

The Church and the Work

I

Assembly Life

WATCHMAN NEE

Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc.

New York

THE CHURCH AND THE WORK
(In Three Volumes)

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ISBN 0-935008-57-8 Cloth Edition
ISBN 0-935008-58-6 Paper Edition

Available from the Publishers at:

11515 Allecingie Parkway
Richmond, Virginia 23235

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

In his many years of faithful service to the Lord, Watchman Nee was given much light and experience in matters concerning the church and the Work. From time to time he shared with his younger colleagues in the Work what God had shown him. Since what was shared proved to be of such great value and help to the younger brethren, his spoken ministry was subsequently compiled and published in successive stages. The first volume to appear on this particular subject of the church and the Work was entitled *Assembly Life*, which consisted of notes of a series of Bible studies the author conducted in Shanghai from February 19 to 26, 1934. It will be of interest to note that this particular Bible study series was held almost immediately after the Third Victory Conference had taken place in January 1934, at which the messages on *God's Plan and the Overcomers** were given. And hence these assembly life messages served as a supplement, or more exactly a complement, to the spiritual truths and principles released at that conference. Consequently, the emphasis of this first volume in the present trilogy is more on the practical outworking of the spiritual truths revealed, particularly as it has to do with assembly life.

These Bible studies proved to be not only timely but also needful. For it is necessary to realize that in the previous decade—commencing with the years 1926-27 when the work by Watchman Nee and a few others of kindred spirit began in Shanghai—God had

* Watchman Nee, *God's Plan and the Overcomers* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1977), translated from the Chinese as a synopsis of these messages, the original manuscript of the full text (containing over 100,000 words) having been destroyed during political upheavals in China.—*Translator*

raised up many brothers and sisters in different localities with the same vision as theirs; and there was therefore the need for clarification and instruction on the various aspects of assembly life.

After this first volume of the present trilogy was published and its contents carried into practice, many more assemblies were raised up and many more workers were, in the sovereignty of God, joined to the Work. As a result, in 1937 Watchman Nee convened two separate conferences in Shanghai and Hankow. The talks given there were directed towards his younger colleagues. “At these two conferences,” wrote the author later, “we sought in the first place to examine the teaching of God’s word concerning His churches and His Work, and in the second place to review our past missions in the light of our findings.”* Within a year afterwards the talks which Watchman Nee had delivered at these two conferences on the churches and the Work were published in Chinese at Shanghai in January 1938 under the title, *Rethinking the Work*. Later while in England on a visit during the years 1938-39, the author translated the volume into English at London where it was published in April 1939 under the title *Concerning Our Missions*** and which forms the second volume of the present trilogy on the church and the Work.

After the publication in Shanghai of *Rethinking the Work*, the Work in China expanded into the interior as a result of war (the Sino-Japanese conflict which erupted in mid-1937). Moreover, the workers became separated from one another due to the division of the country into Occupied and Free China. With the conclusion of the war in 1945, a new situation arose which required a further

* See his “Introduction” to *Rethinking the Work* (January 1938), in Volume Two of this present trilogy.—*Translator*

** Long afterwards, *Concerning Our Missions* has come to be more popularly known and read under the title of *The Normal Christian Church Life*, first published in the United States by the International Students Press (Washington, D.C.) in 1962.—*Translator*

reconsideration of the Work. This new situation centered around the need for better coordination in the Work as well as the need for additional workers. Once again fresh light was sought and given in the Scriptures. Training sessions were held at Kuling Mountain outside Foochow during the years of 1948 and 1949. At the first of these sessions on August 19, 1948, a talk was given by the author on the principles of “the church is local” and “the Work is regional,” which according to their respective emphasis later came to be known as “the Antioch principle” and “the Jerusalem principle.”* At these same sessions a further series of lectures was also delivered by him on the general topic of our behavior in the house of God. And thus the third volume of this present trilogy constitutes a compilation of these talks and is entitled *Church Affairs*.

Hence it can perhaps be seen why it has been thought valuable to add this third volume to the second even as the second has been added to the first. These three are not contradictory but are rather complementary, for through the years more light was given in the Scriptures and more experience was added to the practice. The first volume treats principally the basic subject of assembly life; the second volume deals preeminently with the topic of the church; while the third volume, although admittedly engaged in a general discussion of church affairs that relate to believers’ behavior in God’s house, is nonetheless primarily concerned with the matter of the Work, since such affairs are viewed from the standpoint of the Work itself.

