

Issues that Divide Us - 6: Unlimited Benevolence

INTRODUCTION:

1. We have been discussing the various issues that have caused division among churches of Christ and God's answer to those issues upon which we must unite.
 - A. We have discussed the following (see chart).
 - B. Today, I want to consider the issue of unlimited benevolence in connection with the local church.
 - i. Many believe that there are no limitations, or at least very few limitations, on the benevolent work a local church can do.
 - ii. It is believed that whether one is a Christian or not, a member of the church or a person of the world, it makes no difference, the local church is to provide benevolent help to them.
2. Some history may help see why this became an issue.
 - A. The question of church support of benevolent institutions/organizations was causing division among churches when the question was posed as to whether it was the responsibility of the local church to give benevolent help to anyone but needy saints.
 - B. At this point debates shifted to this issue because it was more emotional and the benevolent organization supporters knew that if people were led emotionally their support of benevolent institutions would continue.
3. So, the question to be answered today is whether the N.T. teaches that the benevolent work of the local church limited or not?
4. Let's clarify the issues:
 - A. What the issue is not (see chart).
 - B. What the issue is (see chart).

BODY:

I. God's answer begins with the individual nature of Christianity:

- A. God's word teaches that responsibility for action/obedience begins with the individual Christian and moves outward to the local church.
 1. Influencing others for Christ (Matt. 5:13-16 – "**You are the salt of the earth**; but if the salt loses its flavor, how shall it be seasoned? It is then good for nothing but to be thrown out and trampled underfoot by men. ¹⁴**You are the light of the world**. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. ¹⁵"Nor do they light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all *who are* in the house. ¹⁶**Let your light so shine before men**, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.").
 2. Conflict resolution (Matt. 18:15-17 – "Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between **you and him alone**. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶"But if he will not hear, **take with you one or two more**, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' ¹⁷"And if he refuses to hear them, **tell it to the church**. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector.").
 3. Benevolent responsibilities (1 Tim. 5:3-4, 8, 16 – "Honor widows who are really widows. ⁴But if any widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show piety at home and to repay their parents; for this is good and acceptable before God... ⁸But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever...¹⁶ If any believing man or woman has widows, **let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.**").
- B. Despite current misconceptions, Christianity is overwhelmingly lived in the arena of one's individual thoughts, words, and actions.
 1. This is seen in a comparison between the commands given to *the churches* and those given to the individual Christian (see chart).
 2. The point I am making here is that institutionalism and liberalism have reversed the order, making the collective/local church the center or focus, rather than the individual.

II. God's word makes a distinction in the benevolent work of the individual Christian and that of the local church:

- A. All deserving people, Christian or not, are to be helped by the individual Christian.
1. Some are not deserving (2 Thess. 3:10 – “For even when we were with you, we commanded you this: If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat.”).
 2. Otherwise, Christians are encouraged to “do good” to all people.
 - a. 1 Tim. 6:17-18 – “Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share”
 - b. Heb. 13:16 – “But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.”
 3. The good that individual Christians do is to be directed at all people, even our enemies (Rom. 12:17-21; Matt. 5:43-48).
- B. Who did the local churches of the N.T. help?
1. The local church would be restricted from helping the undeserving (2 Thess. 3:10).
 2. The brethren in Antioch sent relief to the *impooverished saints* in Judea (Acts 11:27-30).
 - a. Undoubtedly the famine affected more than just Christians.
 - b. But the brethren acted collectively to relieve the *needy saints* in Jerusalem.
 - c. How do you explain that when this was the perfect opportunity to help everyone...if that is what the local church is to do?
 3. The brethren in Jerusalem helped the needy saints “among them” (Acts 4:32, 34-35 – “Now the multitude of **those who believed** were of one heart and one soul; neither did **anyone** say that any of the things he possessed was his own, but **they had all things in common**...³⁴ Nor was there **anyone** among **them** who **lacked**; for all who were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the proceeds of the things that were sold,³⁵ and laid *them* at the apostles' feet; and they distributed to each as anyone had need.”).
 4. This distribution in Acts 4 became a problem later because certain **Christians of that local congregation** were being neglected in that distribution (Acts 6:1-6).
 - a. It should be noted that the widows of the congregation (6:1) would not have likely been the only widows in Jerusalem that were needy.
 - b. Yet, this is the These were not widows from the city that were being neglected, but those among the Greek-speaking *Christians*!
 - c. The church by the instruction of the apostles addressed this need without creating and using a human institution, or “widows' home” to do so.

