

The Work, and the Work Apart from the Work

Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”

Then I said, “Here am I. Send me!”

-Isaiah 6:8-

When you visit a U.S. military installation, whether it is a land base or an aircraft carrier at sea, you will find that the installation is basically a self-sufficient city. It has everything it needs to function independently: living quarters, dining facilities, shopping centers, medical services, firefighters, police, transportation, utilities, and of course the essentials for its military operations. The facilities and services are funded by the government to support the performance of the mission. But there are certain necessary activities that the government does not fund, and therefore individual members have taken it upon themselves to perform those activities that I call “work apart from the work.”

Like-minded individuals get together to form clubs called “professional organizations.” The purpose of these organizations is to do the “work apart from the work” that benefits individuals and thereby contributes to the quality of the military as an institution. Such organizations facilitate professional networking, comradeship, and mentoring, all of which aid in the development of future leaders. These clubs also perform a great deal of community service to promote a positive relationship between the military and civilians. Participation is, of course, voluntary. The benefits provided by these organizations are immeasurable.

But make no mistake: these organizations are solely the work of individuals, not a work of the military itself. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines do not put “mission money” into these extracurricular clubs. The existence of these professional organizations allows the military institution to focus on its military mission while still leveraging the individual talents of its voluntary members to accomplish these other needs. Another benefit is that if a professional organization does something wrong, that organization is held liable and the military institution is shielded from responsibility.

What can we learn from this as Soldiers of Christ? Let us begin by noting that, just as the military has its mission and there is other “work apart from the work” that is done by individuals, so also the local church has a mission, and there is other “work apart from the work” that is done by individuals. The church’s mission is carried out in three functions: evangelism, edification, and benevolence. These comprise what we call the “work of the church.”

The Scriptures authorize the local church to fund, organize, oversee, staff, and perform its own mission work. For example, in Acts 6:1-6, we read that the church in Jerusalem began to have a problem with its benevolence activities. The Apostles had been participating in that work themselves, but it grew so big that it began to detract from their ability to perform their work as evangelizers. So the local church appointed seven deacons to conduct the benevolence program and the Apostles focused on spreading God’s Word.

Then there is work done by individuals...the “work apart from the work.” Such works are the responsibility of individuals and include personal evangelism, visiting the sick, helping the needy, family management, conducting private Bible studies, and much more.

Some works can be accomplished by either the church or individuals. But if the local church is to focus on its mission (evangelism, edification, and benevolence), it must not be distracted by activities that unnecessarily sap away the church’s resources. The “let not the church be burdened” principle of 1 Timothy 5:16 teaches us that if something can be done by individuals, rather than by the church, it *should* be done by individuals. Let us consider some examples.

The church building and property require maintenance. The church *could* use its funds to pay contractors to do the lawn care, clean the building, maintain the baptistery, prepare the communion, and a plethora of other activities. But if there are members in the church who are willing and able to do it as volunteers, “let not the church be burdened.” Those funds are better saved for the mission.

Bible classes qualify as both evangelism and edification. When the local church decides to have a Bible class program, whether it is “Sunday school” or “midweek” or any other time, the church can oversee the selection of the study topic and materials, appoint teachers, and provide the place to host the study, such as a classroom in the church building. And sometimes individuals decide to host their own Bible studies. When individuals, acting in the capacity as individuals, decide to plan, organize, oversee, or conduct their own Bible studies, “let not the church be burdened.” In other words, the church is not obligated to fund such works. This separation ensures that the church is able to focus on its mission, and also shields the church from responsibility for the unapproved behavior of individuals.

There are many more such examples, and the leaders of the church hold meetings to discuss the work of the church. Sometimes these are called “business meetings.” If a church has elders, the elders are responsible for the final decisions. But in the absence of elders, the men of the church hold these business meetings to make decisions. After discussion, proposals are normally put to a vote. Sometimes “majority rules,” and sometimes even a single dissenter can put a stop to a proposed action. But I have one gripe about these meetings: member involvement. Too many men will vote to support a work, but in reality, they are voting for someone *else* to contribute the effort. Their vote really means, “I’ll not stand in the way while someone else carries the load.” We have too many men who are able-bodied but unwilling to participate in the work they vote to support. The Christian Soldier will both raise his hand AND step forward, saying “Here am I, Lord, send me!”