, as Paul’s directive at Corinth has shown, is not a work the New Testament has commanded the church to do. It is a work of the home. An expedient to a work the church was not given is not an expedient at all. It is a facility devoted to an activity outside the church’s charter, funded by the treasury of a body that has no authority for the activity it is facilitating.

The distinction Chapter 6 drew — between an expedient (an aid to the church’s authorized work) and an addition (a

work not within the church's charter) — applies here. A gymnasium, a recreation center, a basketball league, a summer camp, a coffee bar, a fellowship kitchen: each of these is often defended as expedient. But an expedient is an aid to authorized work. None of these is an aid to worship, edification of the saints, evangelism, or benevolence to needy saints in any direct sense. They are aids to something else — to recreation, to socializing, to common life — which is not what the church was given to do. Naming them “expedients” does not alter what they actually aid.

### *What the Text Actually Shows — The Two Spheres, Again*

The pattern this chapter traces is the same pattern Chapter 5 drew, and the same pattern Chapter 8 confirmed. God has always distinguished the collective body's work from the individual's work, and has located different activities in each sphere. The distinction is not a negative one in either direction. Both spheres are authorized. Both are commanded. Both are required.

The local church has a charter of collective work: worship, edification of the saints, evangelism, benevolence to needy saints. That charter is what the treasury is for and what the assembly is for.

The Christian home — the household of each member — has a charter of its own: hospitality, the raising of children in the Lord (Eph. 6:4), the nurturing of the husband-wife and

parent-child relations (Eph. 5:22–6:4), the extending of the table to saints and strangers (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9; Heb. 13:2). The common meal, in the New Testament pattern, belongs to this sphere. It is the work of the home.

When the two spheres are kept distinct, both flourish. The collective gathering of the church carries the weight of worship and the word and the mutual care of the saints in the work Christ gave it. The individual Christian carries the weight of hospitality in his own house, at his own table, with his own resources — and in doing so becomes the kind of Christian the New Testament pictures when it describes a local church.

When the two spheres are collapsed — when the church's collective treasury and facilities take on the meal and the social occasion — two things tend to happen. First, the individual Christian's duty of hospitality quietly migrates to the treasury, where it dissolves. Households that no longer need to host because the fellowship hall hosts are not stronger households in the faith; they are quieter and less exercised ones. Second, the church's collective energy divides, sometimes substantially, between the work Christ gave it and the activities He did not. Budgets, elders' attention, and facility commitments begin to slant toward the latter. Over decades the slant compounds. The trajectory concern Chapter 7 noted in the sponsoring arrangement — that unauthorized structures tend, over time, to grow and reshape the congregations that adopt them — applies here too. What begins as a fellowship supper once a

quarter becomes, in a generation, a gymnasium, a coffee bar, a youth program built around recreation, a camp, and a church calendar in which the recreational and social elements occupy as much space on paper as the worship and the teaching.

None of this, to repeat Chapter 7's qualification, is the Scriptural argument. The Scriptural argument is 1 Corinthians 11:22 and 34. The trajectory observation is a practical observation about what tends to happen when the two spheres are merged. A reader may weigh the trajectory as he will. The apostolic directive stands on its own.

### *Letting the Text Carry the Conclusion*

The question of this chapter admits a specific answer. The local church, as a collective body, has not been authorized by the New Testament to provide common meals, recreation, or social events from its treasury as part of its collective work. Paul's plain directive to Corinth sends the meal for hunger back to the house: "Do you not have houses in which to eat and drink?" and "If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home." The early disciples' common meals took place "from house to house," in the private homes of members. The hospitality the New Testament commands is commanded of the individual Christian, carried in his own home, at his own cost. The common meal is the work of the home, and the charter of the local church lies elsewhere.

A congregation that keeps the two spheres distinct is not a cooler congregation, and not a less loving one. It is a congregation ordered as the New Testament orders the work of God's people — the church doing what the church was given to do, the household doing what the household was given to do, and neither collapsing into the other. The meals happen. The hospitality is commanded. The affection among Christians is real. But the meals happen in homes, the hospitality is the individual Christian's work, and the love feast is the Lord's Supper — the one meal the church has authority to spread on its table when it comes together (1 Cor. 11:20, 23–26).

