



The Reflector

Published and edited monthly in the interest of calling people back to the Bible
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March 2010

God, Man, and Institutions

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God made man a dual being with body and spirit and gave him dual responsibilities. In addition to worshiping the Eternal God, his Creator, he was to “dress and keep” the garden, his earthly home and have dominion over the rest of God’s earthly creatures (Gen. 1:26-30; 2:15). While the earth is the Lord’s and all things therein, there are certain things that are “holy unto the LORD.” (Cf. Lev. 27:28, 30, 32). God has always expected his people to clearly distinguish between the “holy and profane¹.” (Cf. Ezek. 22:26; 44:23), or, as we sometimes say, the “religious” and “secular²” and place them in their proper order in their lives (cf. Matt. 6:33). Hence, man has both spiritual (religious) and earthly (secular) needs and duties.

While God expects man to conduct secular matters in harmony with his will, he is more specific and detailed in his instructions and requirements in religious matters. Man is given more latitude in his choices in secular matters than he is in religious matters. For example, we have more liberty as to what we put on our

table, than we do the Lord’s table. On the Lord’s table we can only put that which is expressly authorized by God’s word – unleavened bread and the fruit of the vine. On our table, we can put anything that we choose as long as it does not violate God’s moral law or other biblical principle.

Likewise, we have more latitude in choosing how we will fulfill our various secular responsibilities. We may fulfill them individually by choosing any morally right means or we may fulfill them in a secular company or institution. These secular institutions may organize and function in anyway that is morally right. This is not the case in religious matters. In religious matters the local church is the only spiritual institution/organization the Lord accepts and it must be organized and function by the express authority of God’s law – the New Testament.

The lack of a clear distinction between the “holy and profane” or the religious and secular has caused and continues to cause problems among the people of God. It has caused brethren to accept things in religion that they would not otherwise accept because they apply the same rules to religious matters that they use for secular matters. In secular matters a thing is pretty well recognized right unless it is specifically forbidden by some biblical statement or principle. This is not the case in religious or spiritual things. In these matters a thing must be expressly authorized by command, example or necessary inference. Unless we recognize this basic concept, we will find ourselves constantly secularizing

¹From the Hebrew word, חֹל (chol), meaning common or unholy (Strong)

²Secular: Of or pertaining to this present world, or to things not spiritual or holy; relating to temporal as distinguished from eternal interests; not immediately or primarily respecting the soul, but the body; worldly. [1913 Webster]

Etymology: Middle English, from Anglo-French *seculer*, from Late Latin *saecularis*, from *saeculum* the present world, from Latin, generation, age, century, world; akin to Welsh *hoedl* lifetime (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary)

the spiritual and spiritualizing the secular until there will be no recognizable difference.

We already see this clearly manifested in mainstream Protestant churches and it is fast becoming so among many members of churches of Christ. One example, brethren have no problem with individually supporting the Salvation Army because of the charitable work it does. They treat it as simply a secular charitable institution rather than the religious organization that it is. The fact that the Salvation Army is big on charity work does not erase the fact that it is still fundamentally a (false) *religious* institution. This is just one example of how we sometimes carelessly blur, and sometimes even erase, the line between secular and religious activities and institutions in our thinking.

This problem becomes especially acute when we look at high profile institutions operated by Christians and look mostly to Christians for support, either as contributors or as clients/customers. Brethren, over the years, have formed and operated two kinds of high profile organizations, other than the local church, that have affected “the brotherhood.”

“Missionary societies” were a big thing in the 1800’s. These were organizations established and operated for religious purposes. These were funded either by individuals or local churches and sometimes by both. As religious societies they clearly usurped and supplanted the role of God’s missionary society, the local church. The phrase, “the church is all sufficient to do all that God gave the church to do,” was a popular (and scriptural) saying among those who opposed these usurpers. It is still a sound principle for us today.

