

**The Necessity of the Institutional Church  
An Article for the Chalcedon Website  
From a Sermon for Chalcedon Chapel**

Ronald Kirk  
Created June 27, 2002  
Modified February 8, 2004

***The Necessity of the Institutional Church***

Some things are so axiomatic that we tend to take them for granted. For example, the Scriptures clearly assume a church institution as the norm. However, it is dangerous to neglect the foundational things of Christ, as the spiritual forces of the Adversary will always work toward their undermining. In an age where Christians increasingly call church traditions into question and many seek a dynamic Biblical orthodoxy to govern and correct the ordinary and extraordinary activities of life, the institutional church comes under greater and greater scrutiny. In the last generation, the Jesus Movement and related trends sought a return to the primitive Gospel. Some Reformed Christians have moved toward a high-church practice. The informal home church grows in popularity. In answer, we may discern appropriate forms upon clearly identified Biblically governing principles. We here wish to take an initial step toward a normative view of the institutional church through exploring its *necessity*. The institutional church holds a critical office as it federally governs congregational life through its structure and discipline. The institutional church exists to promote a Gospel life among the saints.

***The Two Commandments of Christ***

The Two Commandments of Christ lay a foundation. The church as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation consists in a complete, organic Gospel life. Godly love manifests itself in numerous expressions. Glorifying God is the entire purpose of the church. Glorifying God means placing appropriate focus on Him, "For in Him we live, and move, and have our being." The child looks to his father. The thirsty looks to the spring. To put such focus on God in a manner pleasing to Him is love.

Relationship with God is ethical, a matter of right and wrong as God has determined them. Therefore, to love God, one must obey Him. To obey Him, one must know what He requires. To know what He requires one must know and understand His communicated Word. Skill with the Word's *application* is necessary. The Christian learns to live the purity of the whole Revealed Counsel of God. In this sense, education for the Christian is a devotional way of life.

God created man in His image for eternal fellowship. Against the sinful nature, a complete devotional attitude and practice of worship in all things comes very hard. Therefore, we undertake the discipline of piety toward God. The Bible provides for worship in the form of music and prayer. Because it is the body of Christ, God requires *assembled* worship. In all things, the Christian lives self-consciously by faith, beyond human reason or preference, for no other way pleases God. God requires a life reckoned as dead, devoted to Him without reservation.

Yet Christianity is more than personal devotion. God commands His people to take dominion over the earth, to replenish it through the fruit of faithful labor. We undertake to learn particular skills to enable accomplishment such that we take dominion in our vocations. Similarly, we put time aside to tithe our lives in various avocations that may serve as ministries to the Lord. Sound economic investment of God's resources additionally forms a practical love of one's neighbors, as everyone eventually benefits from the fruit of personal productivity. Trade distributes the products of economic specialization. This is love. Such is the nature of God's gifts to men, individually as He wills, contributing to the building of the whole community. Economic productivity expresses love toward God and man.

# **The Necessity of the Institutional Church**

## **An Article for the Chalcedon Website**

### **From a Sermon for Chalcedon Chapel**

Ronald Kirk  
Created June 27, 2002  
Modified February 8, 2004

Loving one's neighbor reveals God's effective work in the Christian. As the first sphere of Gospel living, the home is critical. Because all relationships with God are covenantal and because the home is the first sphere of Gospel living, responsibility for our children's preparation for eternity rests with us by faith. Education is central. If we can earnestly love those whom we know with the greatest intimacy, we ought to be able to love anyone. Familiarity tends to breed, if not contempt, complaisance with and presumption upon those whom we best love. Selfishness is easy in the home where others' flaws seem to grant personal license. Overcoming the difficulty of restraining personal selfishness at home reinforces the ability for love in greater spheres. Conversely, if we cannot love our closest neighbors, our family, love to others is a pretense and manifest hypocrisy.

What seems supernatural self-restraint on the part of the Founders produced the United States. Though presumably obvious, contemporary Christians have lost much of the Biblical understanding and skill in human relationships which once characterized this nation. This fact, in part, explains the breakdown of America's political and economic institutions. These institutions require godliness in practice and we cannot expect more of the world than we do of ourselves. Every Christian should undertake, along with our endeavors to take Christian dominion, to learn how better to live with our neighbors on God's terms.

These various elements minimally describe the activities of a church community attached to God and men. What then is the institutional church's importance?