A brother who holds a different reading is owed charity and patient conversation. The passages may be re-read. The pattern the reader finds in them is the pattern he will have to answer for. This chapter, like the three before it, is an invitation to open the text and let it say what it says.

With this chapter the four specific issues are complete. What remains is the summation — the question of what is really at stake when congregations divide, not over three practices, but over one underlying question. Chapter 10 takes that up.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. Read 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 slowly. Paul's correction to the Corinthians is not merely that their meal was disorderly. What specifically does verse 22 say about

*where* the ordinary meal belongs? What does verse 34 say about *where* the hungry Christian is to eat? If Paul's remedy for the Corinthian problem is to remove the common meal from the assembly, does the directive leave room for a later congregation to add the common meal back, provided it is done in good order?

2. Acts 2:46 describes the Jerusalem disciples as "continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house." Two distinct locations are named in the verse. What was done in the first? What was done in the second? Does Luke collapse the two activities into one undifferentiated congregational life, or does he distinguish them? What does that distinction, if real, suggest about what the local church's collective work is and what it is not?
3. Consider the New Testament passages that command hospitality (Rom. 12:13; 1 Pet. 4:9; Heb. 13:2; 1 Tim. 3:2; 1 Tim. 5:10). In each passage, who is commanded — the individual Christian, or the collective church? If hospitality is an individual obligation, what happens to that individual obligation in a congregation whose fellowship hall hosts the meals that would otherwise be hosted in members' homes?
4. The chapter distinguishes between an expedient (an aid to the church's authorized work) and an addition (a facility or activity devoted to work the church was not

given). Apply the distinction to a current activity of a congregation familiar to you. Is the activity an aid to worship, edification of the saints, evangelism, or benevolence to needy saints? Or does it aid something else? If something else, where is the Scriptural authority for the church to be doing that something else?

5. If the two spheres — the collective work of the church and the individual work of the Christian home — were kept carefully distinct in your own congregation, what would change? Would there be more hospitality among members, or less? Would the church's collective energy be more focused on its authorized work, or less? Would the Christian home be stronger, or weaker? What do the answers to those questions suggest?

PART FOUR

## What It Means

---

*The booklet closes by stepping back from the four specific questions to ask what is really at stake — and by directing the reader to the primary sources for further study.*

## CHAPTER TEN

# What's Really at Stake

Ten chapters is a long road. A reader who has come this far has walked through the history, the principle, the work of the church, the individual-collective distinction, and four specific questions — the orphan home, the sponsoring church, the treasury's scope, and the common meal. Each of those four was asked in the same way: state the question, state both positions as their best advocates state them, walk the Scripture, and let the text carry the conclusion.

The chapters have been specific on purpose. A booklet that speaks only of principle without ever coming down to actual practices can be read and agreed with without ever forcing the reader's hand. A booklet that comes down to the practices and never abstracts back up to principle can be read as a narrow quarrel over institutional arrangements that a reasonable man might adjudicate either way. Neither of those would serve the reader fairly. The work of the four specific chapters was to show what is actually at stake at the practical level — where congregations actually divide, with which congregations, over which arrangements, on the basis of which texts.

This chapter steps back. It asks the question the four specific chapters prepared the reader to ask for himself: *what is really at stake?* The answer, stated as plainly as the booklet knows how to state it, is this. The division among brethren is not, ultimately, about three or four practices. It is about one hermeneutic.

### *Why the Practices Were Not the Real Issue*

A reader coming fresh to the division might assume the quarrel among brethren is a quarrel about specific things — orphan homes, Herald of Truth, church benevolence, fellowship halls. It is natural to think so, because those are the visible surfaces of the division. When congregations drew apart in the 1950s, they drew apart over decisions about those specific things. And when a reader today asks a brother on either side of the division what the issue is, he is often given an answer that names one or more of those practices.