In presenting these three volumes as a trilogy on the church and the Work, it might be useful to make a few remarks. *First of all*, it should be understood by the reader from the very outset that the contents of this trilogy is limited to the subject matter dealt with, that

* This talk serves as the opening chapter of Volume Three of this present trilogy.—
Translator

is to say, it is limited to the subject of the church and the Work. As the author himself pointed out when writing his Preface to the English translation of Volume Two of this present trilogy, he would have preferred to have had those books translated “which better represent” his ministry, for from today’s vantage point, the ministry of the author in its totality is of a much fuller and more spiritual nature than is that which is to be found in these three volumes now before the reader. Nevertheless, the technical side of Christianity cannot be neglected, because spiritual reality has its practical outworking. As Watchman Nee wrote in his introduction to *Rethinking the Work* (1938): “It is death to have a wine-skin without wine, but it is loss to have wine without a wine-skin. We must have the wine-skin after we have the wine. Paul wrote the Ephesian epistle, but he could also write the Corinthian epistle; and Corinthians presents us with Ephesian truths in practical expression.”

Second, in spite of the special character of this trilogy, which focuses on the practical aspect of the local church and the Work, it was far from Watchman Nee’s intention that these volumes should ever be followed as a manual. To the contrary, his real aim was to show the practicality of all spiritual truths.* Methods are mentioned as illustrations, not as mandatory procedures. Spiritual truths must be applied spiritually; that is to say, they need to be crystallized into forms given by the Holy Spirit at each particular time and in each set of circumstances. Hence principles never change, but practices will frequently need adjustments.

Third, the various contents of the volumes in this trilogy are presented according to the time sequence in which they were first

* See, for example, the author’s very clear remarks on this entire point in both his “Preface” (1939) and “Introduction” (1938) to *Concerning Our Missions*, which the reader can find in Volume Two of this present trilogy under the original title, of course, of *Rethinking the Work*.—Translator

presented. And thus they give us a more complete developmental understanding of the Scriptural concept of the churches and the Work as Watchman Nee gradually came to see it. There is, however, more than mere historical value to be gained from these volumes. The principles herein laid down are as relevant to our day as they were in the years in which they were first presented, even though the application of these truths is always to be flexible.

Fourth and finally, even though in these volumes Watchman Nee uses the terms “apostles,” “elders,” and “deacons,” it was clearly his understanding that it is the function, and *not* the title, of these offices which is essential. A New Testament church is not realized by simply having elders and deacons appointed, nor is the New Testament Work truly recognized by merely calling workers apostles. The reality, not the appearance, is what God is recovering today.

This trilogy on the church and the Work is now being released to the English-speaking world with the prayer that it may serve as a reference for all who diligently study God’s word and honestly desire to keep it.

Volume One
ASSEMBLY LIFE

TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

The purpose of God is to establish Christ—and not just the personal Christ but also the corporate Christ, which is the Church: “as the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of the body, being many, are one body; so also is the Christ” (1 Cor. 12.12 Darby). The work of the Holy Spirit in these past two thousand years has been centered on building this body of Christ. We will fail God in seeing His purpose and fail the Holy Spirit in cooperating with His work if we are not “holding fast the Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God” (Col. 2.19). The body of Christ is not only most spiritual but also most practical. It is an earthly testimony as well as a heavenly body. All its spiritual principles must be and can be practiced in a local assembly. Here in these pages, therefore, we shall find that Watchman Nee shares with us the practical aspects of the assembly life. He touches on such practical matters as authority in the church, ministry in the church, church fellowship, church meetings, and the boundary of a local assembly.

It is important for the reader to remember that this volume emphasizes only the practical side of the Church, and hence concentrates on the life of the local assembly. There is another side of the Church—that of the spiritual principles inherent in the Church universal—which is *not* the subject of this book. To maintain the right balance and to obtain the whole concept of the Church, both the principle and the practice, both the universal and the local, must be received and kept. For it must never be forgotten that a new wine-skin is for containing the new wine; and therefore the first without the second is meaningless.

May the Head of the Church find himself expressed corporately among His people.

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Being a sequence of messages given by the author during a series of Bible studies he conducted in Shanghai, China, from February 19th to 26th, 1934.

