

The Churches Founded by the Apostles

by Watchman Nee

The Church is one, invisible, and spiritual, but its members are scattered throughout the earth, and local churches are formed on the basis of locality.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, Matthew 18:17, Acts 14:23, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 1 Corinthians 4:17, 1 Corinthians 10:32, 1 Corinthians 11:16, 1 Corinthians 16:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:14, Revelation 2:1

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Local vs. Universal Church"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the distinction between the universal Church and local churches, explaining that while the Church is one body, the apostles established separate churches based on locality. He clarifies that the term 'church' refers to the assembly of believers in a specific place, and that the division into local churches is divinely ordained to reflect the physical gathering of believers. Nee warns against the dangers of sectarianism and the importance of maintaining the local character of churches, asserting that each church should be independent yet spiritually connected to others. He concludes that the only scriptural basis for church division is geographical locality, and that true unity in Christ transcends physical boundaries.

Transcript

THE CHURCH AND THE CHURCHES

The Word of God teaches us that the Church is one. Why then did the apostles found separate churches in each of the places they visited? If the Church is the Body of Christ, it cannot but be one. Then how does it come about that we speak of churches?

The word "church" means "the called-out ones." The term is used twice in the Gospels, once in Matthew 16:18 and once in Matthew 18:17, and we meet it quite frequently in the Acts and the Epistles. In the Gospels the word is used on both occasions by our Lord, but it is employed in a somewhat different sense each time.

"You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18).

What church is this? Peter confessed that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God, and our Lord declared that He would build His Church upon this confession--the confession that as to His Person He is

the Son of God, and as to His work He is the Christ of God. This Church comprises all the saved, without reference to time or space, that is, all who in the purpose of God are redeemed by virtue of the shed blood of the Lord Jesus, and are born again by the operation of His Spirit. This is the Church universal, the Church of God, the Body of Christ.

"And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church" (Matt. 18:17). The word "church" is used here in quite a different sense from the sense in Matthew 16:18. The sphere of the church referred to here is clearly not as wide as the sphere of the Church mentioned in the previous passage. The Church there is a Church that knows nothing of time or place, but the church here is obviously limited both to time and place, for it is one that can hear you speak. The Church mentioned in chapter sixteen includes all the children of God in every locality, while the church mentioned in chapter eighteen includes only the children of God living in one locality; and it is because it is limited to one place that it is possible for you to tell your difficulties to the believers of whom it is composed. Obviously the church here is local, not universal, for no one could speak at one time to all the children of God throughout the universe. It is only possible to speak at one time to the believers living in one place.

We have clearly two different aspects of the Church before us--the Church and the churches, the universal Church and the local churches. The Church is invisible; the churches are visible. The Church has no organization; the churches are organized. The Church is spiritual; the churches are spiritual and yet physical. The Church is purely an organism; the churches are an organism, yet at the same time they are organized, which is seen by the fact that elders and deacons hold office there.¹

All Church difficulties arise in connection with the local churches, not with the universal Church. The latter is invisible and spiritual, therefore beyond the reach of man, while the former is visible and organized, therefore still liable to be touched by human hands. The heavenly Church is so far removed from the world that it is possible to remain unaffected by it, but the earthly churches are so close to us, that if problems arise there we feel them acutely. The invisible church does not test our obedience to God, but the visible churches test us severely by facing us with issues on the intensely practical plane of our earthly life.

THE BASIS OF THE CHURCHES

In the Word of God we find "the church of God" spoken of in the singular (1 Cor. 10:32), but we find the same Word referring to the "churches of God" in the plural (1 Thes. 2:14). How has this unity become a plurality? How has the Church which is essentially one become many? The Church of God has been divided into the churches of God on the one ground of difference of locality.¹ Locality is the only scriptural basis for the division of the Church into churches.