III. Scripture of interest concerning local church benevolence:

- A. **Acts 2:44-45** – “And all those who had **believed** were together and **had all things in common**;⁴⁵ and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with **all**, as anyone might have need.”
1. It is claimed by some that the church in Jerusalem helped all people, saints and non-Christian alike, because it says they divided their goods “among all” who had need.
 2. But we must remember that the scope of the Greek word “all” (pas), is determined by the context. An, the context is addressing those who **believed** who **had all things in common**.
 3. To get the sense we just need to ask, was this benevolence given to “all” needy...
 - a. People on the earth?
 - b. People in Palestine?
 - c. People in Jerusalem?
 - d. Believers?
 - e. The only possible answer is **all needy believers**, seeing they were the ones who had “all things in common” and the only ones the church could reasonably address.
- B. **Rom. 15:25-33?**
1. Paul was going to Jerusalem to minister to **the saints** (Rom. 15:25)

2. The brethren in Macedonia and Achaia made a contribution to **the poor saints** in Jerusalem (Rom. 15:26)
3. The word “**contribution**” (*koinonia*) is commonly translated “**fellowship**” in the NT.
4. They did this because they were **indebted to the saints in Jerusalem**, since they had been **partakers of their spiritual things** (Rom. 15:27).
5. The phrase “**have been...partakers**” (*koinoneo*) is a verb form of the noun “**contribution**” (*koinonia* – fellowship). So, had been “fellowshippers” of their spiritual things—Christians!
6. Paul pleaded with the brethren in Rome to pray that his service for Jerusalem might be **acceptable to the saints** (Rom. 15:31)
7. The fact that Paul only arranged for the relief of saints does not mean he was **cruel** and **hardhearted**. It simply points to the fact that it was never God’s plan to give local churches the impossible task of helping all the poor people in the world.

C. **1 Cor. 16:1-4:**

1. This collection was for **the saints** (1 Cor. 16:1)
2. Obviously in a huge city like Jerusalem, **saints** were certainly **not the only poor** there. Yet Paul instructed the Gentile churches to collect money “**for the saints.**”
3. Despite what you might think about that, this is what Paul instructed the churches to do.

D. **2 Cor. 8:1-5?**

1. This benevolent aid was a **fellowship** to **the saints** (2 Cor. 8:4).
 - a. The word translated “participation” is **koinonia**, or the word translated **fellowship**.
 - b. The NKJV and NET have **fellowship**, while the HCSB and NIV have **sharing**.
 - c. Fellowship is a spiritual matter of sharing among Christians.
2. So, this collection addressed in Rom. 15 and again in 1 Cor. 16 and now again in 2 Cor. 8 only mentions that it was to **relieve needy saints, or Christians!**
3. So, what were these brethren supposed to believe about who this contribution was to help?

E. **2 Cor. 9:1, 12-13:**

1. This passage is still a part of Paul’s discussion on **helping saints** begun in 2 Cor. 8:1.
2. Yet, brethren who argue for *unlimited benevolence* want to hang their hats here because the recipients will glorify God for the “liberality of your contribution **to them and to all.**”
 - a. This is interpreted to mean that this contribution was “to *them* (Christians) and to *all* (all others – non-Christians)
 - b. If your translation has “all *men*,” you should know that “men” is not in the Greek text.
3. God’s answer is in the text:
 - a. As mentioned before, the word “all” must be determined by the **context**:
 - i. Here again Paul says He is addressing the “ministry to **the saints**” (2 Cor. 9:1).
 - ii. This gift resulted in **thanksgiving** because it supplied the **needs of the saints** (2 Cor. 9:12).
 - iii. This gift was a “**fellowship**,” seeing the word “contribution” is *koinonia*, the same word translated **fellowship** in 2 Cor. 8:4.
 - b. So, **saints**, those in fellowship with the givers, were the recipients.