Scripture quotations are from the American Standard Version of the Bible (1901), unless otherwise indicated.

Introduction

The purpose of this special series of meetings is for us to search the word of God together on the particular subject of assembly life. At the outset we will not read all the passages in the Scriptures which touch upon this topic; we will only refer to them as we proceed in our Bible study.

During the Victory Conference recently concluded* and which preceded this special series of Bible study meetings, we touched on the will of God which He had planned before the foundation of the world. God's purpose is for men to have His life, and to be like His Son. His purpose is to establish Christ—yet not just the personal Christ but also the corporate Christ. And this corporate Christ is the Church. Thus, we have been made aware of the significance of the Church in the eyes of God today. Unfortunately, carnal believers currently pay no attention to God's emphasis, and even spiritual believers are failing to set their priority straight. They often replace the Church of God with their many works.

To substitute the Church of God with some work is what Satan tempts people to do today. But we know God's purpose from the beginning to the end is to obtain a corporate Christ—the Church—so that Christ himself may be the Head and the believers may be the members of the body. Yet how Satan is determined to destroy this plan! And that is why he deceives men into putting in place of the Church this or that work.

What do we mean when we say this? Well, today some greatly emphasize evangelism. They are substituting the work of evangelism

* An outline synopsis (96 pages) of the series of messages given at this conference by the author can be found in Watchman Nee, *God's Plan and the Overcomers* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1977), translated from the Chinese—*Translator*

for the Church. We know many are most able to preach the gospel and win souls, and no one can deny that evangelism is a good work. But to so make it a substitute for the Church that people will not think of the Church can turn out to be a deception of Satan. I believe what I say here ought to be emphasized because we need to see that the ultimate reason God wants the gospel preached is to prepare individual living stones for the corporate Christ, and it would therefore be wrong to substitute the Church with evangelism.

Some believers form missions, encouraging people to preach the gospel abroad. They are zealous in giving contributions and in sending people out. Yet why is it that today many of them only know missions but not the Church? This is because from eternity God's eyes have been upon the Church whereas in this age men's eyes have been upon missions; they have forgotten the Church.

“God never establishes missions; He only establishes the Church,” said Mr. Gordon. Yet today people create mission boards, set up evangelistic organizations, establish schools and hospitals, open orphanages and “endeavor” societies to help the needy ones. Are these undertakings good? They are all good. But if these are erected as substitutes for the Church, God will not be satisfied. Can we not see the cunning hand of the enemy in all this? Satan cleverly entices people to substitute the Church—which God has prepared in His eternal will to establish—with the work He will use. How we need to have our eyes opened so that we may focus our attention on the Church, since God's aim is the life of the Church—which is the life of the body of Christ.

Many Christians may declare that they have not formed missions, endeavor societies, Sunday schools, hospitals, schools, and so forth. That may be true; but let me ask this: What have you been doing? A great many of you think that as long as you are zealous, victorious and holy, you are fine. Allow me to speak frankly that these achievements are not what God is after, for they are not His ultimate

aim. I do not say zeal, victory and holiness are not important. All these *are* important. But God's ultimate aim does not lie in them. God wants a corporate Church, a spiritual home. He does not want isolated, individual stones or bricks. He desires a body, not just a member. He wants Christ to have the preeminence in the Church, to be her Head. Although stones and bricks are definitely needed, they do not answer to God's ultimate purpose.

During the years you have been a Christian, how often have you thought of what God really seeks? Have you ever thought of the Church? Or is it that what you ponder about is how to pray, how to overcome sin, how to lead sinners to Christ, or how to study the Bible well? Do you consider these matters or the Church? Since what God aims at is having the Church, then whatever falls short of it falls short of His aim. I do not say that these various matters mentioned are not significant and good. I only say that whatever comes short of the Church does not fulfill God's purpose. It is well to have Sunday schools, orphanages, "endeavor" societies, and gospel preaching. Nevertheless, such activities and establishments cannot be compared to the Church of God and must never be a substitution for it. God desires and greatly loves the Church. The Lord Jesus even died for the Church. And the Holy Spirit has been outpoured for the Church.