The seven churches in Asia, referred to in the book of Revelation, comprised the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamos, the church in Thyatira, the church in Sardis, the church in Philadelphia, and the church in Laodicea. They were seven churches, not one. Each was distinct from the others on the ground of the difference of locality. It was only because the believers did not reside in one place that they did not belong to one church. There were seven different churches simply because the believers lived in seven different places. Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea are clearly all the names of places. Not only were the seven churches in Asia founded on the basis of locality, but all the churches mentioned in Scripture were founded on the same basis. Throughout the Word of God we can find no name attached to a church save the name of a place, for example, the church in Jerusalem, the church in Lystra, the church in Derbe, the church in Colosse, the church in Troas,

the church in Thessalonica, the church in Antioch. This fact cannot be overemphasized, that in Scripture no other name but the name of a locality is ever connected with a church, and division of the church into churches is solely on the ground of difference of locality.

Spiritually the Church of God is one; therefore, it cannot be divided--but physically its members are scattered throughout the earth; therefore, they cannot possibly live in one place.² Yet it is essential that there be a physical gathering together of believers. It is not enough that they be present "in the spirit"; they must also be present "in the flesh." Now a church is composed of all "the called-out ones assembled" in one place for worship, prayer, fellowship, and ministry. This assembling together is absolutely essential to the life of a church. Without it, there may be believers scattered throughout the area, but there is really no church. The Church exists because of the existence of its members, and it does not require that they meet in a physical way; but it is essential to the very existence of a church that its members gather together in a physical way. It is in this latter sense that the word "church" is used in 1 Corinthians 14. The phrase "in the church" (vv. 19, 23, 28) means "in the church meetings." A church is a church assembled. These believers are not separated from other believers in any respect but that of their dwelling places. As long as they continue in the flesh, they will be limited by space, and this physical limitation, which in the very nature of things makes it impossible for God's people to meet in one place, is the only basis sanctioned by God for the forming of separate churches. Christians belong to different churches for the sole reason that they live in different places. That division is merely external. In reality the church as the Body of Christ cannot be divided; therefore, even when the Word of God refers to the different assemblies of His people, the places named vary, but it is still "the church" in every one of these places, such as "the church in Ephesus," "the church in Smyrna," "the church in Pergamos."

In the New Testament there is one method and one alone of dividing the Church into churches, and that God-ordained method is division on the basis of locality. All other methods are man-made, not God-given. May the Spirit of God engrave this truth deeply on our hearts, that the only reason for the division of God's children into different churches is because of the different places in which they live.

What is a New Testament church? It is not a building, a gospel hall, a preaching center, a mission, a work, an organization, a system, a denomination, or a sect. People may apply the term "church" to any of the above; nevertheless they are not churches. A New Testament church is the meeting together for worship, prayer, fellowship, and mutual edification, of all the people of God in a given locality, on the ground that they are Christians in the same locality. The Church is the Body of Christ; a church is a miniature Body of Christ. All the believers in a locality form the church in that locality, and in a small way they ought to show forth what the Church should show forth. They are the Body of Christ in that locality, so they have to learn how to come under the headship of the Lord, and how to manifest oneness among all the members, guarding carefully against schism and division.

THE BOUNDARY OF A LOCALITY

We have seen that all the churches in Scripture are local churches, but the question naturally arises, What is a scriptural locality? If we note what places are mentioned in God's Word in connection with the founding of churches, then we shall be able to determine what the extent of a place must be to justify its being regarded as a unit for the forming of a church.

In Scripture the localities which determine the boundary of a church are neither countries, nor provinces, nor districts.

Nowhere do we read of a national church, or a provincial church, or of a district church. We read of the church in Ephesus, the church in Rome, the church in Jerusalem, the church in Corinth, the church in Philippi, and the church in Iconium. Now what kind of places are Ephesus, Rome, Jerusalem, Corinth, Philippi, and Iconium? They are neither countries, nor provinces, nor districts, but simply places of convenient size for people to live together in a certain measure of safety and sociability. In modern language we should call them cities. That cities were the boundaries of churches in the apostolic days is evident from the fact that on the one hand Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23), and on the other hand Paul instructed Titus to "appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5).

