

“THINK ON THESE THINGS”

Philippians 4:8

Individual Christin Duties vs. Collective Work of a Congregation

By Frank Walton

When an individual believes and obeys the gospel of the grace of God, his sins are taken away in Christ, he has the hope of eternal salvation, and he is added to the Lord’s church (Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 12:13). Those who become Christians have an individual responsibility to uphold godly principles in every realm of their lives. *“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all to the glory of God”* (1 Cor. 10:31). Each Christian is individually responsible for their own salvation (Rom. 14:12). Each individual Christian will give account for their own life (2 Cor. 5:10). Paul said, *“Work out your own salvation”* (Phil. 2:14).

However, when the Lord established the church, He ordained that individual Christians should work together collectively in fellowship in doing the Lord’s assigned work (Phil. 1:1). *“Strive together for the faith of the gospel”* (Phil. 1:27). Edification in the local church means we are not left alone to struggle alone in serving God. Rather, the Lord organized the church in a local setting so that individuals can assemble together as a body and function collectively as a local church, known as *“the churches of Christ”* (Rom. 16:16). The letters to the Corinthians were addressed to the local church in Corinth, and the letters to the Thessalonians were addressed to the local church in Thessalonica (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1). God’s wisdom is seen in the organization of the local church because it allows His people to gain strength and comfort from one another and to combine their efforts to fulfill His work.

Organization Implies Design And Purpose

The fact that God chose to bring individuals together in an organized local setting implies that He had a purpose for collective work together. This conclusion is based on the universal principle that organization implies purpose. God designed the universe with a purpose in mind. Men organize groups with specific purposes in mind. Likewise, God organized the local church because He intended for it to fulfill a specific role in the religious realm. The local church is *“the pillar and support of the truth”* (1 Tim. 3:15). Seeing that the local church is made up of individuals, it must also be understood that the role of the local church is different than that of the individual. This much is taught throughout the New Testament.

In Acts 4:32-35, Christians were contributing their funds to a collection that was intended to help needy saints. But in Acts 5, there was one couple named Ananias and Sapphira who sold their property and held back a portion of the proceeds but told people that they were giving all of the money. Their sin was not that they failed to give all of their money, but that they lied about how much they were giving. In his rebuke, Peter made a statement that shows the difference between individual and collective. He said concerning the money, *“While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your control?”* (Acts 5:4). As an individual, Ananias had authority over his own money and could do whatever he wanted with it. But once that money was put into the collection, no longer did the individual have authority over it, but God; it was dedicated to aid the collective work of the church in fulfilling whatever purpose God intended. There are various other passages in the New Testament where God makes a distinction between the work of the individual and the work of the local church (1 Tim. 5:3-8; 1 Cor. 11:20-23, 33-34; Acts 5:4; 1 Cor. 16:1-2).

In spite of the above principles, it is believed by many that the local church has the authority to do everything that individual Christians can do. That is, if an individual can hold social meals or social recreation and other activities in his home, then the local church has authority to fund social or recreational activities for its members. It would follow that if an individual can enter into a honest business venture (Eph. 4:28), then the local church too could establish its own secular business or also send money to hospitals and camps and general charity funds. If an individual Christian can vote in politics and advocate for a particular political party, then such thinking that makes no distinction between an individual Christian’s action and collective church action would allow for local churches to become political action committees. Yet, there is no precept or example in the New Testament of local churches engaging in politics or business enterprises for raising money or social recreation. For one to believe such a doctrine is a failure to understand what the Scriptures teach concerning the distinct spiritual mission of the local church. If we are truly going to live and act as the church that Jesus established and organized in the New Testament, then we must come to understand the difference between the work of the individual and the work of the local church. If we do not understand this, then we place ourselves in the same position as the denominations and blur the distinction of the apostolic pattern.

The Work Of The Individual Christian

Once an individual becomes a Christian, he is obligated to live godly in every realm of his life: In the home, the community, in business, in government, and also in the local church (1 Cor. 10:31; Matt. 5:16; Acts 2:42). He is a Christian every second of every day and must strive to live as such all the time that honors Christ. The majority of what we do on a daily basis is as an individual Chris-

tian, the exception to this is more limited in what we do as part of a local fellowship in a local church of Christ. An individual has a responsibility to care for the physical needs of his family (1 Tim. 5:8) but the church is not so charged (1 Tim. 5:16). To fulfill that individual responsibility, he should work honestly to earn money (1 Thess. 4:11), or own his own business (Col. 4:1), or to make investments (Jas. 4:13-17) but the local church is only authorized to raise money by free-will offerings on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:1-2).

