

## Uninstitutional



We expect the proliferation of institutions and hierarchies in the human realm — business, government, the military, education. But there is no place for such things in the Lord's ekklesia because it is not a human organization. It is a spiritual temple whose Builder and Maker is Christ.

Probably most of us have been part of some group in school, college, church or society that started out with excitement and verve, but after a period of time ended up in stagnancy

and micro-management. The members found themselves maintaining the shell when in fact the original vibrancy was gone.

Bob Lupton makes some astute observations along these lines in his article, "The Cycle of Life." However, there is one fatal flaw in the article: *he assumes that when a group moves from its organic beginnings to its institutionalization that it somehow always remains organic.* Not so. Becoming established as an institution is a retrogression that kills organic life. Listen carefully to what Bob says:

**The Western church is in such a decline. Viewed against the backdrop of history, however, the current demise of denominations is predictable. In time, all institutions follow a similar pattern. They begin as fresh movements, new and exciting, abundant with vision and creativity. But in order to survive, a movement must develop structural strength — mission statement, doctrinal distinctives, leadership structure, decision-making processes. Vigorous change takes place during this organizational phase as a seedling becomes established, sinking its roots and spreading its branches. Staff are hired, budgets are created, policies are instituted, goals and objectives are set, property is purchased. As the organization matures it becomes a source of security for its employees. Health insurance, vacation pay, cost of living raises, retirement benefits are negotiated. Gradually the mission shifts from the founding visionaries to hired employees and with each subsequent ring of management the passion that originally inspired the movement becomes slightly diluted. Marketing, management, and funding consume increasing amounts of organizational energy. With its own sturdy root system, it now commands its fair share of sunlight and space on the forest floor.**

**By the time the organization enters the institutional phase of its development, it is fully vested in its own self-preservation. Instead of a movement spending itself on behalf of a noble cause, it has become a respectable institution consumed with preserving its own viability and legacy. It may still use the same stirring language of its past movement days, and**

it may still perform important work, but it spends the lion's share of its energy on buildings, communication systems, internal politics and self-promotion to ensure its longevity. Good stewardship demands its preservation. It is the way of all institutions" (Bob Lupton, "Cycle of Life," September, 2010, <http://fcsministries.org/urban-perspectives/page/2/>).

I think an overview of human history would justify the observation that people have a propensity to move from simple beginnings to bureaucratic mazes at the end of the day. This is certainly what occurred as history moved on from the early church to the post-apostolic church.

Take the Lord's Supper, for example. What began as believers remembering the Lord in a simple meal morphed into a complicated liturgical "sacrament" which had to be officiated by a specially ordained religious person. Emil Brunner documented many such occasions where simplicity was overtaken by complexity in *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (1952).

James D.G. Dunn noted that "increasing institutionalism is the clearest mark of early Catholicism," and that "such features were absent from first generation Christianity, though in the second generation the picture was beginning to change" (*Unity & Diversity in the New Testament*, Westminster Press, 1977, p. 351). **Bob Lupton suggests that "in order to survive, a movement must develop structural strength – mission statement, doctrinal distinctives, leadership structure, decision-making processes."** **These are the crucial questions we must face: *Must the communal life of Christ in believers be institutionalized in order to survive? Was the movement from early church simplicity to later church bureaucracy inevitable and good, or a terrible distortion and tragedy?***

The truth is that in our practice we have tried to institutionalize the living Christ. That which is organic cannot thrive in an institutional environment. The DNA does not match. Of course, it must be said that there are people in many church-institutions who are expressions of the living Christ. But the living Christ is not a fit for institutional structures. It would be like hoping that an orchid would flourish in a barren desert, or that a cactus would do well in a rainforest.

If we believe that the simplicity of Christ is truth worth continuing, then we must resist our tendency toward institutionalism with every fiber of our being. If believers were satisfied with Jesus Christ alone, institutions wouldn't have a chance of taking over.

Frederick Buechner pointed out that churches could learn a lot from support groups like AA. They do not own buildings and have virtually no overhead. "They make you wonder," he went on to say, "if the best thing that could happen to many a church might not be to have its building burn down and to lose all its money. Then all that the people would have left would be God and each other" (cited in my *A Church Building Every ½ Mile: What Makes American Christianity Tick?* 2008, p.72).

Mary Pipher perceptively noted, "Too often [health] institutions are about the needs of the institution, not of the patients" (*Another Country*, 2000, p. 167). Jesus did not come to start

another religious institution with every candle and pulpit in its proper place. By giving his life in crucifixion, taking his life back in resurrection, returning to Father by his ascension, and pouring out his Spirit on the day of Pentecost – he assured that his people would express his life in them as the Body of Christ on earth – organically, not as an institution.

By **Jon Zens**