



**James 1:27 -- Undefined
Religion**

By Keith Greer

"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." {James 1:27}

Over the past three decades, this passage has been the subject of much controversy. Many of our own brethren use it to justify and defend the church's use of the Lord's treasury to support homes for widows and homes for orphans. Let me begin by saying that we are instructed to care for the widows and orphans. This is part of what the Bible defines as "pure religion." The bigger question that must be answered is HOW? According to some, this can never be accomplished except by contributing to an established home for orphans or widows. Let's try to clear up some of the difficulty surrounding this passage.

"Blessed is the man who endures temptation; for when he has been proved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him." {James 1:12} To whom is the passage addressed; who endures temptation -- the man or the church? Who will receive the crown of life -- the man or the church?

"But each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed." {James 1:14} Who is tempted and drawn away; who has desires and is enticed -- the individual, not the church!

"... let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, and slow to wrath." {James 1:19} To whom are these admonitions addressed -- the individual or the church?

"For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man observing his natural face in a mirror; for he observes himself, goes away, and immediately forgets what kind of man he was. But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues

in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does. If anyone among you thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his own heart, this one's religion is useless." {James 1:23-26}

Who is a hearer and not a doer?

Who looks into the mirror?

Who continues in the law?

Who is blessed in his deeds?

Who must bridle his tongue?

Who deceives his own heart?

Whose religion is vain?

All seven of these questions have the same answer. The individual, not the church, can do all of these things. Our brethren figured out a way around this little problem. "Whatever the individual does, the church can do, because the church is made up of individuals." Is this thinking correct?

Since the church acts through individuals, then it can act in any capacity that the individual can. Does this apply only to benevolence? In order to be consistent, it must be true in every other area. How far are those who take this position willing to go? I can buy land, bonds, and invest in the stock market to gain money. Can the church also do these things? Could the church, during an election year, issue political statements in favor of a particular candidate? Could the church contribute to that candidate's campaign? An individual can engage in business to earn a profit. Can the church do so?

Of course, those who defend these practices want to narrow the playing field to include only the "religious arena." They say: "What the individual may do, religiously speaking, the church may also do." Some even go one step further and limit it to matters of benevolence. Yet, all this amending does not solve the problem. The argument still defends the basic principle that the church, collectively, may carry out the individual's duties. Let's examine this reasoning.

Some say that the passage, though addressed to individuals, does not rule out collective action by the church. This resurrects the old argument that silence gives authority -- where does it say we cannot support human institutions? We must understand that silence authorizes nothing! To have God's blessing and acceptance, we must do only those things that have His divine approval. Did God have to enumerate, along with what He expects from those who strive to obey His will, everything He doesn't expect? For example, when God tells us to sing (1 Corinthians 14:14; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16), does He also have to tell us that this prohibits the use of instruments? No -- when He said to sing, He excluded all other forms of music.

Let us examine more closely the terms in this passage:

VISIT -- "to inspect, look upon, care for, exercise oversight." (Vine)

FATHERLESS -- "simply orphans -- no father." (Vine)

Both Thayer and Vine tell us that God's word also uses the word translated "visit" concerning visiting the poor, the sick, and the afflicted. Should the church build hospitals?

AFFLICTION -- "properly pressing, pressing together, pressure. In the Bible, oppression, tribulation, distress. (Thayer) Vine says "anything that burdens the Spirit." Notice what is not in the text -- HOME, BENEVOLENCE, CHURCH, MONEY. The passage used as proof text by those who advocate that the church build and support these homes does not mention what they most need it to mention!

What does this passage mean? Christians do not hate orphans and oppress widows. The church should engage in benevolent work. In 1 Timothy 5:8-16, Paul gave instruction for helping those who are "widows indeed." Why? That the church might not be charged with the care of all widows, only those who meet the Biblical requirements.

The James 1:27 passage is the only one that mentions orphans, and it is addressed to the individual, not the church. Therefore, we have no divine authority for the church to get into this realm of benevolence.

The verse gives instruction for practicing "pure religion." It ends with the admonition to "keep oneself unspotted from the world." Each Christian is responsible for keeping himself pure (1 Timothy 5:22; Matthew 5:8; Romans 12:1,2; 1 John 2:15-17). Only if each does so can Jesus present the church as a "glorious church without spot or wrinkle" (Ephesians 5:27). It is sad that some go to such great lengths to defend what has no scriptural authority. The Bible clearly distinguishes between the individual and the church and what each can do. Mixing them causes us to arrive at the wrong conclusions. God requires individuals, as we have opportunity and ability, to relieve the needs of widows and orphans. Some say that individuals fail in this area, so the church must pick up the slack. Sadly, such human reasoning puts one at odds with God. Two wrongs do not make a right.