



The Good News

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“Pure and undefiled religion...”

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There is an overwhelming belief, in both religious and secular circles, that churches are to be benevolent organizations. While churches in our community are involved in numerous activities designed to help the less fortunate of our society, it may come up in conversation that our congregation is not involved in similar activities. In these discussions with others, there may be confused faces when you tell them that the Lord's church is not authorized to be involved in “social benevolence”. Or perhaps you yourself may be confused as to why our congregation does not involve itself in philanthropic pursuits of the material kind. Our goal this morning in this article and our sermon is to address the issue of the benevolent church so that we may understand and teach others why the church of Christ is not to be involved in the social activities that other churches think are good and necessary.

In discussing matters of church benevolence with others, **James 1:27** is inevitably used as a proof-text to suggest that churches should be involved with helping the less fortunate of our society. However, let's examine this text to see if this is the case: **Context:** In **James 1:26-27**, we find this passage in a context of being doers of the Word and not hearers only (v.22). We read pronouns such as “he” (v.23), “he” (v.25), and “every man” (v.19). In fact, the first time we see any reference at all to the church is in **James 2:2** and even in this context the command is on an individual basis (“your assembly”, (v.2), “you” (v. 3), “you” (v.4)). Even the condemnation for showing partiality in verse 4 is towards individuals in saying that those who show partiality have become “judges with evil thoughts”. So, our context is most certainly talking to individuals, not churches. However, what does the text itself say? “If anyone among you thinks he is religious,” (v.26) and “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.” (v.27) No matter how much this passage is twisted, it can never be made to say that this command is to a church. **Actual Command:**

Another issue is the fact that the command is to “visit orphans and widows in their trouble”. These are very specific categories of people, and most churches do not limit their benevolence to just these two categories in their benevolent activities. But even so, people argue that it is the “spirit of the command” that we help those who are in need. This leads us to our next point.

“Whatever an individual can do, a church can do.” When faced with the fact that **James 1:27** is referring to individuals, some may use the premise that churches can do anything that individuals can do because, after all, the church is made up of individuals. While individuals can conglomerate together, pool funds, establish “cause” foundations, and pursue nearly any benevolent pursuit the heart desires, churches cannot do this. To show this point, **1 Timothy 5:15** teaches us that if any member of a church has a widow in their family, that individual is to take care of her, and the church cannot. We also learn that there are very specific circumstances under which a widow can be supported by the church, not the least of which is that she herself is to be a Christian.

So, if the church is not to fulfill **James 1:27**, how can I fulfill it? There are numerous ways that we can show a benevolent heart to those who are less fortunate. We can always donate our money, goods, and time to charities and other non-church affiliated groups. But if we truly wish to help others, we do not have to look far. Giving of our means at worship (as commanded) enables the church to do far better than help others physically; the funds a church collects can be used to help needy Christians, support preachers, and spread the word of God to a lost and dying generation of people who think that a church is a means of material gain for them. So, if you feel the need to show benevolence, as we all should, help those around you as you have the opportunity and give of your means at worship. In these two ways, we can be Scripturally sound in our efforts to help others, as opposed to taking liberties with God's word.