

A Review of the “Jesus-group” Argument

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No religious doctrine or practice is right unless it is authorized by God (Col. 3:17). In an effort to find positive divine authority for modern-day non-church evangelistic collectives, some brethren are turning to Luke 8:1-3 and John 12:1-8. It is argued that these passages authorize men today to do what Jesus and the apostles did before the establishment of the church. Mike Willis makes this argument in the book, *“We Have a Right: Studies in Religious Collectivities,”* pages 108-118. This book is a publication of the Guardian of Truth Foundation and can be obtained from their bookstore. Brother Willis makes the argument in an effort to defend the practices of Guardian of Truth Foundation. Others have used the argument to defend the organizational structures and functions of other religious collectivities. In this study I will show that it is a misapplication of the above passages to practice the “Jesus-group” concept today. I will demonstrate both the fallacy, and the dangerous consequences of this argument. *Let us remember that honesty demands that one give up a position if he is unwilling to accept the logical and unavoidable consequences of that position.*

Though I have made reference to Mike Willis and the Truth Foundation, my review is of the “Jesus-group” *argument*, and not merely of one man’s use or application of the argument. I have referenced Mike Willis’ use of the argument because he has done the best job that I have seen in *making* the argument. I encourage the readers of this study to also read the study that was done by brother Willis.

Explanation of the “Jesus-group” Concept

For the benefit of those who may have not yet heard or read the argument, I will here provide a brief description. I will emphasize only the major tenets of the argument, seeing that there are different versions of it, which contain varying particulars.

Jesus and the apostles worked together in the preaching of the gospel. Luke 8:1 tells us that Jesus proclaimed the gospel and that the 12 apostles were “with Him.” Luke 9:1-6 tells us that Jesus sent the 12 apostles out on the limited commission. Mark recorded, *“And he ordained twelve, that they should be with him, and that he might send them forth to preach”* (Mk. 3:14). Along with preaching to others, Jesus also trained and edified the twelve (Lk. 8:9, 10). He also engaged in worship with them (Lk. 22:14-20; Matt. 26:30).

The gospels contain many references to *Jesus and the twelve*. There was *common identity* among them. Peter’s accusers recognized that he was “*one of them*” (Matt. 26:73). Members of the Jewish high court recognized that Peter and John had “*been with Jesus*” (Acts 4:13). John once told Jesus that he and the other apostles *forbade* one from casting out miracles because that man “*followed not with them*” (Luke 9:49, 50). Jesus told them not to forbid those who were doing as He was doing. But this incident does reflect the fact that Jesus and the twelve apostles had a peculiar and separate identity

from others. Whether one refers to the group as “Jesus and the twelve,” or “the Jesus-group,” this group was uniquely designated from other religious groups of its day.

Depending upon the translation, either *Jesus*, or the *Jesus-group* was **funded** by contributions from individual disciples. Luke 8:2-3 tells us of Mary, Joanna, Susanna and many others who “*provided for him from their substance*” (KJV, NKJV). Translations following the majority text have “*them*” (ASV, NASB, ESV). Since the “them” versus “him” difference is a *manuscript* issue, it can only be resolved by a consideration of the facts surrounding the nature of the group and of its function. We know that Jesus carried no money on His person (Matt. 17:27), and we know that Judas carried the “bag” (lit. “box” from which, monetary disbursements were sometimes made on behalf of the group (Jn. 12:5; 13:29). This “bag” constituted a common treasury from which group expenses were sometimes paid. This group occasionally pooled its physical resources. In the mass feedings of Matthew 14 and 15, Jesus obtained small quantities of bread and fish from the apostles, from which He fabricated large quantities of other bread and fish (Matt. 14:14-16; 15:34-36). These passages, along with John 12, show that Jesus governed the use of these group funds. Thus, in the Jesus-group we have a group with its own distinct *identity*, having a *religious purpose*, a *common treasury* and *common oversight*. From this, some brethren justify the formation of non-church religious collectives. They use the Jesus-group arrangement as an authorized example for their actions today.

One might read my description of the Jesus-group arrangement and wonder why I earlier stated my opposition against practicing such a concept today. After all, one might remind me of the very truths that I just described; how that *Jesus and the apostles participated in such an arrangement*. One might ask *how it could be wrong for us to do what Jesus did*. One might also observe that we can *read about the practice in the Bible*, and that Luke 8 and John 12 therefore *authorize* the establishment of Jesus-group-styled religious organizations today. Let us examine the Jesus-group argument and see where it goes. I remind the reader that honesty demands that one give up a position if he is unwilling to accept the logical consequences of that position.

