

The Individual and the Church

(by Bob Pulliam)

It seems that many have the mistaken notion that an individual is the church and vice versa. Some would think that members (plural) are the church, and vice versa. While the second statement is closer to the truth, it still needs a good look at scripture and some modification to make it correct.

There Is a Distinction to be Made...

I have been told that if all the members of the church go to a restaurant, and eat together, it is the church eating a meal. Although each family pays, it is the church eating and paying at a restaurant. This is a very common line of reasoning for authorizing fellowship halls. After all, if the church can eat a meal, they can certainly build the facilities in which to do it. Such shows a misunderstanding of what the local church is. To remedy this, we must rightly understand the local church.

A common definition of the church is all of it's members combined. Perhaps this mistake is made by way of an application of what the [universal church](#) is, to the [local church](#). But the local church is not the universal church! Remember that the local church has organization; but the universal church does not. This gives the local church purpose in function; whereas the universal church has only entity (it exists as such, and only as such). When the term "church" is used in a local sense, it is always used in one of two ways:

- It is used of God's people in their saved relationship to God (e.g. I Cor 1:2).
- It is used of God's people as they do God's work (e.g. I Cor 11:18).

The word "church" is never used of:

- Christians eating a common meal together.
- Christians in joint business ventures.
- Christians doing anything other than God's work!

The word "church" is a singular-collective noun that is well illustrated by a chain. It is easy to see how links do not comprise a chain until they sustain a particular functioning relationship. This is the very nature of the singular-collective noun. It is comprised of many parts that function together in a certain way. The church is the same way. It is comprised of Christians working together in a particular function. Just putting Christians together does not give one the church. It is when they function as God ordained that they become known as the "church".

That the individual is to recognize separate responsibility from the church is clearly seen in I Timothy 5:3 - 16. Here children are commanded to take care a parent who is a widow. The command is stressed in verse sixteen where the Christian is commanded to do this that the church not be burdened. The conclusion?... The church is to relieve widows indeed (not all widows); but, individuals are to take care of their own parents. Further illustration of such can be seen in Matthew 18:15-17. Individuals go to the person first, then the church. The individual and the church is given as separate here.

Conclusion...

God has given the individual Christian responsibilities to fulfill in serving God; and the church has its responsibilities. It is important that both understand their individual responsibilities, so each can fulfill their proper place. All too often we allow ourselves to bow out of responsibility by pawning it off on the church. Let not the church be burdened with my responsibility, but allowed to concentrate on its work.