



The Good News

June 27th, 2021

Volume 21, Issue 25

“How does your church do benevolence?”

By Michael McCleary

What those of us with “conservative” mindsets might call “acts of institutionalism”, those with “liberal” mindsets often call “works of benevolence”. There is a vast difference between the two labels attributed to the same activities. Is it simply a difference of opinion? Is it a topic for which there is no clear direction given in the Bible? Is it a matter on which fellowship should be weighed? We now focus our minds to answer these questions:

Is this matter simply a difference of opinion?

This is the question upon which many of the problems between the two stances rest. Those who are called “Institutionalists” often label those who call them such, “legalists” or “anti’s”. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, this issue was debated and discussed until there was a split in the churches of Christ. One party, the majority, went their way in sponsoring church organizations, orphan and widow homes, and other practices. The other, smaller, group continued their way in the lack of such organizations. Is this something that is a matter of opinion? If so, why did either party allow the church to be split over it? If the concept was that it was indifferent to God, and was opinion rather than law, why force the issue? The nature of the beast, as it were, is this: both sides believed they were doing what the Lord wanted them to do in the work of the Church; one side believed there were limits to the work of the church; the other side did not believe in such limits, labeling these works as “expedients” in order to achieve the same goal as what the other party claimed to be after – the saving of souls. One thing was clear then, as it is now – this issue is not simply a difference of opinion in anyone’s mind – it is a matter of doctrine.

Is this a topic for which there is no clear direction given in the Bible? For all things, controversial or otherwise, we must come back to the Bible to see what the New Testament church did – only in conducting ourselves as the 1st-century church did, and was directed to do, can we hope to be found acceptable before God. We can see how the money collected from the saints in other cities could be used for the needy saints in Jerusalem (I Cor. 16:1-3; II Cor. 8, 9; Rom. 12:13) and how local contribu-

tions can be used for widows who meet certain qualifications (I Tim. 5:3-16). Yet, nowhere do we see money being sent from one church to another church to sponsor a mission. Nor do we see monies being used to establish widow’s homes, and absolutely no mention of church support of orphans. In II Cor. 11:8 and Phil. 4:16 we find local churches sending support to individual ministers. We find in Acts 2:44ff that the benevolence of the church was limited to Christians. If we are going to conduct ourselves as the New Testament church did, we must limit ourselves to these particular examples. If there had been other notable works, such as sponsoring churches, widows and orphan homes, and the giving of church funds to the poor non-Christians, those things would have been recorded to show us the full extent of the authority of the church to do these “good works”. An argument that many make is that whatever the individual Christians can do (helping the poor, widows, orphans, etc.) the church can do. Many refer to James 1:27 to say that the church is not exempt from practicing “pure and undefiled religion”. Yet, we see from I Tim. 5:16 that there are, indeed, works that not only are not acceptable for a church to do but that individuals are commanded to do separate from the church, such as the caring for widows that are not widows indeed so that the church is not burdened. We can indeed come to a knowledge of what the works of the church are, having been given direction in the Bible.

Is this a matter on which fellowship should be weighed? The underlying realization that must accompany this question is the understanding that anything practiced by a church that has not been commanded, given an example of, or necessarily inferred from the Bible is sin. We understand that institutions are things for which there is no example, command, or necessary inference, and is therefore of man’s design and addition. Considering this, we know that this practice is not from God. Therefore, anyone not bringing the Gospel according to the Bible is accursed (Gal. 1:8, 9) and they should not be received or greeted (II John 10). Is this a matter upon which to base fellowship? Absolutely, “For he who greets him shares in his evil deeds” (II John 11). The salvation of our souls depends on it.