In the Word of God we see no church that extends beyond the area of a city, nor do we find any church which does not cover the entire area. A city is the scriptural unit of locality. From Genesis and Joshua we learn that cities in olden days were the places where people grouped together to live; they were also the smallest unit of civil administration, and each possessed an independent name. Any place is qualified to be a unit for the founding of a church which is a place where people group together to live, a place with an independent name, and a place which is the smallest political unit. Such a place is a scriptural city and is the boundary of a local church. Large cities such as Rome and Jerusalem are only units, while small cities such as Iconium and Troas are likewise units. Apart from such places where people live a community life, there is no scriptural unit of the churches of God.

Questions will naturally arise concerning large cities such as London. Are they counted as one unit-locality, or more than one? London is clearly not a city in the scriptural sense of the term, and it cannot therefore be regarded as a unit. Even people living in London talk about going "into the city," or "into town," which reveals the fact that, in their thinking, London and "the city" are not synonymous. The political and postal authorities, as well as the man on the street, regard London as more than one unit. They divide it respectively into boroughs and postal districts. What they regard as an administrative unit, we may well regard as a church unit.

As to country-places which could not technically be termed cities, they may also be regarded as unit-localities. It is said of our Lord, when on earth, that He went out into the cities and villages (Luke 13:22), from which we see that country-places, as well as towns, are considered to be separate units.

This division of churches according to locality is a demonstration of the marvelous wisdom of God. Had God ordained that the Church be divided into churches with the country as their boundary, then in the event of one country being vanquished and absorbed by another, the church would have to change its sphere. Were a province to mark the limit of a church, the sphere of the churches would be frequently altered because of the frequent change of provincial boundary. The same holds true in respect of a district. The most stable of all political units is a village, a town, or a city. Governments, dynasties, and countries may change, but cities are seldom affected by any political change. There are cities that have passed from one country to another and still have their original name, and there are cities in existence today that have retained the same name for centuries. So we see the divine wisdom in decreeing that a locality should fix the boundary of a church.

Since the limits of a locality mark the limits of a church, then no church can be narrower than a locality, and none wider.

The Word of God recognizes only two churches, the universal Church and the local churches; there is no third church whose sphere is narrower than the local, or else wider than the local and yet narrower than

the universal Church. A local church admits of no possible division, and it admits of no possible extension. You cannot narrow its sphere by dividing it into several smaller churches, nor can you widen its sphere by linking several local churches together. Any church smaller than a local church is not a scriptural church, and any church larger than a local church, and yet smaller than the universal Church, is not a scriptural church either.

NOT NARROWER THAN A LOCALITY

We read in 1 Corinthians 1:2 of "the church of God which is in Corinth." Corinth was a unit-locality, and the church in Corinth, a unit-church. When discord crept in and its members were on the point of splitting the church into four different factions, Paul wrote, rebuking them: "Each of you says, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ...."

Are you not men of flesh?" (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4). Had these people formed four different groups, they would have been sects, not churches, for Corinth was a city, and that is the smallest unit which warrants the forming of a church. The church of God in Corinth could not cover a lesser area than the whole city, nor could it comprise a lesser number of Christians than all the Christians who lived there. This is Paul's definition of the church in Corinth--"to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, the called saints" (1:2). To form a church in an area smaller than a unit-locality is to form it on a smaller basis than a scriptural unit, and it follows that it cannot be a scriptural church. Any group of believers less than all the believers in a place is not qualified to be a separate church. The unit of the church must correspond with the unit of the locality. A church must cover the same area as the locality in which it is found. If a church is smaller than a locality, then it is not a scriptural church; it is a sect.

To say, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Cephas," is obviously sectarian; but to say, "I am of Christ," is sectarian too, though less obviously so. The confession, "I am of Christ," is good as a confession, but it is not an adequate basis for forming a separate church, since it excludes some of the children of God in a given locality by including only a certain section who say, "I am of Christ." That every believer belongs to Christ is a fact, whether that fact be declared or not; and to differentiate between those who proclaim it and those who do not, is condemned by God as carnal. It is the fact that matters, not the declaration of it. The sphere of a church in any place does not merely include those in that place who say,

"I am of Christ," but all in that place who are of Christ. It extends over the entire area of the locality, and includes the entire number of the Christians in the locality.

