

Institutionalism (Part 3)

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Proof Texts Considered

“So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith” (Galatians 6:10).

Some say that since this verse is addressed to the “church of Galatia” (Galatians 1:2) that it permits those churches to do good to those outside of the household of faith from the congregational treasury. The argument is, “We are told to do good to all men, therefore, we can set up a food bank at the church building for the homeless in our community.”

But it is dangerous to assume that everything written in every epistle is meant to apply to the congregation. One writer who believed that the local congregation can financially assist unbelievers based on Galatians 6:10, revealed his inconsistency by stating, *“A thing may be a good or benevolent work and yet not be a work in which the church is authorized to engage. For example the church is not authorized to enter into a money making project or business as a means of raising funds”* (“Debate On Benevolence,” *Gospel Anchor*, May 1995, p. 19). It is hypocrisy to make this claim, however, since the same logic that opens up Galatians 6:10 to congregational benevolence also opens up Ephesians 6:5-9 to congregational engagement in secular business. Just because something is stated in a letter addressed to a congregation does not mean all things contained therein are either binding or permitted at the congregational level. In fact, when New Testament writers intended for a specific application to be made to the local church, they stated it clearly, leaving no room for confusion. When the church is commanded to do things, it is stated that way (1 Corinthians 5:1-13, 11:18-34, 14, 16:1-4).

Besides, the context of Galatians 6:10 demands that it be interpreted to mean the obligation is individualistic. Notice some of the words used in the preceding verses: 6:1 “yourself, you”; 6:2 “one another’s”; 6:3 “anyone thinks he is..”; 6:4 “let each one”; 6:5 “each one shall bear his own load”; 6:6 “let the one”; 6:7 “whatever a man”; 6:8 “For the one”. The “we” of 6:10 refers to individuals not congregations. Paul included himself in these verses, which means the lexical category is “individuals”.

“This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father, to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

Again, context must be carefully considered. Look at other phrases found in chapter one of this book: 1:3,4,5 “any of you”, 6 “let him”, 12 “blessed is a man”, 13 “let no one say”, 14 “each one”, 19 “everyone”, 22 “prove yourselves”, 23 “anyone”, 24 “he”, 25 “one”, 26 “this man’s religion is worthless”. In fact the verse itself is individual in nature (“keep oneself”). The non-institutionalist is not arguing that the church cannot participate in pure and undefiled religion, but James 1:27 is only defining “pure and undefiled” religion for the individual. There are other verses that discuss the obligations of the congregation.

Another objection to the non-institutionalist is that our position “would require that each individual member of the church must, if able, take at least two orphans and at least two widows (the words are plural) into his own home and support them, in order to engage in pure and undefiled religion.” But that is a ridiculous statement because it assumes that James 1:27 cannot really apply to the individual because it would be impractical. First, the word “visit” does not mean “take into your home” or “adopt”. It means what it says it means. Second, if this verse applies only on a congregational setting than that means any church without the financial capability of supporting at least two orphans and two widows is not practicing pure and undefiled religion. As individuals, we are not expected to help everybody in the entire world, but only those we are able to (Matthew 25:15).

“Because of the proof given by this ministry they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all” (2 Corinthians 9:13).

Some have attempted to make the expression “and to all” refer to non-Christians. But the “to them” here refers only to the needy saints of Jerusalem contextually (2 Corinthians 9:1-2, 1 Corinthians 16:1-4). The “and to all” refers to Christians aside from those in Jerusalem for a few reasons. Notice that the “and to all” will respond to the monetary gift in the following ways: they will glorify God that the Corinthians obeyed the Gospel (9:13), they will pray for the Corinthians (9:14), they will yearn for them (9:14), and will one day reciprocate (2 Corinthians 8:14). It does not sound like the response of unbelievers through the assistance of a church-supported human institution, does it?