

GLAD TIDINGS

“And we bring you good tidings of the promise made unto the fathers...” (Acts 13:32)

Vol. XV

March 12, 2006

No. 11

The Individual and the Church

Jerry Fite

Paul instructs us, “*If any woman that believeth hath widows, let her relieve them, and let not the church be burdened; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed.*” (I Timothy 5:16).

In this passage, Paul distinguishes between the individual and the church by emphasizing their distinct obligations. I, as an individual, must relieve my widowed mother or grandmother. It is not the responsibility of the church in its collective sense to aid my mother or grandmother. I can be a member of the same local church that does not have the same responsibility as I have towards my family in the flesh. In this case, what the individual must do, the church must not do.

The local church acting as a single unit through its one treasury has authority from God to aid those who are “*widows indeed*”. Earlier in chapter five of this letter to Timothy, Paul identifies for us these widows. First, they are actual widows who are “*desolate*”. They have no family member to come to their aid. They have been actually left alone. Second, they are widows who “*have their hope*

set on God and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day” (I Timothy 5:5). These widows are not of this world giving themselves to pleasure (I Timothy 5:6), but dedicated to the Lord hoping in God and praying unto Him continually. Their lives are also full of good works (I Timothy 5:10-11).

Thus we have another example where the Christians or believers were helped through the treasury of the church, not non-saints. (cf. Acts 2, 4, 6, Rom. 15, I Cor. 16, 2 Cor. 8, 9). While the individual is commanded to help all men, including coming to the aid of widows and orphans who are not Christians (Gal. 6:10, James 1:27), the church functioning as a unit through a common treasury is commanded to help those who are saints who have no one to relieve their desperate circumstance.

Since the church is comprised of individual Christians, sometimes the word “church” is used in its *distributive* sense. These are cases where the emphasis is upon the individual members, not upon the whole church in a collective sense. A good exam-

ple of this is where “*the church in Jerusalem*” is persecuted. What happened? “*they were all scattered abroad...*” (Acts 8:1). Again, “*Saul laid waste the church...*” What did he do? He entered “*into every house, and dragging men and women committed them to prison*” (Acts 8:3). The church in its collective sense was not scattered abroad, because some of the individual members were imprisoned. The church in its collective sense was not imprisoned for some of the individual members were scattered.

Since the word “church” is a collective noun we should interpret “church” in its collective sense, until the context leads us to understand it in its distributive sense. Paul could have easily helped us understand “church” in its distributive sense in I Tim. 5:16 if he had said, “*Let not others be burdened*”. Instead, he distinguished the individual responsibility from that of the group in its collective sense. He said “*let not the church be burdened*”. May we distinguish between the individual and the church and their respective responsibilities.