To take one's stand as belonging to Christ alone is perfectly right, but to divide between Christians who take that stand and Christians who do not, is altogether wrong. To brand as sectarian those who say, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Cephas,"

and feel spiritually superior as we separate ourselves from them and have fellowship only with those who say, "I am of Christ," makes us guilty of the very sin we condemn in others. If we make non-sectarianism the basis of our fellowship, then we are dividing the church on a ground other than the one ordained of God, and thereby we form another sect. The scriptural ground for a church is a locality and not non-sectarianism. Any fellowship that is not as wide as the locality is sectarian. All Christians who live in the same place as I do, are in the same church as I am, and I dare exclude none. I acknowledge as my brother, and as a fellow member of my church, every child of God who lives in my locality.

There were a great number of believers in Jerusalem. We read of a multitude who turned to the Lord; yet they are all referred to as the church in Jerusalem, not the churches in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was a single place; therefore, it could only be counted as a single unit for the founding of a single church. You cannot divide the church unless you can divide the place. If there is only one locality, there can only be one church. In Corinth there was only the church in Corinth; in Hankow there is only the church in Hankow. We do not read of the churches in Jerusalem, or the churches in Ephesus, or the churches in Corinth. Each of these was counted as only one place; therefore, it was permissible to have only one church in each. As long as Jerusalem, Ephesus, and Corinth remain unit-localities, just so long do they remain unit-churches. If a locality is indivisible, then the church formed in that locality is indivisible.

NOT WIDER THAN A LOCALITY

We have just seen that the boundary of a church cannot be narrower than the locality to which it belongs. On the other hand, its boundary cannot be wider than the locality. In the Word of God we never read of the church in Macedonia, or the church in Galatia, or the church in Judea, or the church in Galilee. Why? Because Macedonia and Galilee are provinces, and Judea and Galatia are districts. A province is not a scriptural unit of locality; neither is a district. Both include a number of units; therefore, they include a number of separate churches and do not constitute one church. A provincial church or a district church is not according to Scripture, since it does not divide on the ground of locality, but combines a number of localities. It is because all scriptural churches are local churches that there is no mention of state churches, provincial churches, or district churches in the Word of God.

"Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria" (Acts 9:31, KJV). The Holy Spirit did not speak here of the church, but of the churches. Because there were a number of localities, there were also a number of churches. It was not God's plan to unite the churches of different places into one church, but to have a separate church in each place. There were as many churches as there were places.

"He passed through Syria and Cilicia, confirming the churches" (Acts 15:41). Again the reference is not to one single church, because Syria and Cilicia were vast districts, each comprising a number of different places. It is permissible in political circles to unite many different places into a district and call it Syria or Cilicia, but God does not unite the believers in a number of different places and call them the church in Syria, or the church in Cilicia. There may be unions or mergers in the commercial or political world, but God sanctions no combinations among the churches. Each separate place must have a separate church.

"All the churches of the Gentiles" (Rom. 16:4). The churches of God were not formed on national lines but on local lines; therefore, there is no mention of the church of the Gentiles, but of the churches of the Gentiles.

"The churches of Asia greet you" (1 Cor. 16:19). "The churches of Macedonia" (2 Cor. 8:1). "The churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2). "I was still unknown by face to the churches of Judea, which are in Christ" (Gal. 1:22). Asia, Macedonia, Galatia, and Judea were all areas comprising more than one locality-unit; therefore, the Word of God refers to the churches in these areas. A church according to the divine thought is always a church in one locality; any other kind of church is a product of the human mind.

God sanctions no division of the church within any one locality, and He sanctions no denominational combination of the churches in a number of localities. In Scripture there is always one church in one place, never several churches in one place, nor one church in several places. God does not recognize any

fellowship of His children on a basis narrower, or wider, than that of a locality.

Nanking is a city, and so is Soochow. Because each is a separate unit, each therefore has a separate church. The two places are both in the same country, and even in the same province, but because they are two separate cities, they must form two separate churches. Politically Glasgow and Nanking do not belong to the same province, or even the same country; yet the relationship between Nanking and Soochow is exactly the same as between Nanking and Glasgow.

