

Collective Nouns

1 Corinthians 5:9-13

Introduction: This is not just an English lesson, but it is a lesson that addresses several different topics. Topics like withdrawal, benevolence and the support of widows are all affected by our understanding of collective nouns. Properly understanding collective nouns will help us come to a proper understanding of God's instructions in these topics.

I. Definition - Collective nouns.

A. "A collective noun is a singular noun that names a group of people or things (a collection). These nouns may take a singular or a plural verb, depending on meaning." [Student Handbook, *The Southwestern Company*, p. 8]

B. Biblical examples: congregation, herd, flock, family, church, brethren.

II. The problem with collective nouns.

A. Is the collective noun singular action or individual action? Did it occur as a unit or individually?

B. Example of individual action: Acts 12:5, the collective noun church is found. The verse says the church prayed for Peter. There is no indication that the church was assembled (ref. Acts 14:27). Did the church pray together as a unit or did they pray individually? How do we know?

C. Example of unit action: 1 Tim. 5:16, the collective noun "church" is found. It seems obvious from the context that the phrase, "let not the church be charged," means do not take it out of the church treasury. But how do we know?

III. The solution.

A. Determining whether the collective noun indicates unit action or individual action is solved by looking at the pronoun that refers to the collective noun. "A pronoun which refers to a collective noun is singular if the group acts as a unit; but the pronoun is plural if the individuals of the group acts as individuals." [Plain English Handbook, *Walsh*, p. 27.]

B. For example: "The **club** voted to change *its* meeting time and location." The singular is used above because the meeting time and location are for the entire club as one unit. "The city **council** argued among *themselves*." The plural is correct in this example because the individual council members were arguing." [Student Handbook, *The Southwestern Company*, p. 12]

IV. Application.

A. Applied to 1 Tim. 5:16. "... and do not let the **church** be burdened, that *it* (singular pronoun) may relieve those who are really widows." This proves unit action. Therefore, it means the church treasury should not be used in this case.

B. Applied to Gal. 6:10. "... as *we* (plural pronoun) have opportunity, let *us* (plural pronoun) do good to all..." The collective noun for these pronouns is **brethren** in Gal. 6:1. This proves individual action. Therefore, each of us should do good.

C. Applied to 2 Thes. 3:6ff. "...**brethren**, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that *you* withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly... For *you yourselves* (plural pronoun) know how *you* ought to follow us..." The pronoun "you" can be singular or plural; therefore, it is inconclusive. However, "yourselves" is plural making it clear we are talking about individual action. Some people argue that withdrawal is a church action (Matt. 18:17); therefore, the individual can still fellowship an erring brother as long as he doesn't do so as the church. Yet, this proves it is the work of individual members to withdraw our fellowship (2 Cor. 2:6).

D. In fact, many books of the Bible are written to particular churches. Collective nouns are common throughout these writings. However, if we pay attention to the pronouns that refer to the collective noun, then we will clearly understand whether we have unit action or individual action. Let's try 1 Cor. 5:9-13. The pronouns "you" and "yourselves" are referring back to the collective noun in 1 Cor. 4:6 of "brethren." We understand "yourselves" is plural and therefore "you" is plural as well. This means Paul is giving instruction for the individual members to observe. In particular, we as individuals are not to keep company with a marked brother.

Conclusion: The proper understanding of collective nouns will insure a proper understanding of the meaning of many passages. We can also see how some people come to the wrong conclusions when they don't apply these basic English grammar rules. We have been charged to properly divide the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). Let us always strive to do the same.