1. Those who make the Jesus-group argument ignore several key components of the nature of the group. Most importantly, Jesus was the sole founder of the group, and He was exclusively responsible for the selection of the members of the group. He “*called to Him those He **Himself** wanted*” (Mk. 3:13-15). Jesus *called and trained* the twelve, and they were responsible to do as He instructed. Even if the Majority Text is correct in its use of “them,” in Luke 8:3, Jesus was still the sole arbiter of the use of the money. The apostles had *no control whatsoever* over the use of the funds. It is questionable whether or not the Jesus-group even qualifies as an example of pure *joint* action. I know of no modern religious collective that is governed exactly as the Jesus-group was governed, and that functions exactly as the Jesus-group functioned. As I shall demonstrate in the following points, the Jesus-group concept was entirely *unique* in its organization, purpose, nature, timing and function. It was never intended to be reproduced and imitated by men today. In short, **one cannot have a “Jesus-group” without Jesus “Himself”**

(Mk. 3:13)!

2. Not *all* of God's actions are authorized *to be repeated by men*. That is, some things are *right* for God to do, but *wrong* for men to do. For example, God personally administered the first discipline in a local church. He *killed* Ananias and Sapphira for the sin of lying (Acts 5:5, 10). Are we to follow this divine example today? Are we to kill impenitent church members? No, vengeance belongs to God alone (Heb. 10:30). Paul told the Corinthians and Thessalonians that church discipline involves social withdrawal from the sinner (1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Thess. 3:14). We are authorized to *withdraw* from the disorderly, not to *kill* them (2 Thess. 3:6). Another example, Jesus established His own church (Matt. 16:18; Acts 2:1-4). Does this mean that we are authorized to establish our own churches? No, "*other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ*" (1 Cor. 3:11). Jesus directly pardoned sin (Matt. 9:2; Lk. 23:43), but we do not possess this power. Certain activities lie within the realm of *divine function*, and are not authorized for men to do. Another such area is the one that we are discussing: the establishment of *religious institutions*. God alone is authorized to perform such activity. The prominent thing conspicuously absent from any Jesus-group-styled organization today is *JESUS!*

3. The Jesus-group existed *prior to* the establishment of the church. By appealing to the "Jesus-group" for authority for similar religious collectives today, one appeals to passages describing an organizational structure that is contrary to that of the New Testament church. The New Testament requires that each church be governed by local church *elders* (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5; Heb. 13:17; Acts 20:17, 28-31; 1 Pet. 5:1-3). This arrangement is a product of divine design. The exclusive use of the *plural* in connection with local church leaders means that a church may not have one-man rule. However, that is exactly what the Jesus-group has: one-man rule! Too, men must meet the God-given qualifications of first Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:6-9 before they can be recognized as leaders in a local church of Christ. The Jesus-group type of organization does not require that these qualifications be met by their leaders. Proponents happily defend their actions on the basis that *they are not a church*. Certainly, no humanly devised collective is *a church*: On this we fully agree. However, some do argue that their non-church religious collective may function *like* a local church in a number of areas, including: *worship, evangelism, benevolence* and *edification*. Some have even told me that they can observe the Lord's Supper through such human collectives. Why do the promoters of these human institutions go to the New Testament for their authority for the practice of collective *worship and work*, but do not follow the New Testament pattern for *organizing* their collective? Obviously, these groups want to be able to pick and choose which parts of the New Testament pattern for collective work best suits the purposes and goals of their particular organization.

The "Jesus-group" style of leadership is very similar to what is found in some denominational churches. A one-man "pastor" directs the church, while "deacon boards" or variously styled "elder" groups offer suggestions and carry out

