



we've spent a great deal of time trying to prove what may seem like a small, insignificant issue. Does this little distinction make an impact in how we understand the Bible? I would emphatically answer: "Yes!"

Consider the results of ignoring this distinction. If we ignore the Biblical distinction between the individual Christian and the church collectively,

then we must admit that anything the individual can do, the church can do as well. In such a situation the church could pay for tickets to a baseball game, promote and support a political candidate, give it's money to a charity, run a small coffee shop, finance a musical production, or even discipline children. The world has tried to make all of these things the work of the church. Think about it. These are all things that individual Christians are authorized to do, but nowhere in Scripture do we find authority for the church collectively to do such things.

Here's the big deal: there IS a distinction between the individual and the church collectively. God's Word makes this distinction clear in several places. The Bible gives certain commands to the church collectively, and gives other commands to individual Christians. We must understand that this is for a reason. This is the design of God, and we would be wise to follow it precisely!



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Welcome Visitors

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ISSUE

16.49

BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

December 7,
2014



Services

Sunday: 9:30 AM
10:20 AM
6:00 PM
Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn
Kyle Pope

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Jack Langley
Neil Ledbetter
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott

Evangelists:

Kyle Pope
Andrew Dow

Distinguishing Between the Individual and the Church

By Andrew Dow

There is an argument made by many people in the religious world that goes something like this: *The church is comprised of individual Christians. Therefore, whatever the individual Christian is authorized to do, the church can do as well.* This reasoning sounds pretty good. After all, if this reasoning is true, the local church would be allowed to do so many good things for people! In this article I'd like to test this idea against Scripture and see if it passes that test. Does God's Word teach that the individual and the church are inseparable, or does it view the individual and the church as unique entities with unique roles?

The Bible Makes a Distinction

As we begin, we must understand that the Bible makes a clear distinction between what an individual does and what the church does collectively. Consider with me three texts that prove this to be true:

1 Timothy 5:16 – "If any woman who is a believer has dependant widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed" (NASB). This verse is the conclusion of a lengthy discourse concerning the financial support of "widows indeed" (1 Timothy 5:3, 16). Notice carefully in the verse above that Paul, by the Holy

Spirit, makes a distinction between “**any woman** [man or woman, NKJV] **who is a believer,**” and “**the church.**” Therefore, we see an example where the individual Christian is responsible to do something, so that the church collectively does not have to do it. Such a distinction could not be made if the individual and the church were the same thing.

Matthew 18:15-17 – “**If your brother sins, go and show him his fault in private.... But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you.... If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church....**” In this text Jesus teaches about



Olsen Park church of Christ

proper protocol for correcting a brother in sin. The Son of God makes a distinction between “**you**” (vs. 15), “**your brother**” (vs. 15), “**one or two more**” (vs. 16), and “**the church**” (vs. 17). The first three refer to individual Christians, while the last refers to the collective body comprised of all the saints. If there is no distinction between an individual and the church collectively, then this process is pointless. If such were true, by talking to my brother in private, the church would already be involved. To the contrary, Jesus made a clear distinction.

Acts 5:4 – “**While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control?**”

The fifth chapter of Acts records the infamous story of Ananias and Sapphira. The statement above comes from Peter while he was exposing Ananias’ lie. What is pertinent to our discussion is Peter’s statement about who controlled the proceeds of Ananias’ sale of his land. Peter makes it clear that the money was under the control of Ananias, an individual Christian, to do with it as he pleased. However, when Ananias “**laid it at the apostles’ feet**” (Acts 5:2) it came under the control of the church. Therefore, we see this distinction once again.

From these three examples we must recognize that God’s Word makes a distinction between the individual Christian, his actions, and his possessions; and the church collectively, its actions, and its possessions. If Peter, Paul, and Jesus saw fit to make this distinction, then I would suggest it is a distinction we should be careful to make as well.

Consider Some Examples

The Bible presents three areas in which the local church is authorized to work. **First, the church is authorized to work in the area of evangelism.** After the Holy Spirit selected Paul and Barnabas for the work of spreading the gospel, we see that the

collective church in Antioch “**sent them away**” to do that work (Acts 13:1-3). This is consistent with Paul’s description of the church as “**the pillar and support of the truth**” (1 Timothy 3:15). **Second, the church is authorized to work in the area of edification.** Paul explained to the Ephesians that the design of the church was “**for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up** [i.e., edification] **of the body of Christ**” (Ephesians 4:12). **Finally, the church is authorized to work in the area of benevolence.** Local churches are often found in the New Testament providing assistance to the needy, however the assistance is always provided to “**the poor among the saints**” (Romans 15:25-26; cf. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2; Acts 11:27-30). These are the things that the church collectively is authorized to do. Adding anything that extends beyond the authority granted in Scripture is to violate the work of the collective church.

On the other hand, the Bible gives the individual Christian certain responsibilities that are separate and apart from the church’s obligations. **For instance, an individual Christian has the responsibility to become employed and provide for his family.** Paul told the Thessalonians, “**if anyone is not willing to work, then he is not to eat, either**” (2 Thessalonians 3:10). Paul also wrote to Timothy, “**If anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever**” (1 Timothy 5:8). **Additionally, individual Christians are expected to raise and discipline their children.** God’s Word instructs parents, “**Do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord**” (Ephesians 6:4). **Finally, individual Christians are expected to show benevolence**

to all men. “**He who steals must steal no longer,**” Paul wrote, “**but rather he must labor... so that he will have something to share with one who has need**” (Ephesians 4:28). While this is not a complete list, we see that these are things that Scripture expects of the individual Christian.

Hopefully by considering these examples we can see that Scripture not only makes a clear distinction between individual action and collective action, but it also specifically directs individuals to do things that the church collectively is not authorized to do. For the church to take on the responsibilities of the individual would be beyond the teaching of Scripture, but it would also move into the realm of absurdity.

What’s The Big Deal?

Perhaps you’re still reading this article, but your asking yourself, “*Why are we making such a big deal out of this distinction?*” After all,