Nanking and Soochow are as truly separate units as Nanking and Glasgow are. In the division of churches the question of country or province does not arise; it is all a question of cities. Two cities of the same country, or the same province, have no closer relationship than two cities of different countries or different provinces. God's intention is that a church in any one locality should be a unit, and in their relationship one to the other the different churches must preserve their local character.

When God's people throughout the earth really see the local character of the churches, then they will appreciate their oneness in Christ as never before. The churches of God are local, intensely local. If any factor enters in to destroy their local character, then they cease to be scriptural churches.

THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE CHURCHES

It was never God's purpose that a number of churches in different places should be combined under any denomination or organization, but rather that each one should be independent of the other. Their responsibilities were to be independent and their government likewise. When our Lord sent messages to His children in Asia, He did not address them as "the church in Asia," but "the seven churches which are in Asia." His rebuke of Ephesus could not be applied to Smyrna, because Smyrna was independent of Ephesus. The confusion in Pergamos could not be laid to the charge of Philadelphia, because Philadelphia was independent of Pergamos. And the pride of Laodicea could not be attributed to Sardis, because Sardis was independent of Laodicea. Each church stood on its own merits and bore its own responsibility. Since God's children lived in seven different cities, they consequently belonged to seven different churches. And since each was independent of the other, each had its own special commendation, or exhortation, or rebuke.

And not only were there these seven churches on earth; there were seven lampstands representing them in heaven. In the Old Testament there was only one lampstand with seven different branches, but in the New Testament there were seven distinct lampstands. Had the New Testament representation been the same as the Old, then believers in the seven Asiatic churches might have united to form one church; but there are now seven separate lampstands, each upon its own base, so that the Lord is able to walk "in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (Rev. 2:1). Therefore, though all churches stand under the authority of the one Head and express the life of the one Body (for they are all made of gold), still they are not united by any outward organization, but each stands on its own base, bearing its own responsibility, maintaining its local independence.

AMONG THE CHURCHES

This does not imply that the different local churches have nothing to do with one another, and that each can simply do as it pleases without considering the rest, for the ground of a church is the ground of the Body. Although they are unit-churches in outward management, still their inner life is one, and the Lord has made their members the members of one Body. There is no outward organization forming them into

one big combined unit, but there is a strong inward bond uniting them in the Lord. They have a oneness of life which knows nothing of the bounds of locality, and which leads the separate churches to uniform action despite the absence of all outward organization. In organization the churches are totally independent of one another, but in life they are one, and consequently interdependent. If one church receives revelation, the others should seek to profit by it. If one is in difficulty, the others should come to its aid. But while the churches minister one to the other, they should always preserve their independence of government and responsibility.

On the one hand, each church is directly under the authority of the Lord and responsible to Him alone; on the other hand, each must listen not only to His direct speaking, but to His speaking through the others. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," is our Lord's injunction to all (Rev. 2 and 3). In the introduction of His letters to the seven churches we find our Lord addressing the angel of each church, but at their close we find that His message to one particular church was also a message to all the churches. From this it is clear that what one church ought to do, all the churches ought to do. The responsibility of the churches is individual, but their actions should be uniform. This balance of truth ought to be carefully preserved.

We find the same teaching in the Epistles. "Because of this I have sent Timothy to you...who will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, even as I teach everywhere in every church" (1 Cor. 4:17). What Paul has taught "everywhere in every church," the Corinthians are called upon to lay to heart. There is not one kind of instruction for Corinth, and another kind of instruction for another place. What the apostles have been teaching to some of the churches, the believers in other churches must also note. And that applies to commandments as well as to matters of doctrine. "As the Lord has apportioned to each one...so let him walk. And so I direct in all the churches" (1 Cor. 7:17). The Lord could never give a command to one church which in any way contradicted His command to another church. His requirements for one group of His children were His requirements for all His children. "But if anyone seems to be contentious, we do not have such a custom of being so, neither the churches of God" (1 Cor. 11:16). The church in Corinth was apt to strike out on individual lines. All the other churches were going on together with the Lord. It was only Corinth that was out of step; therefore, Paul sought to bring it into line with the others. Today, alas! it is not just one church that has departed from God's way, but the majority of the so-called churches. It is a tragedy that today an injunction to follow "all the churches" would lead, not into, but away from, the will of God!