- instructions. The Jesus-group is organized like many human denominations and mega-churches. I wonder if they would cite the Jesus-group as authority for their style of organization?
4. The Jesus-group ceased to exist upon the establishment of the church. The church is the “*eternal purpose*” of God, not the “Jesus-group” (Eph. 3:11). Jesus is the *head of the church*, not of the “Jesus-group” (Eph. 5:23). The apostles were “*set in the church*,” not in the “Jesus-group” (1 Cor. 12:28). It is the church that is built upon “*the foundation of the apostles and prophets*” (Eph. 2:20), not the “Jesus-group.” Jesus Christ is the chief cornerstone of the church, not of the “Jesus-group.” God is *glorified* in the church, not in the “Jesus-group” (Eph. 3:21). However, though the Jesus-group was not the church, it was not disconnected from the church. Upon His ascension, Christ assumed the throne of His church/kingdom, and the apostles each sat upon their thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). This expression refers to the special role of the apostles as revelators. As special *ambassadors for Christ*, the apostles were given the ministry of *reconciliation* (2 Cor. 5:20, 18). Reconciliation occurs in the *body* of Christ, not in the “Jesus-group” (Eph. 2:16).
 5. The function of the Jesus-group was fulfilled in the church. The Jesus-group accomplished its divinely purposed tasks and was assimilated into the church. The Jesus-group observed the Lord’s Supper on the night of Christ’s betrayal (not on Sunday, as we shall see later), but Jesus told the apostles that he would not observe the Supper again with them until He did so in His Father’s *kingdom*, that is, the *church*, Acts 2:42; 20:7). Notice the connection between the Jesus-group and the church. Jesus was the universal head of the disciples while He was upon the earth, and He is now the universal head of the church while He is in heaven (Eph. 1:22; 5:23).
 6. Jesus and the apostles were *divinely commissioned* in their work. As the “*apostle of our confession*,” Jesus was “sent” to accomplish the Father’s will (Heb. 3:1; Jn. 4:34). Near the beginning of His public ministry Jesus then selected the *twelve apostles* and divinely commissioned them in their work (Mk. 3:14, 15). They were to preach the gospel to “*the lost sheep of the tribe of Israel*” (Matt. 10:6). The Jesus-group was far more than just a group of a few men who one day decided to form their own religious collective: It was the direct work of God. It was a product of divine planning and arrangement. The Jesus-group collective was *divinely* guided and governed. It was no mere *human* collective. It had no mere *human* purpose. It is pathetic that men today would compare their own little humanly devised religious inventions to the magnificent work of Christ and his holy apostles in their anticipatory work foreshadowing the establishment of God’s eternal kingdom.
 7. The Jesus-group observed the Lord’s Supper on **Thursday** night (Luke 22:14-20; 1 Cor. 11:23). If one uses Luke 8:1-3 for authority to establish similar religious collectives today, then can he use Luke 22:14-20 for authority for his religious

- collective to observe the Lord's Supper on some other day than Sunday? If not, why not? The fallacy in the Jesus-group argument is seen in the fact that it proves far too much. Advocates of the argument have a particular agenda in mind. They want to justify what they are doing. Long-held beliefs and established practices usually limit one's vision and foresight. All passages are interpreted from the skewed perspective of trying to defend what is already in existence and practice. Men get caught up in trying to defend what they are already doing, and do not stop to consider all of the corollary implications of their position. If the Jesus-group example authorizes action for today, then it authorizes non-church religious collectives to observe the Lord's Supper, and it authorizes them to observe the Lord's Supper on *Thursday*. Are you willing to accept this position? I hope not.
8. By using Jesus-group passages, like Luke 8 and John 12 for one's authority for modern non-church religious collectives, one binds himself to the form of government that was practiced by Jesus and the apostles. This means that all non-church religious collectives would have to be organized with one superintendent over twelve men, whom the superintendent had appointed. The twelve would be trained by the superintendent and would be subject to his orders. They may offer suggestions, such as the one offered by Judas in John 12:5, but all such suggestions would be subject to review by the Jesus-like leader of the collective, and he may arbitrarily overrule any suggestion at any time, much the way Jesus did in John 12.
 9. Some try to distinguish the Jesus-group from the local church by pointing out that the Jesus-group is funded by individuals. Some proponents have admitted that the group performs the works of the local church, and that it has common identity, common oversight and a common treasury. *Functionally*, there is, therefore, no real difference between the Jesus-group and a local church. This is why some people are very quick to observe that their non-church collective is "funded and supported by *individuals*, and not by *churches*." But so is the local church! "*Every man according as he has purposed in his heart, so let him give...*" "...*Let every one of you lay by him in store...*" (2 Cor. 9:7; 1 Cor. 16:2). ***Even joint religious activity involves individuals!*** This argument is a smokescreen. The real difference between the *church* collective and the *non-church* collective is that proponents of the non-church collective concept feel free to fund evangelism in whatever way they think best. By accepting funds from individuals and not from churches, they feel no scriptural restraint in their *methods*. They turn to the New Testament pattern to define their *work*, but they ignore the New Testament pattern in defining their *methods*.
 10. If the Jesus-group arrangement authorizes the formation of similar religious collectives today, then it authorizes a *missionary society arrangement*. Notice that I said "**a**" missionary society arrangement, and not "**the**" missionary society arrangement. Many people lightly dismiss this comparison by affirming that their collective does not accept funds from local church treasuries. I understand and appreciate this fact, but that is not my only concern. I am not here concerned with

