
Words of Truth

Institutionalism – Individual, Concurrent, And Collective Action

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In our last article we made some applications from what is commonly known as the “Parable of the Good Samaritan” (Luke 10:25-37). Very often, someone with an institutional mindset will read such Scriptures and equally conclude that what the “Good Samaritan” can do the church can do too. Many with the institutional mindset simply cannot see a difference between the work of one Christian, multiple Christians, and the church collectively. Thus, they often confuse Scriptures that apply to Christians as though they apply to the whole congregation.

When you study the Scriptures you have to be reasonable. You know that all New Testament Scriptures do not apply to everyone. The fact is, no single Scripture written was ever directly written to anyone alive today. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t study those Scriptures (Romans 15:4, I Corinthians 10:1-12, and Colossians 4:16). That doesn’t make them completely inapplicable (II Timothy 3:15-17). What we have to cautiously understand is, we are making applications to our lives from things written to different people under different circumstances. Thus, we must handle the Scriptures aright (II Timothy 2:14-18). There are many things written that never applied to everyone.

What directly applied to the Apostles in some cases applied or applies to no one else (i.e. Matthew 10:5-20, Luke 24:45-49, John 14:26, etc.). Also, things written specifically regarding a husband is an instruction that doesn’t apply to everyone else (i.e. Ephesians 5:23). There are some different instructions that apply to wives and not to husbands (i.e. Titus 2:3-5). If you are neither a slave or a master certain Scriptures do not apply directly to you (i.e. Ephesians 6:5-9). If you earn no income and have not prospered certain Scriptures cannot be directly applied to you (i.e. I Corinthians 16:1-2). If you are a Eunuch certain Scriptures do not apply to you directly (i.e. I Corinthians 6:18-7:5). While we are to follow the example of Jesus (I Peter 2:21), there are things He did that we cannot. For example, we cannot observe the Passover (Luke 22:7-8), partake of the Lord's Supper on Thursday [the night in which He was betrayed] (I Corinthians 11:23-26), forgive sins as deity (Luke 5:17-26), or accept worship (Matthew 28:9 and Matthew 28:17).

I trust that anyone with a brain and an ability to reason beyond that of a ten year old child can understand the things above. Thus, we should all be able to reason and conclude that not all Scriptures apply to everyone equally. There are many more points that could be made, but I do not want to take us too far from the subject matter at hand. What we are setting out to accomplish in this study is to realize how that what is written regarding one Christian, plural Christians, and the church as a collective body are often different. Let’s prove this now as we ought to (I Thessalonians 5:21).

The Difference Between Authorized Individual, Concurrent, And Collective Actions

Consider this text: *“Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican”* (Matthew 18:15-17). When you read through the quoted Scriptures here, you should have noticed the difference between individual, concurrent, and collective action. First, a Christian who has been sinned against is supposed to go alone to the brother in error which is individual action. If that does not work, he is to take one or two more as witnesses which is multiple individuals acting at the same time [concurrent action]. It is not until these two things fail that the whole congregation assembles to deal with the matter which is collective action. Thus, when one or more members of the same congregation are involved, that does not put the church into action nor does it authorize the church to be in action.

Here is another example: *“Honour widows that are widows indeed. But if any widow have children or nephews, let them learn first to shew piety at home, and to requite their parents: for that is good and acceptable before God. Now she that is a widow indeed, and desolate, trusteth in God, and continueth in supplications and prayers night and day. But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth. And these things give in charge, that they may be blameless. But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel. Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers, if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work. But the younger widows refuse: for when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry; Having damnation, because they have cast off their first faith. And withal they learn to be idle, wandering about from house to house; and not only idle, but tattlers also and busybodies, speaking things which they ought not. I will therefore that the younger women marry, bear children, guide the house, give none occasion to the adversary to speak reproachfully. For some are already turned aside after Satan. If any man or woman that believeth have widows, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed” (1 Timothy 5:3-16). In the above Scriptures, you see the same thing as you did in Matthew 18:15-17. There is a difference between what one, more than one, and the church collectively are authorized to do. Even though plural pronouns might be used [i.e. “them”], that does not authorize collective action.*

Conclusion

If anyone can study the two inspired examples above and not see the difference between authorized individual, concurrent, and collective spiritual works; I cannot say any more to help. Thus, from here, I want to move on in our study of Institutionalism to cover the actual work of the church as a collective body. What we will do next is examine what the church is authorized to do and how the church is sufficient for those works.