Throughout the New Testament we can find this very principle, that everything is for the Church: "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it" (Eph. 5.25). He has risen from the dead and is now far above all rule and authority and power and dominion. He is to be "head over all things to the church" (Eph. 1.22). Indeed, the Lord is building the Church upon this rock. The work of the Holy Spirit in these past two thousand years has been to establish the Church. God saves sinners and gives them victory in order to build the Church. He bestows apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers upon the Church for its edification. It is also declared that Christ is to sanctify the Church, "having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a

glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5.26,27). All this too is for the Church. The final goal of God is to have the New Jerusalem, which is a type or figure of the Church. The entire Bible, in fact, is centered upon this ultimate end.

Hence let me say emphatically that if today our aim, work and living are not for the Church—so as to accomplish this that the Lord desires—then we are a great failure. May the Lord have mercy on us, delivering us from our petty ideas so that we may enter into His thought and into that which God has revealed in the Bible.

As we have said, then, God’s aim is the Church. What He purposes to obtain is the New Jerusalem. And today He puts this purpose before men. He takes the Church, which New Jerusalem represents, and puts it as a unit in each city. Before New Jerusalem descends from heaven, God wants to have a miniature New Jerusalem in each city. This is to say that He wants to have a church in each city to manifest His eternal purpose. From start to finish, the greatest work of God is to build up the body of Christ. He would therefore like to establish a local assembly in each city. This serves as a miniature of the great Church of God—a diminutive manifestation of New Jerusalem—since the horizon of God’s purpose is too vast a thing to be grasped in its totality. And hence in every city there is a miniature. God gathers together all who are saved in the city and makes them a local assembly. Thus is the will of God manifested.

Perhaps it would be helpful to explain it in this way: Suppose you are going abroad by way of an ocean liner. You ask the clerk of the steamship company where your room is, for the ship is so huge that it looks like a city to you. The clerk can help you by showing you in his office a model built after the likeness of the big ship; except that of course it is a miniature. Going to the ship’s model he will open up deck after deck to you and show you how you may find your way to

your room. So that when you at last board the ocean liner, you are able to find your assigned room with ease. Now in like manner, the New Jerusalem of God's eternal purpose is so immense that He must set in each city a local assembly as a representative model of His will. And thus the various things concerning this small model of the great Church of God—such as things in regard to meeting, for example—can be examined by us without too much difficulty.

After so many years of working in China to preach the gospel, few people have come to notice what God himself emphasizes and is after. The Roman Catholic Church, for instance, came to China over three hundred years ago. And if we count from the time of the arrival of the Nestorian Church, it can be said that Christianity has been in our land for over a thousand years. Yet it would appear that few people have ever given attention to this miniature expression of God's eternal purpose. We instead stress personal victory and works. We fail to see how to express God's will concerning the church in a locality. May God be gracious to us that we may understand that personal victory and works and these other things mentioned are nothing in themselves. They are indeed related to the local assembly, but they can never take the place of the church, since God establishes the local assembly as the center. All these other things flow into and are joined to this center. Consequently, our concern today should not merely be about victory, evangelism, or prayers answered; it should go a step further to include asking ourselves how we can be coordinated with other brothers and sisters.

Fukien is famous for its masonry work. Masons in that province are able to cut irregular stones and put them together beautifully. Unlike the stone walls on Kuling Mountain which are merely composed of stones piled together, these stones in Fukien are carefully hewed and fitted compactly together. The question in these skilled workers' minds is not whether a stone is big or small, nice looking or ugly; rather, it is how does this or that stone fit with the other stones? Can these stones be built into a house? Today many

Christians are truly nice looking and smooth, but they cannot be put together because they are either this or that in such a way that they cannot be fitted in with other Christians. We know that every saved person is a living stone. The issue, however, is not centered upon whether he can overcome or whether the other has power; instead, it is focused on whether this living stone or that living stone can fit in with other stones so as to leave no gaps.

When we as living stones come together on the Lord's Day morning to listen to messages delivered, and come in the evening to break bread, can we be viewed as stones that are being fitted together? Or when we seek to be good brothers and sisters, is such seeking for the purpose of helping a meeting—that is to say, of helping the church? What we are now about to embark upon in our studies together is to take the broader view of the Church about which we have been speaking and to extend it into a consideration of those smaller, more practical matters as are raised by just such questions as these which have been asked.