"Now concerning the collection for the saints, just as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also do" (1 Cor. 16:1). Paul is saying in effect, "Although you are independent of other churches, yet you must not disregard their example." A willingness to help one another, and to learn from one another, should mark the relationship between the various churches. What the more mature churches have learned from the Lord, the less experienced should be ready to learn from them. "For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus," wrote Paul to the Thessalonians (1 Thes. 2:14). The church in Thessalonica was younger than the churches in Judea; therefore, it was only fitting that they should learn from them.

There is a beautiful balance in the teaching of God's Word regarding the relationship between the various churches. On the one hand, they are totally independent of one another in matters relating to responsibility, government, and organization. On the other hand, they are to learn from one another and to keep pace with one another. But in everything it is essential to have both the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the pattern in God's Holy Word.

THE HIGHEST COURT

Since there is a spiritual relatedness between the various local churches, no one church may strike out on an individualistic line, and taking advantage of its independence, decide things after its own good pleasure. Each must rather cultivate a relationship with the other churches, seeking their sympathy and working with their spiritual good in view. On the other hand, since each is totally independent of the other, the decision of a church in any locality is absolutely final.

There is no higher court of appeal; the local court is the supreme court. There is no organization to whose control it must submit, nor is there any organization over which it exercises control. It has neither superiors nor subordinates. If any one is received or refused by a local church, its judgment in the matter must be regarded as absolutely decisive. Even should the decision be wrong, all that can be done is to appeal for a reconsideration of the case. The local church is the highest church authority. If other churches object to its decisions, all they can do is resort to persuasion and exhortation. There is no alternative course, because the relationship which exists between the churches is purely spiritual, not official.

If a brother who has been disciplined in Nanking moves to Soochow, and there proves himself to be innocent of the charge brought against him, then Soochow has full authority to receive him, despite the judgment of Nanking. Soochow is responsible for its actions to God, not to Nanking. Soochow is an independent church, and has therefore full authority to act as it thinks best. But because there is a spiritual relationship with Nanking, it is well for the brother in question not to be received before Nanking's mistake in judgment is pointed out to Nanking. If Nanking's relationship with the Lord is right, then it will pay attention to what Soochow has to say. But if it refuses to do so, Soochow cannot press anything against Nanking, because Nanking as a local church is directly responsible to the Lord alone, and has full authority to decide and act independently of Soochow. If the churches are spiritual, there will be no difficulty in their relationship one with the other.

But if they are not, and difficulties should arise, we must not seek to solve them by interfering in any way with their independence, for it is ordained by an all-wise God.

The organization of no one church is superior to another, nor is its authority greater. Many Christians regard Jerusalem as the mother-church, possessing supreme authority, but such a conception has its source in the human mind, not in the divine Word. Every church is locally governed and is directly responsible to God, not to any other church or organization. A local church is the highest Christian institution on earth. There is none above it to whom appeal can be made. A local church is the lowest scriptural unit, but it is also the highest scriptural organization. Scripture warrants no centralization in Rome which could give Rome authority over other local churches. This is God's safeguard against any infringement of the rights of His Son. Christ is the Head of the Church, and there is no other head in heaven or on earth.

There must be a spiritual relatedness among the churches if the testimony of the Body is to be preserved, but there must at the same time be an absolute independence of government if the testimony of the Head is to be maintained. Each church is under the immediate control of Christ, and is directly responsible to Him alone.

Then why, when a question arose concerning circumcision, did Paul and Barnabas go to Jerusalem to see the apostles and elders there? Because those who were responsible for the erroneous teaching in Antioch had come from Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was the place where this problem originated; therefore, it was to Jerusalem the apostles went to have it settled.