the *source* of the funding, but with the kind of *practice* that is being funded. Supporters of the Jesus-group arrangement must admit that if their interpretation and application of Luke 8:1-3 is accurate, it would authorize the missionary society *concept* today! To be consistent they will have to admit that missionary societies are scriptural if they are funded by *individuals*. They will have to admit that there has never really been anything wrong with the missionary society concept, itself. If they are correct in their application of Luke 8 and John 12, the only real criticism that they can make against the missionary society is that it was *funded by churches*, and that it *sought to control churches*. That is all! The *concept* of the missionary society must be accepted by those who use the Jesus-group argument. By defending the use of Jesus-group styled religious collectivities today, one admits that the Bible authorizes the use of missionary societies in the work of evangelism. Opposition to a particular method of funding a thing does not necessarily constitute opposition to the thing *itself*. Due to the history of unscriptural practices by some missionary societies, one may feel compelled to disavow the practice of *local churches* supporting the societies. This is not, however, absolute disavowal of the *nature, function* and *purpose* of the society. The missionary society *concept* stands or falls together with the Jesus-group *concept* as it is held by some brethren. As I explained above, the Jesus-group found its fulfillment in the church. It does not exist today.

11. The Jesus-group fed people (Matt. 14:14-16; 15:34-36). The Matthew 14 feeding is particularly interesting in that it is associated with *healing* (Matt. 14:14), and not necessarily with *hunger* (cp. Matt. 15:32). Like healing, miraculous feeding was a faith-producing *sign* (Jn. 20:30, 31). Now, no modern religious collective operated by brethren claims to be able to perform miracles, but what about the principle of *feeding*? The Jesus-group functioned jointly (the apostles brought bread and fish, and Jesus replicated that same bread and fish) in the feeding of people in order to achieve credibility for their gospel message. May men then use their modern non-church religious organizations to feed people in order to build their confidence in the message that they hear? (I know that some are doing this.) Jesus demonstrated His *compassion* by feeding the thousands. May modern collectives raise money to feed people as an expression of their compassion?

Conclusion

Modern practice of the Jesus-group concept is a circumvention of the local church. It is a way for non-institutional brethren to practice every tenet of institutionalism without *directly* involving the treasuries of local churches of Christ. There is the pooling of funds (donated by individuals, of course), the centralization of control under a one-man, Jesus-like figure, the feeding of saints and non-saints alike, non-biblical methods of supporting preachers, and a missionary society arrangement. All of which is defended on the basis that the “Jesus-group” is not the church, and that no church funds are used to fund the group and its activities. We are witnessing the rise of a brand new form of institutionalism. These groups defend their arrangements by soliciting and accepting the financial and moral support of *individual* saints only. They feel safe with this position,

but has any proponent of this concept considered the consequences of their becoming hugely successful in their actions? The organized activation of the universal church is limited only by the degree of success of the individually supported society. What if a Jesus-group-styled organization achieved such success that it had the financial backing of *all living saints* on the earth? And what if its gospel lectureship was attended by all of these saints, so that they could all engage in worship in one huge assembly? Ultimate and global success for such a group would amount to the *activation of the church universal under one-man headship and through a common treasury!* What did I earlier say about accepting the logical consequence of a position? Brethren, this must be opposed. It will lead to all forms of error and digression. I strongly encourage the colleges, bookstores and publishers among us to provide their services for those who are willing to buy them, and stay out of the collective functions that God designed the church to accomplish. There is unity in the Bible way, and upon the Bible platform (Eph. 4:4-6). The innovations of human wisdom lead to sin, selfish ambition, confusion and division (Jas. 3:13-17). “*Unto Him be glory **in the church** throughout all ages, world without end*” (Eph. 3:21).

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