



Let the Church Not Be Burdened?

Brownsburg Church of Christ

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PM Assembly



Introduction:

Let's begin with a story. A Jewish man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. By chance, a priest was going down that road. When the priest saw the beaten man, he passed by on the other side of the road. Sometime later, a Levite was also walking down that road. When he saw the beaten man, he also passed by on the other side. Sometime later, a Samaritan, a man hated by Jews, came to the place where the man was. The Samaritan, having compassion on the man said to him, "You are so lucky that I'm part of the Good Samaritan Society. We have funds and resources to deal with this very thing." He called up the nearest outreach manager of the Good Samaritan Society, had him come meet the man. Together they bandaged him up, put him in the Good Samaritan Society's chariot and gave him a ride to the nearest Good Samaritan Society medical facility. Where the Samaritan left the man in the good hands of the organization he had given so much money to in the past (not quite **Luke 10:29-37**).

I hope by this time, you've heard the story of the Good Samaritan enough to recognize where this version went astray. And yet, the way the modern religious world and mainstream denominationalism conducts good works, you would almost think that is exactly what this story says. In fact, the idea that the local congregation is supposed to be an organization that institutionalizes all potential good works and whose main function is to uphold social justice is all but unquestioned in "American Christianity." Some churches pursue this as a means of outreach and sharing the gospel with the lost. Others simply pursue it because they believe the church's job is to change society itself to be more godly. It is almost like they don't see the world as the enemy of the church but as the great project of the church. Getting into the theology of this Social Gospel is too much for one simple sermon. However, I'd like to get down to some brass tacks about the local church's place in being Zealous for Good Deeds. I'd like to look at an often overlooked passage tucked into **I Timothy 5:16**: "If any believing woman has relatives who are widows, let her care for them. Let the church not be burdened, so that it may care for those who are truly widows" (ESV). While we'll cover a couple of concepts, I'd like to make sure we recognize one main thing. As individual Christians, we are responsible to unburden the local church. This is not so much a regulation for congregational work as it is an explanation of individual responsibility.

Discussion:

I. While the church is always the people, the people are not always the church.

- A. When you think "church," what do you think? Do you think of a building? ("My church is on Hornaday Road.") Do you think of a service? ("We have church at 10:30 on Sundays.") While I get that in the way the English language is used, these are both true statements in a sense that the English word is defined, neither one of these ideas accurately represents what the New Testament means when it uses the word "church." In the New Testament, the word "church" is synonymous with our English word "assembly." When you think of an assembly, what do you think of? An assembly is a gathering of people. That is what a church is. It is a gathering of people. Therefore, when you think of a local church, you shouldn't think of the building where the church meets or even the time when the church meets. You should think of the people that meet.
- B. However, **I Timothy 5:16** makes a profound point. While the church is always the people, the people are not always the church. What I mean by that is just because the members of a congregation are doing something doesn't mean the church is doing it. Paul said that an individual believer should take care of her dependent widows so the congregation would not be burdened with that work. Here, an individual member is doing the work. If an individual doing work is the same as the congregation doing the work, it would be impossible for the church not to be burdened when the individual is doing the work.
- C. If a Christian lied or committed fornication, would we say the church lied or committed fornication? Of course not. Why then when a Christian feeds a homeless person would we say that the church is feeding homeless people? We get this with other institutions. If a member of Toastmasters gives a speech at her corporation's conference, did Toastmasters give the speech? A Boy Scout may help a little old lady across the road, but that is not the Boy Scouts helping a little old lady across the road. Similarly, just because a member of your family does something, that doesn't mean the family did it. The same is true with the congregation. There is a difference between individual action and congregational action.