If a boy were caught in mischief, we would report his misdeeds to his father. In going to Jerusalem Paul and Barnabas were bringing the case to those who had control of the brethren who had created trouble, and once they brought the matter to the responsible source, a speedy settlement was effected. The elders in question were not the elders in Jerusalem, but the elders of Jerusalem; and the apostles were not the apostles of Jerusalem, but the apostles in Jerusalem. The former were the representatives of the church; the latter, the representatives of the work. Paul and Barnabas referred the matter to the apostles and elders, because the apostles had been responsible for teaching in the churches, and the elders for any decision made regarding local matters. When the apostles and elders both repudiated responsibility concerning the teaching propagated by these troublesome brethren from Jerusalem, Paul and Barnabas on their later visits to different places were able to show to the churches there "the decrees to keep which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem" (Acts 16:4). We must not infer from this that the elders of Jerusalem had any authority over other churches, but merely that they, as well as the apostles, repudiated the teaching of those who had gone out from them. Besides, in Jerusalem some of the apostles occupied the double office of elder and apostle.

HOW TO PRESERVE THE LOCAL CHARACTER OF THE CHURCHES

Since the churches of God are local, we must be careful to preserve their local character, their local sphere, and their local boundary. Once a church loses these, it ceases to be a scriptural church. Two things call for special attention if the local nature of a church is to be safeguarded.

In the first place, no apostle must exercise control in any official capacity over a church. That is contrary to God's order, and destroys its local nature by putting the imprint of an extra-local minister upon it. No apostle has the authority to establish a private church in any place. The church belongs to the locality, not to the worker. When people are saved by the instrumentality of any man, they belong to the church in the place where they live, not to the man through whom they were saved, nor to the organization he represents. If one or more churches are founded by a certain apostle, and that apostle exercises authority over them as belonging in a special sense to him or to his society, then those churches become sects, for they do not separate themselves from other Christians (saved through the instrumentality of other apostles) on the ground of difference of locality, but on the ground of the difference of instrumentality of salvation. Thus apostles become the heads of different denominations, and their sphere the sphere of their respective denominations, while the churches over which they exercise control become sects, each bearing the particular characteristic of its leader instead of the characteristic of a local church.

The Epistle to the Corinthians throws light on this subject. There was division among the believers in Corinth simply because they failed to realize the local character of the church and sought to make different apostles--Paul, Apollos, and Cephas--the ground of their fellowship. Had they understood the divinely-ordained basis for the division of the Church, they could never have said, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," for, despite their especial love for certain leaders, they would have realized that they belonged not to any one of them, but to the church in the locality in which they lived.

No worker may exercise control over a church or attach to it his name or the name of the society he represents. The divine disapproval will always rest on "the church of Paul," or "the church of Apollos," or

"the church of Cephas." In the history of the Church it has frequently happened that when God has given special light or experience to any individual, that individual has stressed the particular truth revealed or experienced, and gathered round him people who appreciated his teaching, with the result that the leader, or the truth he emphasized, has become the ground of fellowship. Thus sects have multiplied. If God's people could only see that the object of all ministry is the founding of local churches and not the grouping of Christians around any particular individual, or truth, or experience, or under any particular organization, then the forming of sects would be avoided. We who serve the Lord must be willing to let go our hold upon all those to whom we have ministered, and let all the fruits of our ministry pass into local churches governed entirely by local men. We must be scrupulously careful not to let the coloring of our personality destroy the local character of the church, and we must always serve the church, never control it. An apostle is servant of all and master of none. No church belongs to the worker; it belongs to the locality. Had it been clearly seen by the men who have been used of God throughout the history of the Church that all the churches of God belong to their respective localities, and not to any worker or organization used in their founding, then we should not have so many different denominations today.

Another thing is essential for the preservation of the local character of the church--its sphere must not become wider than the sphere of a locality. The current method of linking up companies of believers in different places who hold the same doctrinal views, and forming them into a church, has no scriptural foundation. The same applies to the custom of regarding any mission as a center, linking together all those saved or helped by them to constitute a "church" of that mission. Such so-called churches are really sects, because they are confined by the bounds of a particular creed, or a particular mission, not by and within the bounds of locality.