The larger principles pertaining to the Church we have already touched upon at some length—both in the conference only recently concluded and in our preliminary remarks just now. From this point onwards, however, our emphasis will be to focus attention not so much on the spiritual principles of the Church but on its practices—how in various ways we can be good brothers and sisters in assembly life. In this connection, then, we shall be studying such aspects as the authority and the ministry of the church, how to meet, how to maintain unity, and so forth. Yet it needs to be pointed out that although we shall now be dealing primarily with the outward matters of the Church, we must recognize the fact that these outward things do nevertheless still contain spiritual elements in them all. And this we should constantly keep in mind as we go through these studies together.

1

Authority in the Church

In order to understand authority in the Church, we must first know what authority is; otherwise, we will never come to grips with it.

What is authority? There is nothing in the universe more difficult to explain than this. The Bible speaks of two matters difficult to interpret: glory and authority. What is holiness, righteousness, gentleness or patience? Many seem to have little difficulty in understanding these matters. But what can the glory of God and the authority of God mean? Few can really comprehend and expound these two things. The first is related to God himself; the second is related to His government. God himself is glorious, and His government is maintained by His authority.

God's authority is that law or principle by which He organizes the universe. He rules His creation with authority. How, in the first place, did God create the heavens and the earth? By authority. How did He restore the world? Again, by authority. It is most amazing that when on the first day He made the light, He did not as it were collect massive amounts of electricity and make light. Not at all. He simply gave the command, Let there be light, and there was light. Similarly on the second day, He said, Let there be a firmament, and there was a firmament. He gives his command in word and does everything by means of authority. Word here represents command, which in turn represents authority. It is not by power nor by method. Do you now see that God uses only authority? By it He created the universe, and by it He also rules the universe. Both the beginning of the universe and its continuity ever since subsist through the authority of God.

In the beginning—after the universe was created—we know that God set up cherubim or archangels to rule all things. God himself has the preeminence over all things, and He ruled the first world through

His cherubim. At a certain point, however, sin came in. Now sin is lawlessness, and lawlessness is basically the overturning of God's authority. And the fall of one of God's cherubs (Lucifer) who becomes Satan was due to this very thing of lawlessness, because as the Bible explains, he wanted to exalt himself to be equal with God. Thereafter, sin entered the world as well, and again it was due to lawlessness, because as we are told in Genesis, Eve did not submit herself to Adam. In the absence of any command from her husband, she ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Although the world is now full of sins, authority is still the principle of God's government in relation to the world. We may easily notice the authority that has been established by God in many areas of earthly life: wives are to be subject to their husbands, servants are to be subject to their masters, employees to their employers, students to their teachers, citizens to various governmental or administrative officials, subordinates to their chiefs—the latter classes in all these relationships are authorities that have been set up by God. For He wants men to be submissive to authority. These authorities are not only appointed by God, they also represent God. It is clearly stated in the Letter to the Romans: "There is no power but of God; and the powers that be are ordained of God" (13.1). No Christian student should boycott a class, no Christian laborer should strike, no Christian son or daughter should be unfilial, no Christian people should rise up in insurrection. For if they do these things, they are not merely overthrowing the people directly over them whom they oppose, they are also overturning the very authority of God. What God uses to create and to sustain the universe is His authority. Both Lucifer and Adam tried to subvert that authority, and thus both had sinned; for whoever in God's created order does not recognize authority or submit to it is guilty of lawlessness, and lawlessness, as we have seen, is sin.

Many believers have never perceived this marvelous thing called authority. To be a good Christian one must know what authority is,

because it represents God. By tracing authority to its highest source, you will eventually see God. This is why a Christian should not only submit to the chief executive and the other officials of his country but also to the police on the street. You cannot despise a policeman because he may earn so little a month. He has authority, and he represents not only the government but also God, for there is no authority in the world except it be of God. Oh, do let us see that the Bible is very strict on this point. Paul, Peter and Jude are all in agreement with this word found in the book of Acts: "Thou shalt not speak evil of a ruler of thy people" (23.5). In our conversation, therefore, we should be careful not to vilify the leaders of our government.

In the book of Jude it is recorded that when the angel Michael contended with the devil about the body of Moses, Michael did not bring against Satan a railing judgment, but said, "The Lord rebuke thee" (v.9). This is because at one time Michael had been a subordinate angel to Lucifer (Satan) the archangel. Hence he simply said, "The Lord rebuke thee." He did not speak on his own; he only appealed to the higher authority of God. Michael knew what authority was, and thus he dared not reprimand the devil by himself.