But a practice is always downstream of a hermeneutic. A practice is adopted or rejected because of how Scripture is being read. Two congregations may disagree about whether to cooperate with the Herald of Truth sponsoring arrangement, but their disagreement is not, at bottom, about radio programs. Their disagreement is about whether Scripture's silence on a proposed practice is permissive or restrictive — whether a congregation may do what Scripture does not mention, so long as it is not expressly forbidden, or whether a

congregation must find positive authority in the text for what it undertakes.

Every one of the four specific issues walked in the preceding chapters turns on that single hermeneutical question. The orphan home question is not really about whether orphans should be helped (both sides agree they should) but about whether a congregation's treasury may pass through a separate human institution for which Scripture provides no specification. The sponsoring church question is not about whether evangelism is authorized (both sides agree it is) but about whether one congregation's eldership may oversee a work funded by many other congregations, when the New Testament shows no such structural arrangement. The treasury-and-benevolence question is not about whether the needy should be helped (both sides agree they should) but about whether the collective treasury's scope is the scope the New Testament consistently specifies or a broader scope the New Testament never authorizes. The fellowship hall question is not about whether Christians should eat together (they should) but about whether the common meal, which Paul explicitly sends to the house, belongs on the collective property of the church.

In every case, the disagreement about the practice is downstream of a disagreement about how Scripture authorizes. The practice question is the visible surface. The hermeneutic is the thing beneath.

This is why the division has persisted. A disagreement about a practice could be settled, in principle, by a compromise or an adjustment or a careful set of distinctions. A disagreement about the hermeneutic cannot be settled that way, because the hermeneutic governs every practice, not just the one currently in view. Two congregations that cannot agree on how Scripture establishes authority will continue to disagree on practice after practice, indefinitely, because every new practice raises the same underlying question. And two congregations that *do* agree on how Scripture establishes authority will generally reach the same conclusions on the practices, not because they have agreed to agree, but because the text will have carried them there.

### *The One Question*

Chapter 3 named the hermeneutical question as the load-bearing question of the booklet, and every chapter since has rested on it. Stated plainly, the question is this: *does silence in Scripture, on a specific practice or arrangement, imply permission to adopt it, or does it imply the absence of divine authority for adopting it?*

The two sides of the division answer that question differently. The institutional answer, in its most careful forms, is that silence is permissive. If Scripture does not expressly forbid a practice, and if the practice can be defended as an expedient to the church's work, then the practice may be

adopted. This is not the casual institutional answer but the thoughtful one, and it is the answer on which the institutional arrangements of the mid-twentieth century rest.

The non-institutional answer is that silence, when paired with apostolic specification, is restrictive. Where the New Testament has specified a means — one congregation’s eldership overseeing its own work, the treasury’s benevolence directed to needy saints, the common meal taking place in the house — that specification governs. The absence of other means in the apostolic record is not a gap to be filled by human judgment. It is a divine reticence that the congregation is to respect. Where Scripture has specified, the congregation does not add; where Scripture is silent on a category of work altogether, that work is not authorized to the congregation at all.

The reader may have noticed that the question is not new. It is the same question Chapter 3 posed at length: Leviticus 10 (Nadab and Abihu offering “strange fire which He had not commanded them”), Numbers 20 (Moses striking the rock after being told to speak to it), Colossians 3:17 (“whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus”), and the apostolic demand that worship be rendered by authority. Every generation of God’s people has faced the same question, because every generation has been tempted to add. The institutional-noninstitutional division is one expression of a question that was settled in principle long before Alexander

Campbell, long before the Reformation, long before the church of the first century first gathered.

And the answer God has given in every generation is the same answer. What He has commanded, His people do. What He has not commanded, His people do not add — not because they are being stingy, and not because they are being legalistic, but because they are being obedient. The pattern of worship and of collective work that God has specified is the pattern He wants; anything in addition to it is, by definition, something He did not ask for.

This is the pattern Colossians 3:17 captures in a single sentence. “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.” Every word. Every deed. Done by the authority of Christ. That verse, more than any other, names the principle that governs what the local church undertakes as its collective work. A practice the Lord has authorized is a practice done in His name. A practice the Lord has not authorized is not done in His name, however sincerely it is offered. The question is not whether the congregation means well. The question is whether the Lord has authorized what the congregation is doing.

### *A Warning From Within*

One observation from the history of the twentieth century is worth pausing on in this chapter, because it bears on the question of what is really at stake.