- II. Christians have responsibilities that the local church does not.
- A. In **I Timothy 5:3-16**, we learn that individual Christians have responsibilities that the local church doesn't. In other words, it is important to distinguish between what we as individuals are supposed to do and are allowed to do and what the local congregation is supposed to do and is allowed to do.
 - B. Are there qualifications placed on the widows that individual Christians are to support? No. The text simply says if a Christian won't take care of his/her family members, he/she is worse than an unbeliever. The widow doesn't have to have been any kind of Christian, she's just a dependent widow. But notice that the congregation very much has qualifications and stipulations. She must be at least 60 years old, the wife of one husband (a one-man woman), a reputation of good works (which explains why what we've been talking about this month is so important), a Christian who has set her hope fully on God, and is not self-indulgent.
 - C. In other words, you as an individual Christian have responsibilities that the church doesn't have. It doesn't matter if your widowed mother or grandmother is a faithful Christian or not, you are worse than an infidel if you won't support her in her need. However, if a widow is not a faithful Christian, the local congregation is not authorized to support her. That is not because churches don't love widows or don't care about widows. It is simply because God has a plan for His church.
- III. The local church must stay focused on its purpose.
- A. **I Timothy 5:16** explains more about this distinction between the individual and the local congregation. Regrettably, it is an explanation increasingly lost on people today and even on Christians today. Paul says that the reason individuals are to do their good work of supporting their dependent widows (and actually their family) is so the church will not be burdened.
 - B. The word "burdened" here is interesting. It is the same word as used in **Matthew 26:43** to describe the "heavy" eyes of the disciples. This term isn't just speaking about a weight that adds responsibility. It is talking about a weight that hinders the burdened from functioning properly. Jesus wanted the disciples to stay awake, watching and praying. But the burden of their heavy eyes was keeping them from functioning properly. In the same way, individuals are supposed to fulfill their responsibility of taking care of their own family so that the church will not be so burdened as to not be able to function properly.
 - C. Please understand what this means. For too long, Christians and gospel preaching churches have been arguing simply over a rule and a regulation. Churches and Christians on all sides have made this debate about congregational authority for different work a debate about who is keeping a rule better and have all but forgotten what the issue behind all of this is. The point is not for us to figure out a rule and then prove that we are following it better. The point is that God has a purpose for the local congregation and we as individuals are to keep the church unburdened so it can do the work God has given it.
 - D. What work has God given the church? I think we can find three things demonstrated by **I Timothy** and supported in the rest of the New Testament.
 1. *Proclaim the truth*: According to **I Timothy 3:15**, the church is a "pillar and buttress of the truth" (ESV). According to **I Timothy 2:4**, it is by knowledge of the truth that folks are saved. Remember **John 8:32-36** explains that the truth sets people free from sin. And in **John 17:17**, we understand that it is God's truth that sanctifies people. The local church's job is to uphold that truth, to lift it up for all the world to see, to expound it so that even those in the church can grow.
 2. *Glorify God*: **I Timothy** begins and ends with a profession of the glory of God. **I Timothy 1:17** says, "To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen" (ESV). And **I Timothy 6:15-16** says, "...he who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen" (ESV). As **Ephesians 3:21** says about God, "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (ESV). The local church is responsible to bring glory to God, honoring, and praising Him.
 3. *Care for the family*: In **I Timothy 5:16**, Paul specifically said that individual Christians should take care of their own dependent widows so the church would not be hindered from caring for those who were truly widows or widows indeed. But notice that the first qualification for those widows is that they are faithful Christians who have set their hope fully on God (cf. **I Timothy 5:5**). These are widows who are in the family of God. Remember, the church is God's household and family (cf. **I Timothy 3:15**). If the household of God doesn't take care of its dependent family members, are we not also worse than unbelievers? But if the local congregation gets burdened as so many today are doing to it by leading us to believe that the local church is supposed to care for the entire world, how will it fulfill its own mission?

E. In almost every other organization in the world, we recognize how important this principle is. Consider Alcoholics Anonymous. Listen to their fifth and sixth traditions: “5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic that still suffers. 6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.”¹ If you called up Alcoholics Anonymous and asked them to donate some money to the American Cancer Society, an orphan’s home, or to provide for widows, they would say “No” because that would hinder and divert them from their primary purpose. However, do you believe that any members of Alcoholics Anonymous ever give to the American Cancer Society, take care of orphans, or widows? Of course some do. Do you think any Alcoholics Anonymous group runs an inner city coat closet for the homeless? No. That would divert them from their purpose. However, do you think any member of Alcoholics Anonymous might donate, work at, or even run an inner city coat closet? I can almost guarantee you some do since many recovering alcoholics have been homeless and long to help their fellow sufferers in this kind of way. Now, do you think Alcoholics Anonymous hates people with cancer, poor people, the homeless, orphans, widows, etc.? Do you think anyone ever even accuses that institution of hating these people? Of course not. Does Alcoholics Anonymous think that running orphan’s homes, hospitals, nursing homes, inner city coat closets, etc. are bad works? Of course not. Would anyone accuse them of such? No way. We all know that they would believe these are all good works, they just aren’t the good works Alcoholics Anonymous was set up to accomplish. We all recognize the necessity for an organization to maintain its focus on its primary purpose without getting distracted even by other decent and good causes. Why do we have such a hard time understanding that with the local congregation? Sadly, because too many churches have allowed the world to set their agenda and purpose rather than God.

IV. Christians must keep the local church unburdened.

- A. Now here’s the clincher for our series. If you’ve gotten bored by some of the technical discussion up to this point, wake up. Pay attention to this point. **I Timothy 5:16** is an instruction to individuals not to local churches. That is, Paul wasn’t telling local churches to make sure they didn’t get burdened; he was telling individual Christians to fulfill their responsibility of doing good deeds so that the local church would not get burdened with them.
- B. Isn’t that exactly what has happened in our modern world? Christians haven’t been taking up the mantle of loving their neighbor, so churches start developing programs that divert time, finances, and resources from the primary purpose of the local church. Sadly, many today have determined that the work of the church is to save society, rather than to save sinners. We need to remember the difference. We need to remember which one is the church’s work and which one isn’t. Jesus didn’t come to restore social order. He didn’t come to redeem governments and nations. He came to seek and save the lost (**Luke 19:10**). The church, His body must carry on His mission without being diverted, burdened, or hindered.
- C. Hopefully, we have learned from this series that a person that has been saved by the love of Jesus Christ will no doubt become a person who loves his/her neighbor. That love will be demonstrated in many ways. But the local church is to funnel that love into a focus on glorifying God and setting people free from their sins. And we as individuals are to fulfill our responsibilities so the church will not be burdened by them and be hindered from accomplishing its work.

Conclusion:

No doubt, as with every individual responsibility placed on us by the gospel of Jesus Christ, the local church is to teach us, train us, and equip us to go out and love our neighbors in every way possible. The local church may even make us aware of opportunities. Many of us may even band together to do the good works and help in cases of urgent need. We may band together because we have this relationship in this local congregation. However, we must make sure that we keep the local church unburdened from our responsibilities so that the congregation won’t be hindered and diverted from its God glorifying, truth proclaiming, family caring mission.

¹ http://www.aa.org/en_pdfs/smf-122_en.pdf