Institutional maintenance and the care of souls

by Jack Shaver

There exists a notion, sometimes seeming to be widely held, that a concern about institutions is the opposite of a concern about persons.

It surfaces in congregations, when people complain that they seem to be spending so much time shoring up the institution that they are neglecting the people.

It surfaces in feelings that policies and procedures may be important, but spiritual matters are more important.

It is true that in one of the ways in which the Christian story is told, Jesus broke with the forms and legalism of the scribes and the pharisees, and with his free spirit liberated all persons to love and to do what they liked.

It is also true that our institutions can do harm, and our systems can perpetuate injustices. But we make a costly error and we misunderstand the biblical doctrine of sin if we see the remedy for all that in getting rid of our institutions. It would be a similar error to say, “People are evil, therefore get rid of people!”

We need a word like “fall” to convey the depth and nature of the biblical understanding of the human predicament. We are a fallen race, a fallen people. We have to do with a fallen world. Our institutions and systems are fallen. Our social roles are fallen. But biblical insight does not fix on institutions as the equivalent of the fall.

We cannot get rid of institutions. To be human at all, we must live together. Living together creates and depends on institutions. In living together, we inevitably form systems.

There are faults in all systems, but they will not cease to do harm if they are ignored or rejected.

I remember the stir caused among student radicals of the 60s when a sympathetic Political Science professor challenged them with “It is our institutions that save us”.

Of all the sub-cultures I have ever met, that one was most critical of systems and institutions. Those student radicals were deeply concerned about the kinds of oppression under which the peoples of the world suffered. Their discernment of the structures which perpetuated this oppression was penetrating. But they heard what the professor was driving at.

The point was simply that the only way anyone in the world could live an oppression-free life was if others granted it. And the only way that others could grant that oppression-free life was through institutions which attempted to structure our collective behavior. Individual human rights, however inalienable we may claim them to be, are not naturally provided on this earth. When each individual defends his or her own rights, when each person interprets justice individually, then we have war, not freedom. Justice becomes the will of the powerful.

Nothing can be learned and no justice can be provided without organization. And for organizations to be just, procedures for arriving at just decisions need to be provided, and to be cared for.

Indeed, if the problem is that institutions can work injustices, then the answer must be that they need care, not abandonment.

At the time, I thought, “That’s a word that the Church needs to hear.” We haven’t changed much since the 60s in this regard. We are still inclined to transform the freedom of the Christian gospel into anti-institutionalism.

When Jesus said, “The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath,” he was calling for proper care of the Sabbath, not its abandonment.

The institution of the church and its structures needs our care if it is to serve the gospel and not itself, if it is to be a blessing and not a monster. The trouble with the boards and courts and procedures of the church is not that they exist, but that without our care, they will not be about their true business.

I like the phrase which describes the church’s work as “The Cure of Souls”. That can be accomplished only if the church’s ministry also includes the cure of structures and systems. The ministry of persons includes a ministry to the structures which make their individual personhood possible.

Ministry to persons and ministry to structures are not identical. For a corporate body to come to a decision without violating its members requires a different kind of attention than hearing the cry of an individual brother or sister. To structure accountability requires a particular wisdom. To care for systems so that they serve humanity without making the system itself an idol requires an abundance of grace.

Institutional structures, including the kind in the church, are not evils in themselves. They do their harm when they are left to flounder unattended and when they are served as idols.

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