4. **1 Tim. 5:3-16**

- a. **Individual Christians** are to relieve **their widows**, and **the church** is not to be burdened with their care (5:4, 8, 16)
- b. **The church** is to relieve those who are “**widows indeed**,” who were obviously **Christians** (1 Tim. 5:3, 5, 16).
 - i. Chart: “The Widow Indeed”
 - ii. Chart: “Who Relieved Whom?”

F. **Galatians 6:10:**

1. Although some seek to argue that “we” who are to do good to all means “we churches,” the context shows that the “we” means “we as individuals.”
2. This is seen in how...

- a. Paul includes himself in the “us” and “we.”
 - b. It is the “us” and “we” that reap from doing good, and is parallel to Paul’s usage of “we” in 2 Cor. 5:10, where he states, “For **we** must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that **each one** may receive the things *done* in the body, according to what **he** has done, whether good or bad.”
 - c. So, like in 2 Cor. 5:10, “we” refers to the group as individuals, which is how *we* will appear before God in judgement.
3. This same approach and understanding applies to passage like James 1:27, Eph. 4:28, etc.
- G. Because **the NT pattern show churches helping needy saints**, a **church’s benevolence must be limited to needy saints**.
- 1. This is essentially the same argument that we have made down through the years against **instrumental music** and **infant baptism**.
 - a. Chart: “Saints-Only and Singing”
 - b. Chart: “Benevolence and Believer’s Baptism”
 - c. Chart: “Church Sponsored Benevolence”
 - 2. Since there is **no scriptural authority** for the church to provide benevolence for those who are **not saints**, to do so is to **act presumptuously** and without God’s authority, and **the consequences are grave** indeed.
 - 3. Chart: “If It’s Not In The Bible....”

IV. Arguments defending unlimited benevolence:

- A. Many seek to defend unlimited benevolence by the local church by claiming that the local church can do whatever the individual Christian is commanded to do?
- 1. So, it is argued that if the individual Christian is commanded by God to help all people, then the local church can do it also.
 - 2. **V. E. Howard**: “The church is composed of Christians; what the church does, Christians do; what Christians do, the church does, generally speaking. We cannot separate the Christian’s work from the work of the church...Actually we may say that whatever is the duty of a Christian is the duty of a congregation of Christians.” (*Institutionalism, Orphan Homes and Church Cooperation*, pp. 6, 7)
 - a. Who made this rule or established this principal of biblical interpretation?
 - b. Where is the passage that indicates this is the truth?
 - c. The individual Christians has duties to business, neighbors, his/her spouse, children, etc., that the local church does not!
 - 3. The individual Christian is not a local church (Matt. 18:15-17).
 - a. One must go to the offender individually—not the local church.
 - b. Take two or three brethren as witnesses—still not the local church.
 - c. Afterwards, one can take it to the local church.
 - 4. And individual Christian’s money is not the local church’s money (Acts 5:3-4 – “But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? ⁴ While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control?...”).
 - 5. The work an individual Christians does is not necessarily the work of the local church (1 Tim. 5:16 – “If any believing man or woman has widows, let them relieve them, and do not let the church be burdened, that it may relieve those who are really widows.”).
 - 6. And, I might add that the local church has works it does that cannot be fulfilled individually, such as partaking of the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:17-34).
 - 7. Trying to justify church action by passages addressing individual Christian action is like trying to justify instrumental music by passages addressed to O.T. Jews!

CONCLUSION:

- 1. The individual Christian as he has ability and opportunity has the primary responsibility when it comes to benevolence.

2. All scripture relating to the local church's work in benevolence finds them being instructed to and exemplified as helping needy Christians.
3. Unlimited benevolence by local churches is without authority, being an addition to the word of God.