The reason God does not sanction the establishing of churches which combine companies of believers in different places is that the divinely-ordained basis for the forming of churches is thereby destroyed. Any "church" formed with a mission as its center is bound to be other than local, because wherever there is a center, there is also a sphere; and if the center of the church is a mission, then obviously its sphere is not the scriptural sphere of locality but the sphere of the mission. It clearly lacks the characteristic of a church, and can only be regarded as a sect. In the purpose of God, Jesus Christ is the center of all the churches, and the locality is their sphere.

Whenever a special leader, or a specific doctrine, or some experience, or creed, or organization, becomes a center for drawing together the believers of different places, then because the center of such a church federation is other than Christ, it follows that its sphere will be other than local. And whenever the divinely-appointed sphere of locality is displaced by a sphere of human invention, there the divine approval cannot rest. The believers within such a sphere may truly love the Lord, but they have another center apart from Him, and it is only natural that the second center becomes the controlling one. It is contrary to human nature to stress what we have in common with others; we always emphasize what is ours in particular. Christ is the common center of all the churches, but any company of believers that has a leader, a doctrine, an experience, a creed, or an organization as their center of fellowship, will find that that center becomes the center, and it is that center by which they determine who belongs to them and who does not. The center always determines the sphere, and the second center creates a sphere which divides those who attach themselves to it from those who do not.

Anything that becomes a center to unite believers of different places will create a sphere which includes all believers who attach themselves to that center and excludes all who do not. This dividing line will destroy the God-appointed boundary of locality, and consequently destroy the very nature of the churches of God.

Therefore, the children of God must see to it that they have no center of union apart from Christ, because any extra-local union of believers around a center other than the Lord enlarges the sphere of fellowship beyond the sphere of locality, and thus the specific characteristic of the churches of God is lost. There are no other churches in Scripture but local churches!

THE BENEFITS OF INDEPENDENCE

The divine method of making locality the boundary line between the different churches has various obvious advantages: (1) If each church is locally governed, and all authority is in the hands of the local elders, there is no scope for an able and ambitious false prophet to display his organizing genius by forming the different companies of believers into one vast federation, and then satisfy his ambition by constituting himself its head. Rome could never sway the power it does today had the churches of God maintained their local ground. Where churches are not affiliated, and where local authority is in the hands of local elders, a pope is an impossibility. Where there are only local churches, there can be no Roman Church.

It is the federation of different companies of believers that has brought such evils as dabbling in politics into the Church of God. There is power in a federated "church," but it is carnal power, not spiritual. God's thought for His Church is that she should be like a mustard seed on earth, full of vitality, yet scarcely noticed. It is federation that has brought the Church of today to the state of Thyatira. The failure of Protestantism is that it has substituted organized churches--State and Dissenting--for the Church of Rome, instead of returning to the divinely-ordained local churches.

(2) Further, if the churches retain their local character, the spread of heresy and error will be avoided, for if a church is local, heresy and error will be local too. Rome is a splendid illustration of the reverse side of this truth. The prevalence of Romish error is because of Romish federation. The sphere of the federated churches is vast; consequently the error is widespread. It is a comparatively simple matter to quarantine error in a local church, but to isolate error in a vast federation of churches is quite another proposition.

(3) The greatest advantage of having locality as the boundary of the churches is that it precludes all possibility of sects.

You may have your special doctrines and I mine, but as long as we are out to maintain the scriptural character of the churches by making locality the only dividing line between them, then it is impossible for us to establish any church for the propagation of our particular beliefs. As long as a church preserves its local character, it is protected against denominationalism, but as soon as it loses that, it is veering in the direction of sectarianism. A believer is sectarian when he belongs to anyone or anything apart from the Lord and the locality. Sects and denominations can only be established when the local character of the church is destroyed.

In the wisdom of God He has decreed that all His churches be local. This is the divine method of safeguarding them against sects. Obviously, it can only protect the Church against sectarianism in expression. It is still possible for a sectarian spirit to exist in a non-sectarian church, and only the Spirit of God can deal with that. May we all learn to walk after the Spirit and not after the flesh, so that both in outward expression and inward condition the churches of God may be well-pleasing to Him.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/watchman-nee/the-churches-founded-by-the-apostles/>

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