Chapter 2 quoted Foy E. Wallace Jr., writing in 1939, warning of a drift he saw developing among the brethren of his day. “The church,” he wrote, “is about to become the unwitting and unwilling victim of institutionalism.” And again: “Institutionalism was the taproot of digression.” Wallace was not writing from the non-institutional side of a division that had not yet occurred. He was writing as a recognized figure on what would become the institutional side, warning that side before the division came. His warning was not heeded, and a decade and a half later the division he anticipated had occurred. The reader may judge for himself, from his own observation of twentieth-century churches of Christ, whether Wallace’s 1939 warning has been borne out in the decades since — and whether the pattern he feared, that institutional arrangements tend to grow, to accommodate, and to reshape the congregations that adopt them, has in fact developed as he anticipated it would.

This is not the place to trace the history of the subsequent decades. The two standard scholarly treatments are David Edwin Harrell Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the Twentieth Century: Homer Hailey’s Personal Journey of Faith* (University of Alabama Press, 2000), and Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Eerdmans Publishing, 1996; 3rd ed., 2024). A reader who wishes to examine the trajectory of twentieth-century churches of Christ in scholarly detail should consult those volumes.

Both are extensive, well-documented histories written by academic historians, and both address, from their respective perspectives, the movement within institutional churches of Christ across the twentieth century. The present chapter does not rest on that historical observation. It is noted here simply because the reader may wish to weigh, alongside the Scriptural argument, the further question of how the hermeneutic once adopted has actually played out over time.

What the present chapter rests on is the Scriptural point: the hermeneutic that receives silence as permission has no logical stopping point. Once the principle is accepted that a congregation may adopt what Scripture does not expressly forbid, each new generation will adopt what the previous generation did not, because the hermeneutic has given itself no boundary. The only boundary is whatever the congregation happens to feel, at a given moment, is too far. And congregational feeling, absent a textual check, tends to move with the broader culture. This is not a prediction about any particular congregation. It is an observation about how the hermeneutic, once admitted, actually behaves over time.

### *A Word to the Reader on Both Sides*

A booklet of this kind, written with any care at all, asks different things of different readers. Here, toward the end, is what it asks of each.

*To the reader who has worshiped in an institutional congregation.* You have been presented in this booklet with an argument that the arrangements your congregation has adopted — the orphan home, the sponsoring arrangement, the fellowship hall, the broader scope of benevolence — are not authorized by the New Testament. That is a weighty claim. The question is whether the argument rests on the text or on something else. The invitation is to read the four specific chapters again, slowly, with your Bible open, and to ask of each Scriptural walk whether the text actually says what the chapter reports it to say. If it does not, discard the argument. The author of the booklet has no claim on your assent beyond what the Scripture itself demands. But if the text does say what the chapters report, the consequence for your practice cannot be avoided by appeals to tradition, to warm memory, or to the kind brethren among whom you have worshiped. Those brethren are not the Word of God. The Word of God is.

*To the reader who has worshiped in a non-institutional congregation.* You have been represented in this booklet as holding the position that the non-institutional side of the division holds. The question for you is whether you hold that position because the Scripture has settled it for you in your own reading, or whether you hold it by inheritance — because your father held it, because your home congregation has always held it, because your friends and teachers hold it. If the latter, then you hold the position in a form that will not survive an attack. The

non-institutional position is worth holding only if it is held by conviction, and conviction comes from the text, not from the party. The same four chapters that challenge the institutional reader challenge you: read them again, with your Bible open, and ask whether the Scripture actually says what the chapters report. If the argument does not rest on the text, discard it. If it does, hold it because the text holds it, not because you were given it.

*To the reader, on either side, who has held his position with hostility toward brethren on the other side.* The division among churches of Christ is a grief. It is not a triumph. Brethren who loved the Lord and loved His word have been separated from one another for two generations over questions that the New Testament, carefully read, could have settled if both sides had been willing to be settled by it. The honest argument for one position or the other is not the same thing as contempt for brethren who hold the opposite position. Every brother named or implied in this booklet — whether on the institutional side or the non-institutional side — is a Christian for whom Christ died, as long as he is a Christian at all. The argument of this booklet is that one side has read the text correctly and the other has not, on the specific questions in view. That argument, if it is right, calls for the other side's correction; it does not call for the other side's contempt.

