

# Individual and Collective Action

By David Phillips

**W**hen an individual believes and obeys the gospel, their sins are taken away in Christ and they have the hope of eternal salvation. They are added to the Lord's church according to Acts 2:47. Those who become Christians have an individual responsibility to uphold godly principles in every realm of their lives. They are individually responsible for their own salvation.

However, when the Lord established the church, He did not leave it without any organization. That is, He did not leave individuals to fend for themselves in a sinful world all alone. 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. Therefore, Paul was able to say, "*The churches of Christ greet you*" in Rom. 16:16 because he had helped to organize many local churches. The letters to the Corinthians were addressed to the local church in Corinth. Likewise, the letters to the Thessalonians were addressed to the local church in Thessalonica. 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**

The fact that God chose to bring individuals together in an organized local setting implies that He had a purpose for doing so. This conclusion is based on the universal principle that organization implies purpose. God designed the universe with a purpose in mind. Men organize book clubs and bowling leagues 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. 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 body 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, which we will look at more closely later on (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 and other activities in his home, then the local church has authority to fund social activities for its members. Or if an individual can enter into a business venture, then the local church too can establish its own business or send money to hospitals and camps and charitable funds. For one to believe such a doctrine is a failure to understand what the Scriptures teach concerning 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.

### **The Work of the Individual**

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 in the local church. He is a Christian every second of every day and must strive to live as such all the time. There really are no limitations as to what the individual can do so long as he respects God's authority and righteousness in all things. An individual has a responsibility to care for the physical needs of his family (1 Tim. 5:8). To fulfill that responsibility he is able to work to earn money (1 Thess. 4:11), own his own business (Col. 4:1), or to make investments (James 4:13-17). A man has responsibilities toward his wife and the wife toward her husband (1 Cor. 7:2-7). Christians must submit to civil authority (Rom. 13:1ff.).

Individuals also have responsibilities concerning their devotion to God. Pure and undefiled religion is to care for those who are in need (James 1:27). Individuals are commanded to pray (Matt. 6:6), study God's word (2 Tim. 2:15), teach the gospel as they have opportunity (Acts 18:24-26), and to do their part in the work of the local church (Eph. 4:16). Whatever is good and honorable for a man to do in his personal life, that is what he must do in every aspect of his life (James 4:17).

### **The Work of the Collective**

In defining the work of the local church, God is much more specific than with the individual. 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 are Christians and are "*widows indeed*, 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.

**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.

**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 Matt. 28:20 Jesus commanded that those who obey the gospel learn to do all that He commanded. In Eph. 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).

**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.

**Benevolence of needy saints:** In 1 Tim. 5:3ff the collective body is authorized to care for the needs of widows indeed. Also, in Acts 11:29-30 and 2 Cor. 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 in order 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.

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