When our Lord was on earth, He was completely under authority. While young, He was in subjection to His parents' authority. He kept all their rules. Though He is the Creator, He accepted all the limitations in being a man. He did indeed say to His mother, "Knew ye not that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2.49) Yet had you or I uttered these words, we would not have returned home with our parents to continue being subject to them. But how different was the Lord. He obediently went down with them. And when much later He stepped into public ministry, He was in subjection to the authority of the government of the day. Even when He was unfairly judged, He still was subject to its authority. He did not revile those in authority. He allowed them to inflict their worst on Him. Never has the world seen a person so submissive to authority as He was.

Once Paul stood before the Jewish council to be judged. He was truly willing to be in subjection to authority. When the high priest commanded those who stood by him to strike him on the mouth, Paul, not knowing it was the high priest, said to him, “God shall smite thee, thou whited wall”! (Acts 23.3) But when he was told he should not revile the high priest, Paul quickly apologized. From the Scriptures we may readily discern how very important this matter of authority is.

The biblical word which is coupled with that of authority is “submission,” with the Bible therefore speaking of authority on the one hand and submission on the other. Authority and submission are interrelated. If a person is submissive, he is in subjection to God’s authority. Otherwise, he is one who will try to overturn the authority of God.

In the Church God established His authority, to which we all must be in subjection. We need to submit to authority in our home, in society, and in the world. God has ordained that we submit to such authority. Let us lay hold of this principle. All who think of overthrowing authority are in reality those who think of overturning God. Do not imagine that we may be in subjection to God while at the same time we are disobedient to our parents or are rebellious against husbands or masters or school principals or whoever else is in authority. Never can this be. If we do not submit to these authorities whom God has ordained on earth, how can we obey God? By the same token, if we are not in subjection to the authority in the church, we are being disobedient to God.

What I am concerned about is that many brothers and sisters come here to meet with different motives in their hearts. Some come probably for the sake of exercising mutual love and care. That is good. Let it be known, however, that we are not without authority in our midst. We do have authority here in our midst, and we must learn to submit to it. How frequently Christians harbor a wrong concept

within them which says that to come out of a sect is to be free to do anything, that hereafter everybody is equal and nobody can reprove the other. To them it is a free-for-all situation; everyone can be lawless. Let me say, though, that it is a great mistake if anyone should have left the oppressive control of a sect (as true as that may have been) so that he might do anything he pleases elsewhere. Please understand that, due to the authority which is found here, you will perhaps experience even more restraint.

People leave sects out of three different motivations—(1) They are disappointed in the sect. A person, for example, may have expected to become a pastor there but was unable to arrive at his aspiration. So he leaves after he has quarreled with someone in the sect. (2) They seek freedom. Some have left their sect because they were under man's control and restriction. They wanted to be free-lance evangelists who would not receive any salary nor accept any control. They wished to move according to their pleasure. Yet let us see that there is no such thing as a free-style evangelist before God. Instead, believers have the life of "the body." Believers have to accept the restriction of the church; they do not have absolute freedom. And (3) they see the body of Christ. They began to realize on the one hand that division and party is of the flesh, and so they left the sect in order to come out of human restriction and to work according to the leading of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, they also began to see the body of Christ. They commenced to realize that whatever they do must be restricted by the brethren. They were willing to learn to be members in the body. (Unfortunately, many who have come out of large sects have not seen the body of Christ, and have themselves then become a small sect. They failed to see how they must accept restraint from the brothers and sisters.)

From God's standpoint, only the third class of people above have the right motive. For the purpose of God is for His people to obtain body life and to abstain from independent action. God sets authority in the Church and He wishes to manifest His authority there.

Accordingly, each member needs to learn to submit to God's authority and to accept the restraint of other members. Every brother or sister must see negatively the error of sectarianism and see positively the body of Christ, in which there is no independent action.

What Is Authority in the Church?

How is divine authority in the Church delegated? The authorities which God sets in the Church are the elders and the apostles. God appoints the first in a local assembly, He appoints the second in the midst of many assemblies. The authority of an apostle is over various assemblies, whereas the authority of an elder is in the local assembly. In order to manifest His authority in the Church, God sets up elders in local assemblies to represent His authority. Hence the other name used in Scripture for elder is "bishop," which carries within its meaning the sense of authority in his "oversership." The Bible instructs us to submit to the elders because they have authority. And because all authorities initiated by God are representative in character, so the authority of the elders is also representative—to manifest the authority of God. Irrespective of how well the elders represent divine authority, a Christian must nonetheless learn to submit to them because all authorities are of God.