## *The Thesis*

A booklet that opens with a clear statement of what it is trying to do ought to close with the same clarity. The preface named the thesis in plain words: a position must stand or fall on what the Scriptures actually teach. Every chapter since has held itself to that test. Every argument in the booklet has attempted to show, text by text, what the Scripture actually says — and to distinguish what the Scripture says from what tradition has assumed, what inheritance has presumed, and what cultural comfort has invited.

The stakes are not small. A division among brethren that has persisted for two generations, and will very likely persist for more, is not the kind of thing that resolves by splitting the difference. It resolves only by one side conceding the text to the other. The concession is costly for whichever side makes it, because it means a change of practice, a revision of arrangements perhaps built at great effort, and a willingness to be thought wrong by brethren who were close. But the concession is what the Scripture asks when the Scripture says what it says.

The question is therefore the same question Chapter 1 opened with, stated a final time:

*A position must stand or fall based on  
what the Scriptures actually teach.*

That is the thesis. It is the standard by which every claim in the preceding pages has been offered. And it is the standard by

which the reader is now invited, with his Bible open and nothing else between him and the text, to weigh what has been said. If the Scripture does not say what these chapters have reported, discard what these chapters have reported. If it does, receive the text, and let the text carry the practice.

That invitation is the end of the argument. The one remaining chapter is not another argument but a service to the reader: a list of sources, on both sides of the division, for further study.

### *For Reflection and Discussion*

1. The chapter claims that the division among brethren is not, ultimately, about three or four practices but about one hermeneutic. Working from the four specific chapters you have read (6, 7, 8, 9), can you identify the single underlying question of authority that each chapter turns on? Stated in your own words, what is that question?
2. Colossians 3:17 commands that whatever we do in word or deed be done in the name of the Lord Jesus. What does it mean, concretely, for a congregational practice to be done “in the name of the Lord Jesus”? How is that different from a practice being done with good intentions, or a practice being done for a good cause?

3. The chapter observes that a hermeneutic which receives silence as permission has no logical stopping point — each generation will extend what the last did not, because the principle itself supplies no boundary. Do you find this observation fair, or unfair? Can you identify a principled boundary that the “silence is permission” hermeneutic could maintain, against the pressure of successive generations to extend further?
4. To the reader who has held a position by inheritance: can you state, in your own words and without reference to what your parents or teachers held, why you hold the position you hold? If you cannot, what does that suggest about how the position might need to be examined?
5. The chapter addresses the reader on both sides of the division — institutional and non-institutional — with substantially the same invitation. Why the same invitation, and not a different one for each? What does the sameness of the invitation imply about what the division can and cannot be settled by?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# For Further Study

The preceding chapters have offered the argument. This chapter offers the sources.

A booklet of this length cannot replace primary reading on a subject that generated entire volumes of debate at the time and continues to produce serious writing today. A reader who wishes to test what has been said in these pages — who wishes to hear the institutional position in the words of its own best advocates, the non-institutional position in the words of its own best advocates, and the history of the division in the words of trained historians — needs access to primary and secondary sources.

What follows is organized by category. Within each category, sources are given with full bibliographic information so the reader can locate them. Each entry carries a brief annotation describing what the work is, who wrote it, and what use it serves for the reader of this booklet. Readers are reminded throughout that availability of these works varies: some are currently in print and easy to obtain; others must be sought through used-book dealers, denominational research

libraries, or online archives. Where an online archive is known to hold a particular body of material, it is noted.

One honest caution before the list. The reader will note that the citations are fuller for works the author of this booklet has in hand or can verify through current publishers' catalogs. Several works mentioned in oral tradition or informal reference — particularly certain compilations of journal articles from the 1950s — are known to exist but could not be verified to the author's satisfaction in specific bibliographic detail. Where this is the case, the reader is pointed to the journal archives themselves rather than to a book whose exact title could not be confirmed. This is the same discipline applied to Scripture throughout these chapters: a reference is not offered unless it can be verified, and the reader is owed honest access to what is and is not known.

