

Organised Religion

We will be leaving on Thursday for Croatia, and I thought that it would be a good idea to send some thoughts out for our discussion here at our place on May 27th. I am including two articles that I found very interesting, but also very thought provoking.

I have for a very long time battled with question of “organized” religion; is it good or bad? Would house groups or small neighborhood churches serve the believers better, or in a truer sense?

Is it possible to have large religious organizations and avoid corruption, conflict, the feeling that it is we against them, and we are “better?”

Why is it that the very structure of organized religion, is also the cause of conflict and wars, and has always been?

If it could be done better, why is not?

When you study the corrupt and bloody history of religion, it is very difficult to say proudly “this is what I belong to and believe in”; yet, are we any better today?

Responses

Leif’s topics essentially raise the question “Is organised religion good or bad” in a number of different forms.

By organised religion, I assume Leif means the established organised churches such as the Catholic Church, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists etc.

We are commanded by scripture to be a part of the body of Christ and this is widely commended (e.g. 1 Corinthians 12:27). The body of Christ is the church. Of course that need not necessarily mean an organised church or the established church, although it is clear that even in Apostolic times the Apostles, particularly Paul, acted to establish Apostolic authority and root out false teaching (2 Corinthians 11:13). A hierarchy was also established amongst the early believers by the appointment of deacons etc. This division of labour is probably necessary for the smooth running of the church. The real problem is that if there is no organised church then how can Christian teaching be kept in line with scriptural principles?

Of course, excessive zeal over these principles are precisely what has split the church in the past. Some of these splits were, in my view, justified. I believe that the split of the Protestant churches at the time of the Reformation was justified by the corruption in and unscriptural practices of the Catholic church at the time. I don’t believe that the split of the Eastern Orthodox churches after the Council of Chalcedon was justified. The issues at stake there were not sufficiently important.

I would contend that organised religion is scripturally sanctioned and (in principal) good, but is let down by our fallen nature. Certainly, I think that house churches can serve believers well and, at their best, much better than the established churches. The problem is that there is no guarantee of continuity of ministry and teaching even amongst the good ones. Over time

house churches tend to organise in hierarchical groupings for this sort of reason as is happening in China.

Given human nature it is probably impossible to avoid some level of corruption within the organised church and conflict between the different denominations. What we – all Christians – must do is to work to root out corruption and push for reconciliation between the various denominations. After all Jesus commanded us to be one even as he and the Father are one (John 17:11). The work of reconciliation between Catholics and Anglicans did make quite a lot of progress under Pope John Paul, but I doubt that the current Pope has the will to make the compromises which will inevitably be necessary to progress this.

Of course, Christianity should never lead us to conflict, especially violent conflict. However, our religion by its nature arouses very strong feelings within us. This can then lead us to conflict. This is absolutely wrong, but to eliminate all organised religion on this ground would be to throw the baby (and indeed the whole family) out with the bathwater.

The use of organised religion to enrich pastors is also, of course, absolutely contradictory to the scriptural ideal of servant leadership espoused by Jesus. The whole prosperity gospel movement is also dishonouring to Christianity. Nowhere do the scriptures give a promise of certain material prosperity to Christians. Christians are only promised spiritual prosperity. Thus, those who preach a prosperity gospel, are promising what they cannot deliver - and what they ought to know they cannot deliver if they are fit to be teachers.

Having said all that I believe it is scriptural and honouring to God for us to tithe our income for the benefit of the church and for Christian charitable purposes.

I do not accept the position of the Catholic church regarding contraception. As far as I am aware, the only scriptural support is the “sin of Onan” (Genesis 38:8-10). I do not consider that this is sufficiently authoritative or applicable to justify the absolutely rigid position of the Catholic Church on this issue. Given the social evils of excessively large families which cannot be supported, world overpopulation and the spread of Aids, I think the use of contraception is to be recommended rather than forbidden.

There are many times when I despair of the way our Anglican church is sanctioning practises I believe to be wrong – such as ordaining homosexual bishops. However, I believe I am commanded to be part of the body of Christ (that is the church) and the Anglican church is where God has placed me. Thus, I soldier on trying to change where I can, disagreeing where I must, but remaining overall a part, frequently crying out “How long O Lord, How long!