Individuals also have responsibilities concerning their devotion to God and their neighbor. Pure and undefiled religion is to care for those who are in need (Jas. 1:27; Gal. 6:10), as opportunity, need, and ability permit. However, the local has a more restrictive precedent in caring for the needy. Non-Christians are not given resources from the local church treasury (Acts 3:6) but all examples of church benevolence was to Christians only. ***“There was not a needy person among them”*** (Acts 4:34; cf. Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:4, 9:1).

The Collective Work Of The Local Church

In defining the work of the local church, God is much more specific than with the individual because we act as an individual Christian every hour of every day, but participation in the local church is the exception to his general rule. For this reason, the work of the collective is much more limited than that of the individual. For example, where an individual is obligated to care for widows in his family, the church is only authorized to care for those who Christians and are ***“widows indeed,”*** being of a specific age and faithful to the Lord (1 Tim. 5:3-16). If a widow has surviving family members, they must care for her so that the church may not be burdened (vs. 16). Therefore, there is a difference between the responsibility of the church and that of the individual.

Remember the account of Ananias and Sapphira; that they could do whatever they wanted with their money as long as it was in their control. But what happens when that money is placed into the collection of the church? Who determines what happens to it then? Since that money is devoted to doing the Lord’s will, God is the one who determines what happens with it. Though the individual has authority to act in every realm of life, the Scriptures confine the work of the local church to four categories: Evangelism, worship, edification, and benevolence of needy saints.

1. Evangelism: In the Scriptures, the funds that were placed in the church treasuries were used to support preachers such as Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and the other apostles (1 Cor. 9:1-12, 14). By that means the collective body was working together to support the preaching of the gospel to save the lost. In fact, God’s design for the local church is all-sufficient to carry out its soul-saving mission as ***“the pillar and support of the truth”*** (1 Tim. 3:15). Hence, there is no authority for a man-made institution to supplant the work of the local church or oversee local churches.

2. Edification: Edification is how the church is built up through teaching God’s word and exhorting all the members of the body to grow in faith, knowledge, and godliness. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus commanded that those who obey the gospel learn to do all that He commanded. In Ephesians 4:11 it says that Jesus gave apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors and teachers for the equipping the saints and edifying the body. Such edification can only take place when individual Christians are working together as a collective body (Heb. 10:24-25).

3. Worship: Worship in the New Testament was also designed to be done as collective effort. Though individuals can worship God on their own, there are some aspects of New Testament worship that cannot be fulfilled outside of the local church. Paul said that the Lord’s Supper was to be eaten ***“when you come together”*** (1 Cor. 11:33). Nowhere is an individual authorized to eat the Lord’s Supper outside of the assembly of the local church. The collection must also take place when the church comes together on the first day of the week (1 Cor. 16:1-2). We can sing on our own, but God also commands that we ***“speak to one another, in psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, making melody in your heart to the Lord”*** (Eph. 5:19). This requires collective action. Therefore, the church is commanded to worship as a collective body.

4. Benevolence of needy saints: In 1 Timothy 5:3ff the collective body is authorized to care for the needs of widows indeed. Also, in Acts 11:29-30 and 2 Corinthians 8:3-4, we see church funds being used to care for needy saints. When a local congregation is unable to care for its own needs, God authorizes other congregations to send aid. At no point, however, do we see the local church using its funds to support charitable organizations for unbelievers.

Conclusion

Where God is specific, we have no authority but to do exactly as He commanded. Concerning the work of the local church, God is very specific. He designed the local church to fulfill a different role than the individual Christian. But if we go beyond God’s purpose for the church, as many churches have done today, then we can no longer call ourselves the church that is of Christ. If local congregations want to be New Testament churches, they must stop doing things that God has not authorized. Social activities, youth programs, charity organizations are things that God allows individuals to participate in, but they have no place in the work of the local church. Let us respect the limitations that God places on collective action and work with all of our might to do that which He does command. Love and respect for Christ our Lord requires that we gladly submit to His authority in the New Testament, which is the rule and limit of faith and practice in the Lord’s Church (Jn. 8:31-32; 14:15; 15:13). ■

Service Times - Sunday: 9:00 & 10:00 AM; 6:00 PM - Wednesday: 7:00 PM

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