### *Primary Non-Institutional Sources*

**The Cogdill–Woods Debate: The Issue of “Congregational Cooperation” — A Debate on Institutionalism.** Roy E. Cogdill and Guy N. Woods. Held November 18–21, 1957, at Music Hall in Birmingham, Alabama. Most recently reprinted by Guardian of Truth Foundation / Truth Publications, 2007 (ISBN 978-1584270386). This is the most widely known of the debates on institutionalism in churches of Christ. Four nights of formal debate, with each man both affirming and denying propositions on whether congregations may cooperate

through a sponsoring arrangement, and whether benevolent institutions such as orphan homes may be supported from congregational treasuries. Cogdill argued the non-institutional side; Woods argued the institutional side. The debate book is the single most efficient way for a reader to hear both positions thoroughly developed by competent advocates in the same pages. A reader of this booklet who wishes to move directly from these chapters to the primary source debate is directed here first.

**Roy E. Cogdill, *The New Testament Church*.** Originally published by Roy E. Cogdill Publishing Company (Lufkin, Texas), circa 1949–1950; subsequently published by Cogdill Foundation Publications in multiple editions (1974, 1978, 1979, 1984); currently available from Guardian of Truth Foundation (ISBN 978-1584270812). A 138-page, 52-outline-lesson book covering the nature, origin, mission, membership, government, unity, identity, and worship of the church. Not specifically a polemic on the institutional question, but a comprehensive statement of the ecclesiology on which the non-institutional position rests. Widely used as a teaching outline in non-institutional congregations for decades.

**The Gospel Guardian (journal, 1935–1936, revived 1949–1988, continued as The Guardian of Truth and subsequently Truth Magazine).** Primary journalistic archive of the non-institutional position from the period of division forward. Originally published by Foy E. Wallace Jr. beginning

in 1935; revived in 1949 with Fanning Yater Tant as editor and Roy E. Cogdill as publisher. Tant served as editor for twenty-two years through the period of most intense controversy. The journal later merged with *Truth Magazine* to become *The Guardian of Truth*, subsequently renamed back to *Truth Magazine*. The full archive of the *Gospel Guardian* has been digitized and is available online at [wordsfityspoken.org](http://wordsfityspoken.org), where individual issues can be read by volume and number. A reader who wishes to trace the arguments as they were actually made in the years of division should begin here. Specifically relevant special issues include the November 1955 Tant–Harper Debate coverage and the 1967 “On the Banks of the Rubicon” special issue by Fanning Yater Tant on the sponsoring church question.

**The Tant–Harper Debate.** Fanning Yater Tant and E. R. Harper. Held November 27 – December 1, 1955, in Abilene, Texas, across four evening sessions. Published in book form under a contract with Chronicle Publishing Company. The debate took up the sponsoring church arrangement specifically. Harper was a principal proponent of the sponsoring church concept; Tant argued the non-institutional side. Useful alongside the Cogdill–Woods Debate for the reader who wishes to see the same issues argued by different advocates in a different forum. The printed text has been reprinted periodically by non-institutional publishers; currently-available editions should be sought through Truth Publications, Guardian of

Truth bookstores, or used-book dealers specializing in Stone-Campbell restoration materials.

**James W. Adams.** James W. Adams of Lufkin, Texas was a longtime editor of *The Gospel Guardian* and wrote extensively on the cooperation question in that journal and in *Truth Magazine*. A representative article — “Cooperation” — is archived at [truthmagazine.com](http://truthmagazine.com) (Volume 34, No. 160) and is freely accessible. Adams’s broader body of work can be accessed through the *Gospel Guardian* archive referenced above. The outline for this booklet originally identified a work titled “Studies in Church Cooperation” attributed to Adams; the author of this booklet was unable to verify that specific title through current bibliographic sources at the time of writing. A reader who wishes to locate it is encouraged to consult Truth Publications or a knowledgeable bookseller; absent such verification, the reader is pointed to Adams’s journal articles as the most reliable access to his thought.

