

# Worshipping Man is Wrong

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By **Jamie Buckingham**

inary, the world's largest seminary with more than 1,600 full-time students, tells of a recent interview with Billy Graham. Graham was asked who would be the leaders of the evangelical world in the future. He answered: "The next leaders of the evangelical world will not be individuals, but institutions."

If that's true—it's frightening. Institutions breed death because they are impersonal. Man worship—whether it's worshipping Jim Bakker, Kenneth Copeland or even your local pastor—is wrong. But worship of an institution is even worse. Men usually don't declare themselves "great" or "incomparable"—but institutions do. And the moment they do they have signed their own spiritual death warrant.

Church historians mark the downfall of institutions to when they begin composing hymns to themselves—as the Salvation Army did some years ago. We find that same syndrome in many large churches whose press releases describe them as "the best," "the biggest" or "the friendliest." A signboard along the highway proclaims: "The great Calvary Cathedral will meet all your spiritual needs."

Sad. We've come a long way from singing: "God will take care of you."

As a college student I always felt uncomfortable singing the alma mater. I could never choke out those final lines:

"Hail to thee, O alma mater,  
"Mercer, hail, all hail."

Now I know why. The Spirit living in me would not allow me to venerate any institution any more than I can pay homage to a man. Both Nero and Caligula understood this as the line of spiritual demarcation with those early Christians. Rather than sing the Roman alma mater they lined up by the thousands to say, "*Christus este kurios*," and went bravely to the crosses and lions.

Is it wrong, as the Jehovah's Witnesses say, to salute the flag? No. It is right to "pledge allegiance"—just as it is right to take vows to marriage, to military service, to your job or to a local church. But to pay homage—to say "All hail!" to man or institution, borders on—indeed may be—idolatry.

The problem with institutions is—left unchecked—they early evolve into personification, taking on themselves the characteristics of men yet remaining impersonal.

The common man is looking for security. If he can find it in a doctrine, he cherishes that doctrine. If he finds it in a man, he idolizes the man. If he finds it in an institution, he quickly becomes a piece of machinery fitted into a system which by its nature is forced to clip and trim the sprouting gifts of the Spirit until all the plants look the same.

Take away a man's security and man panics. But if his security is in Jesus, he is not affected by growing doctrine, falling men or iron-clad institutions.

Institutions demand constant feeding—supplying oil to the gears of the machinery. Take "storehouse tithing," which is a prime Old

Testament principle. This doctrine insinuates that only the clergy are smart

enough and spiritual enough to distribute kingdom funds. Why then do I give my tithe through my local church? Not out of biblical command, for I believe the New Testament teaches each man should seek the Lord's best as to where it should be placed. Rather, I tithe through my local church because I believe I should give my tithe where I am spiritually fed.

Offerings over and above my tithe are given to various ministries as the Lord directs.

If, for some unthinkable reason, I were part of a church which was not feeding me spiritually, if I belonged to a church which wasted money on unneeded luxuries, if my church sent part of my money to humanistic and communistic councils—then I would not give my money to that church. The same is true of sending offerings to parachurch ministries—evangelistic, missionary or television—which use that money unwisely on worldly things. That would be poor stewardship.

Institutional thinking, however, does not allow that kind of freedom. It demands the tithe for it does not want its constituency to think independently—or even think at all. The institution realizes that where your treasure is, there is your heart as well—so it demands your money.

People need to be taught to give to God—not to institutions.

Graham may be right when he says the shift is toward institutions. That's part of the cycle which begins with charismatic personalities and evolves into the institutions they create. Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Hagin, now Bill Bright—all are building institutions of higher learning. I'm seeing it in my own church which has now grown large and is becoming structured. The next step is institutionalization.

Is that wrong? No, it is inevitable. It becomes wrong only if the leadership becomes institutionalized in its thinking and refuses to allow the people to hear for themselves.

But it's sad. I fear that sometime over the next 30 years a group of people will do as we did half a generation ago—pull out (or be kicked out) and start a "New Testament church." Not that our church has drifted from the New Testament forms. In fact, we are closer in structure now than we were when we started. But what of the Spirit?

Jesus' "church" was a band of people in relationship—to Him and to each other. They did not honor the group. They did not speak of "the great Church of the Disciples." But under Constantine the church institutionalized—and the battle has been going on ever since.

So what do we do?

We do the best we can. And fight to remain free.

I don't want to be numbered among those who were left behind when the cloud moved because I refused to submit to an earthly Moses who was anointed by God. But if I align myself too closely, I may die with him on Nebo. I must remember: Canaan, not Moses, is my final goal.

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