The other type are secular businesses started and/or run by the New Testament Christians. Some are non-profit and others for-profit. They include charitable, philanthropic, educational, publishing, and sales organizations. These institutions for the most part have served “the brotherhood” well, offering products and services especially geared to the needs of Christians. Individuals, and in many cases local churches can buy and use their services and products. The problem has

been the proper distinctions have not always been made between these secular enterprises and the only spiritual/religious organization that God has provided for his people – the local church. Sometimes these secular enterprises have been found doing work that properly belongs to God’s only religious institution. And at other times the church has been found doing the work that ought to be left to secular institutions. This confusion is generally caused by a lack of understanding of the basic nature of all these institutions. This is especially true when these secular institutions provide goods and services that have a religious connection, like publishing and selling Bibles and/or religious literature.

When one examines the New Testament he sees that the local church is the only religious/spiritual institution through which the early Christians did religious/spiritual work. Each Christian did this kind of work personally and sometimes *concurrently* with other Christians but when they acted *jointly* with other Christians in religious matters it was in the local church. There is no evidence that any of these local churches operated in the realm of any of the businesses of which its members may have been a part. Nor is there evidence that any of the businesses of the members tried to operate the realm of the local church.

If all businesses and institutions run by brethren would recognize their legitimate role and local churches recognized their legitimate role there should be no problem.

Now let us look at some of the institutions run by brethren and see if they have a legitimate role to play and if so, what is it?

We have already mentioned the missionary societies. They have no scriptural right to exist – period – whether supported by churches, individuals or both. They are religious organizations rivaling the only religious organization authorized by God – the local church.

But, what about schools/colleges run by Christians? What if they offer Bible and Bible related courses, along with their other courses, to their students? What if they have chapel programs or devotionals for their

students?

What about youth camps run by Christians? What if they have Bible classes for the campers? What if they have devotionals in the evening?

Can these be justified and if so upon what grounds? Does the fact that these enterprises are run by groups of Christians and teach Bible subjects as part of their curriculum necessary make them religious institutions doing the work assigned to local churches?

These two kinds of institutions can be rightly justified on the basis of their being business enterprises (either nonprofit or for-profit) providing a service to those who need and desire it. Parents are responsible for educating their children in both secular and spiritual matters. They also have the responsibility to provide wholesome recreation and skill training to help them become productive and godly adults. They can do this themselves at home. Or they might choose to hire someone to come into the home and assist them in teaching academic subjects and as well as talking to their children about moral and spiritual matters; or they can buy the services and/or products of an institution that provides such to parents – just like they can buy the services of a barbershop to cut their children’s hair. The schools sell instruction, both secular and biblical, to parents and students. The camps sell a service to parents to help them provide wholesome play, various helpful skills and spiritual training for their children.

So, schools and camps offer services to parents for a fee to aid the parents in fulfilling their responsibility to bring their children up the nurture and admonition of the Lord (cf. Eph. 6:4). Parents with a sick child might hire a nurse to help them at home or they might opt to place him in the care of a facility in the business of providing medical care. By the same token, the parents might hire a teacher to help them in meeting their God-given responsibility of teaching and training (which includes spiritual training) their children at home or they might place them in the care of a service facility in the business of providing such education and training. So parents may buy the services of schools and camps

operated by Christians to assist them in doing what is their responsibility. In some cases, one might buy the services for his own education rather than on behalf of his children. These schools and camps are not doing the work assigned to the local church. While the local church can and should teach people of any age, it is not assigned the responsibility of bringing up children – that is assigned to parents (Eph. 6:4) and parents can employ others to assist them with this task.

What about a business enterprise (incorporated or not) that publishes and/or sells religious material? Does the fact that a product is religious in nature make its publisher and seller a religious/spiritual institution? No, it is a secular business that happens to deal in a religious product. It sells a product to anyone or any group that wants to buy it. Then the buyer uses it as he or it sees fit. The seller and/or publisher is not teaching anything, nor is he responsible for the use that the buyer may make of it. I know a faithful brother who was in the printing business for years. On occasion, a local denominational group would order flyers to advertise their revival meetings. The brother sold them the flyers, but he did not nor would he have advertised their revival by either handing out the flyers or posting them on the company bulletin board or the window of his business.

