

# The Institutional Church

by Clark Blanchard

- *What is the institutional church?*
- *What does the Bible say about it?*
- *How should we relate to it?*

The purpose for this brochure is to briefly explore the “local” institutional church and our relationship to it. The New Testament church was simply a group of believers in a particular region or city. The word “church” in the Bible always means believers (plural), nothing more. The New Testament Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, literally meaning “a calling out of.” The true church has been called out from the unsaved human race to a special relationship with God through Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, the word “church” sometimes means all believers since Pentecost. At other times, it means all believers in a given city or area, depending on the context.

## **Institutionalism**

Very early in the history of the church, men began to add institutionalism to the simplicity of the church. Webster’s Dictionary defines “institution” as “an organization or establishment devoted to the promotion of a cause or program, especially one of public, educational, or charitable character.”

Examples of modern Christian institutions are parachurch organizations such as the Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, the Salvation Army, and many others. These are clearly extrabiblical manmade institutions created to aid the true church in evangelism, teaching, and charity. Most Christians understand that these organizations are “parachurch,” meaning that they “come alongside” (*para*) the true church to assist it in ministry. Most Christians understand that these organizations are not the church but merely help it.

Most Christians also believe that the “local” church they attend is the true church, or at least part of it. They attempt to read into the New Testament descriptions of the church that they experience in their “local” church. However, the widely different church denominations, organizations, doctrines, creeds, histories, liturgies, and practices should cause one to have second thoughts about such exclusiveness. The true church is a spiritual organism—a body, not an earthly organization or institution (Romans 12:4-5).

Unfortunately, these same Christians fail to see that their “local” church is not the New Testament church but is a parachurch, similar in principle to those organizations referred to above. It may contain some of the church, assuming there are believers (plural) there, but it is not the church—it is an extrabiblical manmade parachurch institution.

As evidence of this fact, we can see that today’s “local” church has all the characteristics of an institution, which were absent in the New Testament church. For example, most all “local” churches have:

- Some sort of organizational documents, such as bylaws, beyond what Scripture says
- Some sort of formal membership

- Some sort of legal standing with the civil government
- Some sort of formal organizational structure, which nearly always includes the clergy
- Most include group ownership of facilities, property, and other assets
- A regulated financial structure
- Salaried employees
- Some form of democracy or majority rule
- Most have other organizational affiliations

So it is essential for us to recognize that the “local” church is an extrabiblical parachurch institution. In and of itself, it is not the church. Here we should also note that there is absolutely no New Testament command to plant or start “local churches,” nor is there any prohibition against it. [See the Relational Concepts’ brochure, “The Training of the 12 to Start the Church.”] If one wishes to create an extrabiblical institution, he is free to do so, but it is important to understand what it is and what it is not, and what issues and complications come along with its creation. Christ did not equip the disciples to administer institutions but rather to carry out evangelism and discipleship, independent of any institution (Acts 1:8). The marching orders are evangelism and discipleship (Matthew 28:18-20).

## **Jesus and the Synagogue**

Once we understand the difference between the biblical New Testament church and the “local” institutional church, we must next explore how to relate to the institutional church. Of course, we have no explicit New Testament commands in this regard because the institutional church didn’t exist then.

Fortunately, Christ has left us an excellent example in His attitudes toward the Temple and the Jewish synagogues. Although the Temple in Jerusalem was biblical, the synagogues were manmade extrabiblical religious institutions. They were created by the Jews to supplement the Temple, but the Mosaic Law knew nothing of them. Christ and the Temple is a different matter. In many respects, the synagogue of Jesus’ time and the “local” institutional church of our time have many parallels.

The specific origin of the synagogue, like that of the institutional church, is nearly impossible to trace. Synagogues began to appear sometime shortly after the Babylonian Exile. Their purpose was to be a weekly gathering center for fellowship, teaching, prayer, and the reading of Scripture. They were not places of sacrifice or worship. After the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D., synagogues became the only place of Jewish religious assembly worldwide, even to this day.