### *Primary Institutional Sources*

**Guy N. Woods, *Questions and Answers: Open Forum, Freed-Hardeman College Lectures*.** Two volumes. Volume 1, Gospel Advocate Company, 1976 (ISBN 978-0892252770); Volume 2, Gospel Advocate Company, 1986. For almost thirty years Guy N. Woods moderated the Open Forum at Freed-Hardeman College, during which any person in attendance could ask a biblical or doctrinal question and Woods would

respond. These two volumes collect the questions and his answers. The volumes are not organized around the institutional controversy specifically, but Woods addresses cooperation, sponsoring arrangements, and benevolent institutions at multiple points across both volumes, making his case for the institutional position from Scripture and from principle. Essential reading for a reader who wishes to see the institutional position defended by one of its foremost advocates in his own words.

**The Woods–Porter Debate on Orphan Homes and Homes for the Aged.** Guy N. Woods and W. Curtis Porter. An earlier debate on the benevolent-institution question specifically. Published by Truth Publications. The debate is narrower in scope than the Cogdill–Woods Debate — focused specifically on the orphan home and related institutions — and serves as a useful complement to it. Woods argued for institutional support; Porter argued against. The two debates read together (Cogdill–Woods and Woods–Porter) give the reader the most comprehensive view of the institutional position as it was defended in the controversy’s most intense decade.

**The Gospel Advocate (journal, continuous since 1855).** Primary journalistic archive of the institutional side of the division, particularly during the editorship of B. C. Goodpasture (1939–1977). Published continuously since its founding by Tolbert Fanning in Nashville in 1855, the *Gospel*

*Advocate* was the principal voice of churches of Christ for most of its first century, and during the period of the institutional controversy became the primary organ of the institutional position. A reader who wishes to see the institutional argument made contemporaneously with the events of 1950–1960 should consult bound volumes of the *Gospel Advocate* from that period. These are held in the research libraries of Freed-Hardeman University (Henderson, Tennessee), Abilene Christian University (Abilene, Texas), Lipscomb University (Nashville, Tennessee), and Harding University (Searcy, Arkansas). Some digitized holdings are available through university-library online portals and through interlibrary loan. Specific editorials from the Goodpasture era that addressed the cooperation controversy can be located through the indices of the bound volumes, though no single comprehensive anthology of those editorials is known to the author.

### *Historical and Scholarly Studies*

David Edwin Harrell Jr., *The Churches of Christ in the 20th Century: Homer Hailey's Personal Journey of Faith*. University of Alabama Press, 2000. ISBN 978-0817310080. Harrell is a professional historian and a member of the churches of Christ who brings both academic training and personal familiarity to his subject. This volume is structured biographically around Homer Hailey, a significant figure in churches of Christ education and preaching whose career

spanned the division, and uses Hailey’s life as a lens through which to view the larger movement. Harrell’s perspective is sympathetic to the non-institutional side, which the reader should know going in, but his historical scholarship is rigorous and his treatment of sources is careful. The most thorough scholarly treatment of the post-division period available.

**Richard T. Hughes**, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America*. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996; 3rd edition with James L. Gorman, 2024 (ISBN 978-0802877291). Hughes is a historian trained at the University of Iowa who has written extensively on Stone-Campbell restoration movements. His perspective is from what he describes as a mainstream academic position, tracing what he calls the “sect-to-denomination” movement of churches of Christ across the twentieth century and the tension between restorationist impulse and cultural accommodation. A useful companion to Harrell, differing in perspective but covering substantially the same historical terrain. The 2024 third edition has been updated with James L. Gorman and extends the treatment into the twenty-first century.

**Jefferson David Tant**, “The History of the Institutional Controversy.” An online article available at [lavistachurchofchrist.org](http://lavistachurchofchrist.org) (/cms/the-history-of-the-institutional-controversy/). A briefer, more accessible historical summary than the Harrell or Hughes volumes, written from the non-

institutional perspective by a grandson of the Gospel Guardian editor Fanning Yater Tant and great-grandson of J. D. Tant. Useful as an orientation to the controversy's history before a reader undertakes the more substantial scholarly treatments.