As long as such organizations operate as secular enterprises no one can legitimately accuse them of infringing upon the Lord’s institution – the local church.

But if any of these secular institutions – a school, a camp, other business – begins to operate in the religious realm paralleling the local church they infringe upon God’s only spiritual/religious organization/institution. In the New Testament, the local church was the only God-ordained organized functioning spiritual unit. It has God-ordained oversight and organization. It is all-sufficient to accomplish its work and mission. It plans and executes all *joint* religious activities of Christians such as public worship, evangelism, and help for certain needy saints, all for glorifying God and the mutual edification of the saints. The expenses involved are paid

for from the common fund (treasury) of the congregation. How could anyone think that the owners/managers of secular service/business institutions can plan and oversee the work given to local churches as well or better than the overseers of God's institution, the local church itself – even if they are operated by brethren “who seem to be somewhat” among us?

We believe some further words of caution about the high profile secular institutions operated by Christians are in order – even when these institutions may be staying in their places and not necessarily usurping the role of the local church. There is the temptation for those who operate and those who have received benefits from the services and products of these institutions to overstate their importance to “the brotherhood.” It seems hard for some of them to see how the church could survive and prosper without them. As one who has at one time or the other utilized the services of each of the types of secular institutions described in this article, both for himself and his family, I have a news flash – the church would both survive and prosper if every school, camp, or paper operated by brethren had neither started or were to go out of business today. However useful they may be, the church does not depend on them for its continued existence, progress or function.

It is easy for those who are involved in the operation of these institutions, in order to drum up business, to appeal to prospective clients in way as to leave the impression that somehow those who do not avail themselves of what is being offered by their institution are somehow robbing themselves and/or their children of the opportunity to be the kind of Christian they ought to be. It is also easy for those who have benefitted from the services offered by these institutions to think of themselves somehow as the “privileged/elite” and view those who do not utilize them as kind of second class citizens in God's kingdom. Now, I am not speaking merely hypothetically, I have personally observed such attitudes in far too many and one would be too many. We can be thankful that not all are that way.

Also, it is easy for local churches to allow themselves to be overly influenced by these institutions – especially churches located in close proximity to them or have preachers and other members who are “wrapped up” in them. The history of schools and papers operated by brethren as a whole has not been good along these lines. The longer the institutions exist, the bigger they get, and the more financially endowed they become the more influence they seem to have over churches. One brother made a kind of “tongue in cheek,” remark that it might be good if all the “brotherhood papers and schools” could fold every five years or so and start over. He may have been on to something, given what I have observed in my lifetime. It is too easy for such institutions to get “too big for their britches” and either step across the line and usurp the role of the church or to wield such a powerful influence upon brethren that they for all intents and purposes overshadow the work of local church.

Brethren, let us all be careful that we do not lose sight of the distinction between the “holy and profane.” Let us be careful to keep our secular institutions from infringing upon the role of God's spiritual institution, the church. Let us be careful not to be unduly influenced by high profile secular organizations run by our brethren. And, let us not throw the baby out with the bath water by denying the right of any schools, camps, and other businesses operated by and for brethren the right to exist as long as they stay in their place as secular enterprises. edbragwell@gmail.com

A Voice From The Past

“And we come to love the institutions more than the church. Schools, for instance -- and this is the test: Criticize the church, and it brings no rise from these devotees of certain institutions; but criticize their school and they will have a fit, and your name thereafter, henceforth and forever is a hiss. But brother, the college is not the church nor can the church own and operate it. It is private and secular and belongs to the man or group of men to whom it belongs. It is an adjunct of the home, not of the church; auxiliary to the family, not to the congregation; and parents and interested individuals, not churches, should sponsor and support them.”
– Foy E. Wallace, Jr.

From “Bible Banner” July 1939

Copied here from "Plain Talk" edited by Robert Turner