During the time of Christ, the idea of a synagogue was synonymous with the building itself. This, too, is like the “local” church. In Capernaum, the construction of the synagogue was paid for by a Roman centurion (Luke 7:1-10). Typically, the synagogues were run by a few elders and administered by an “official” (Mark 5:22; Luke 13:14). Although the synagogues seemed to be the spiritual centers of towns, they were far from ideal. Hypocrisy, doctrinal error, and even demon possession were common in them during Christ’s day (Matthew 6:2, 5; Mark 1:21-25, 39; Luke 13:14-16).

Of particular interest to us here is how Jesus related to the synagogue. While growing up, He obviously attended the synagogue at Nazareth with His family (Luke 2:51-52). After He began His public ministry, He openly used them as a place for teaching, preaching, and healing (Matthew 4:23; 9:35). He did this in both Galilee and Judea (Matthew 4:23; Mark 1:39; Luke 4:44).

Early in His ministry, the synagogue members in His hometown of Nazareth tried to kill Him (Luke 4:28-30). Increasingly, the synagogues became places of hostility and persecution for both Him and His disciples (Luke

13:14; Matthew 10:16-18; Acts 6:9-12). Eventually, anyone openly confessing that He was the Christ (Messiah) was thrown out of the synagogue (John 9:22; 12:42-43).

Although Jesus performed miracles for a few individuals in the synagogues, He never tried to fix the synagogues' problems. He held them very loosely and centered His ministry elsewhere among the common people. Apparently, He had no "home" synagogue. The Gospels and Acts convey that He and the disciples had no ownership in them. The Gospels commonly refer to the synagogues as "their" (the Jews') synagogue (Matthew 4:23; 9:35; 10:17; 12:9; 13:5; Mark 1:23, 39; Luke 4:15). In Acts, they are similarly referred to as the "synagogue of the Jews" (Acts 13:5; 14:1; 17:1).

**Jesus participated in synagogues when it was profitable but then moved on because their value was limited. At times, they were even hostile, and He had no ownership in them.**

## **Relating to the Institutional Church**

It seems that the strong parallels between the synagogue and the "local" institutional church are compelling. We can benefit greatly in relating to the institutional church by following the Lord's example of how He related to the synagogues. Here are a few thoughts:

- Understand that the institutional church is not the church, although it likely contains some of the church (and some unsaved, too).
- You may be able to do some ministry there and have a positive experience.
- It is difficult to grow beyond the spiritual level of the specific institution as a whole.
- It is "their" institution—the relatively small group of individuals who run it.
- Because it is an institution, it will have characteristics and do things that are not in the Bible. It is extra-biblical and may be non-biblical.
- Because it is "their" institution, they may take it in a direction with which you do not agree.
- The more closely you hold to Scripture, the greater the possibility of conflict.
- Hold the institutional church loosely. Don't try to fix what you perceive as its problems.
- Center your spiritual life in your home and your ministry with people in the community.
- The spiritual instruction of your family is your responsibility, not that of the "local" church.
- Help your family understand these principles.

## **Questions and Answers**

**Q:** *What is the institutional church?*

**A:** It is the extrabiblical manmade organization that attempts to help the true church of Christ. It is a true institution in every sense of the word. In fact, it is parachurch and is most commonly referred to as the "local" church.

**Q:** *What does the Bible say about it?*

**A:** Nothing directly because it didn't exist in New Testament times. However, it has many similarities with the Jewish synagogue of Jesus' time.

**Q:** *How should we relate to it?*

**A:** We would be wise to follow Jesus' example. He recognized that the Temple was God-ordained, and therefore, He held it in highest regard (Mark 11:16-17). On the contrary, He viewed the synagogues as manmade, and He held no allegiance to them. Likewise, today we should hold the God-ordained true church, the body of Christ, in high regard and hold manmade institutions loosely.