### ***What the institutional church is not***

First consider what the institutional church is not. The church is not a substitute for home and family. It does not exist to usurp the home. It does not exist generally to control people through human regulations. It does not represent a special priesthood or intermediary between God and the saints. Christ hates the deeds of the Nicolaitans. The institutional church does not exist to peddle services (read *ministries*), as socialistic civil government does. Christians do not exist to serve the institution of the church, but rather the church to serve believers.

### ***The institutional church is of central importance***

The church functions in ways no informal association or other institution can. We draw distinction here between the common assembly of the saints and the formal church with its various specific authorities and functions. Here, the Biblical principle of Liberty under Law serves our understanding for the need of both the community and the institution. Just as civil government exists and wields authority in order to serve its citizens, the church likewise wields authority, rightfully requiring something of the community of the saints. The Sole purpose of the institutional church is to assist the saints to live out the Two Commandments in all their diverse expressions. It must possess certain power to fulfill its calling.

The institutional church thus manifests a distinctly governmental function. For the faith, it is not the importance of the individual *or* the community, but rather *both*. Though the individual is fundamentally important, so also is the covenant union of the faith. God intends His glory to rest upon the whole of mankind unto the uttermost parts of the world. Therefore, the church provides a federal identity to bind the individual and home to the larger community of saints. Likewise, the institutional church provides a visible, federal representation of the saints to the rest of the world.

# **The Necessity of the Institutional Church**

## **An Article for the Chalcedon Website**

### **From a Sermon for Chalcedon Chapel**

Ronald Kirk  
Created June 27, 2002  
Modified February 8, 2004

Moreover, as we have noted, the job of the Christian is large. Individuals are inherently feeble. God provides greater institutions to provide order where the local ones may be weak or failing. Though individual virtue is a fundamental goal of Christianity, our greatest strength lies in Christian union. The church provides critical support to the individual and the family in their Christian duty. The church supports the home with a regularity which the family often finds difficult in its informal, organic life. (Accordingly, the church is essentially a local institution). Men are frail in the disposition to sin. We need all the help available to overcome our carnal natures. For example, God gave us first the Sabbath and then the Lord's Day to assist doing two things we find it difficult to do: rest and corporate worship. Because of its importance and natural comfort, the home can pose a formidable inertia against even the mere gathering with fellow believers. The formal church thus provides that structure and discipline necessary to help us to practice the things of God within the home and without. Faith-based discipline militates toward perfect love.

### ***Critical Functions of the Institutional Church***

The formal church exists to maintain and propagate the purity of the Gospel to the congregation. The elders are men with special callings and gifts, and preparation to make them suitable economic specialists in divinity. The church has long rightly held the position that it is the caretaker of the oracles of God. The elders rule. The elders are capable of teaching. Not sacerdotally withholding the Word or dispensing it "ex cathedra," the teacher practices constant care to be found true in its treatment and distribution. This is not to say that the congregation cannot learn independently. Indeed, part of the pastor's job is to educate in the use of Scripture, so that the church is not so dependent on experts. The pastor's job is to equip the saints for every good work, the work of Christian ministry.

The Scriptures are filled with references to central musical worship. The *halal* is a term of passion and excitement over the things God has done and who He is. David's orchestration of the *halal* established the conceptual standard of worship, if not a precise mode. The church as a formal place for the people of God to gather in worship is manifestly indispensable to the service of Christ.

Various other governmental functions and ministries likewise lay with the institutional church. Just as the Levites collected the tithe, providing education, assisting those in need, and supporting the centralized worship of the priesthood, the local church likewise represents an appropriate New Testament storehouse. The church assumes authority for guidance of appropriate Christian activity. This is *moral leadership*. The eldership helps establish a local vision and guides the congregation toward appropriate outlets. It encourages fellowship, evangelism, and various ministries appropriate to the local community and gifts in the congregation. The pastor articulates a model of living for the congregation appropriate to the Word of God and His glory. The church leadership oversees the order of worship, sets meeting times, and other functions. Such a function clearly belongs with the leaders of the formal church. Jay Adams says that the Biblically well-studied pastor and well-taught congregation are competent to counsel. Lastly, where necessary for the purity of the Gospel and peace, God granted juridical church discipline.

Altogether, the institutional church rightly envisions, prepares and encourages the congregation toward fulfilling its calling. Voluntary mutual ministry builds church associations. External ministry serves the cause of the Great Commission. The institutional church with its expertise, and its disciplinary and

**The Necessity of the Institutional Church  
An Article for the Chalcedon Website  
From a Sermon for Chalcedon Chapel**

Ronald Kirk  
Created June 27, 2002  
Modified February 8, 2004

governmental function is indispensable. Therefore, let us not forsake the gathering together and the building of the local church.