### *Archival Resources*

**wordsfityspoken.org.** Online archive of the *Gospel Guardian* journal (1949–1988), fully searchable by volume, number, and page. The single most important online resource for anyone wishing to read primary-source non-institutional writing from the period of division. Free to access.

**truthmagazine.com.** Online presence of *Truth Magazine* (successor to *The Guardian of Truth*, which itself was the merger of the *Gospel Guardian* and *Truth Magazine*). Current and archival articles from the non-institutional perspective. Includes archived articles by James W. Adams, Fanning Yater Tant (as reprinted material), and other major non-institutional writers.

**therestorationmovement.com.** General historical resource on the Stone-Campbell restoration movement, including biographical entries on major figures on both sides of the institutional controversy. Useful as a starting point for biographical research on any of the named figures in this booklet.

Freed-Hardeman University, Abilene Christian University, Lipscomb University, and Harding University lib-

**raries.** The four principal research libraries holding comprehensive bound-volume collections of *Gospel Advocate*, *Firm Foundation*, and related churches-of-Christ periodicals from the nineteenth century forward. Access policies vary; readers may inquire directly with each institution's special collections department.

### *Scripture for Re-examination*

A reader whose chief question after reading this booklet is "does the Scripture actually say what the chapters have reported?" does not need a bibliography of secondary sources. He needs his Bible, opened to the passages walked in each chapter, and time to read them himself. For that reader, the most important "further study" is the text itself.

The key passages on the four specific issues are gathered here for convenience.

*On the question of authority (Chapter 3).* Leviticus 10:1-3 (Nadab and Abihu); Numbers 20:7-12 (Moses striking the rock); Matthew 28:18 (all authority to Christ); Colossians 3:17 (whatever you do in word or deed); Hebrews 8:5 (Moses warned to make according to the pattern); 1 Peter 4:11 (speak as the oracles of God); Revelation 22:18-19 (add nothing, take nothing away).

*On the work of the church (Chapter 4).* Acts 2:42 (teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, prayers); Ephesians 4:11-16 (gifts for the equipping of the saints); 1 Timothy 3:15 (the

house of God, the pillar and support of the truth); 1 Peter 2:5, 9 (a royal priesthood); 1 Timothy 5:16 (the church assisting widows indeed).

*On the individual-collective distinction (Chapter 5).* Exodus 23:10–11; Leviticus 19:9–10; Deuteronomy 24:19–21 (gleaning laws on the individual landowner); James 1:27 (the individual's religion); Galatians 6:1–10 (individual restoration, individual bearing of burdens, individual doing good to all).

*On church-supported institutions (Chapter 6).* Acts 6:1–6 (appointment of the seven, the church handling its own benevolence internally); 1 Timothy 5:3–16 (the church supporting widows indeed under specified conditions).

*On the sponsoring church arrangement (Chapter 7).* Acts 14:23 (elders appointed in every church); Philippians 1:1 (overseers of a local congregation); 1 Peter 5:1–4 (elders shepherding the flock among them); Acts 20:28 (overseers over the flock assigned to them).

*On the treasury and benevolence (Chapter 8).* Acts 2:44–45; 4:32–35; 6:1–6; 11:27–30; Romans 15:25–27; 1 Corinthians 16:1–3; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:1; 9:12 (the nine passages of collective benevolence, all specifying saints as recipients); James 1:22–27 (the individual's religion, including visiting orphans and widows); Galatians 6:10 (the individual's two spheres).

*On fellowship halls and social meals (Chapter 9).* 1 Corinthians 11:17–34 (Paul's apostolic directive sending the ordinary meal home); Acts 2:46 (temple and house as two

distinct locations); Romans 12:13; 1 Peter 4:9; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8 (the individual Christian's obligation of hospitality).

These are the passages on which the booklet's arguments rest. A reader who works through them, slowly, with no commentator at his elbow, will have done the most important work of further study. If the Scripture does not support the argument made in the preceding chapters, the reader will see it for himself. If it does, the reader will have received the text directly, which is always the best reception.

• • •

— *end of Chapter 11* —

• • •

*One chapter and the preface remain. The preface, which will appear at the front of the finished volume, names the thesis plainly and the author's own position honestly. The book closes where it opens — with Scripture as the final authority.*