At the inauguration of any gathering of believers in a locality, there are no elders. But gradually some people who commence to function like elders will begin to be manifested within the group. As was mentioned already, elder and bishop are different names for the same office. The term elder points to the person, while bishop points to the service. Furthermore, the elders in the Bible are always plural and never singular in number. For things are less likely to go wrong when the spirits of two, three, or more persons are receiving the same guidance. Individualism is never a biblical principle; it can easily lead to error.

How God Appoints Elders

How does God appoint elders? In a gathering, there will be a few brothers who appear to be more advanced spiritually than the rest. They seem to have a better testimony, and they do desire to perform the work of an eldership. They begin to function as elders would. Accordingly, an apostle will make them elders to serve the local brethren. The church at Ephesus can serve as a good example of this. At first there were only saved believers in Ephesus because elders had not yet been appointed. But on the second visit of the relevant apostle (in this case, Paul), we find elders are there. The first apostolic trip which Paul took out from Antioch was for the purpose of preaching the gospel and saving souls. Later on, he established elders in each city previously visited (Acts 14.23). Before an assembly is established, the saints are weak, and therefore they need support. But when individuals are raised up to take the responsibility of elders, the apostle concerned will appoint them.

In other instances, however, the apostles were unable to go to places to appoint elders, and so they sent special envoys to perform the task. Timothy, Titus and others were such persons sent by the apostles. They went to different cities and appointed elders to take local responsibility in the church according to the order of the apostles.

Since the appointment of elders is for the purpose of representing the authority of God, these elders should understand that Christ is the Head and that He desires to express His will in the Church. They need to seek the mind of the Lord in order to manifest His authority in the assembly. For God uses these men to make decisions on matters as to whether to proceed or to stop. All the other brethren in the assembly need to learn to submit to them. Naturally we do not expect anyone to control us, but these elders do not lord it over us; they simply represent God's delegated authority, to which we submit ourselves.

What God has ordained from eternity are both authority and submission. Yet many believers do not like to submit to authority. The world today is full of lawlessness, and I am afraid “the mystery of lawlessness” (2 Thess. 2.7) has already infiltrated the Church. How greatly children criticize their parents without fear, how often wives dominate their husbands, how much students attack their principals and teachers, and how laborers freely strike against their companies! Such things are rampant in our time. Even as the Scriptures predict, now is the time when “the lawless one shall be revealed” (2 Thess. 2.8). If we Christians are not careful, we too will be following after the Antichrist instead of Christ himself. How can we ever expect others to submit to authority if we ourselves do not submit to it? If God should be pleased to place some in the position of authority, we others should learn to submit to them: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit to them: for they watch in behalf of your souls, as they that shall give account” (Heb. 13.17). In the light of this, we need to submit to the elders.

The Title and the Appointment of Elders

To briefly sum up, then, (1) elders are bishops, (2) elders are plural in number, and (3) elders are appointed by apostles or those specially sent by them. Today we know that the question of apostles (as to whether they exist) is unresolved. How, then, will the elders be chosen? From a study of God’s word, we would agree to the following deduction: Since the question of apostles is still unsettled, there is no way to appoint elders officially. We cannot give the title of elder to anyone. If we were to do so, we would have to ask where the apostle is who can appoint the elders. Having said this, however, we do not mean to say that there are not men today who can *function* as elders. Though there may not be the *title* of elders today, there nevertheless are men in every place who are like elders and who do the work of the eldership. They act as informal or unofficial elders. Yet the question still remains, How are they raised up? Who asks

them to act as elders informally? We must answer that they are appointed by the informal apostles.

Though this question of apostles remains controversial, there is nonetheless a class of people today who are performing the works of apostles—such works as preaching the gospel and establishing churches. They confess that they fall short of the holiness, power, victory and labor of the apostles because they can only do a small portion—perhaps one thousandth—of the works of the early apostles. Yet God uses these people in our day to labor in various places just as He used the apostles in the earlier days. Formerly it was these apostles who established churches everywhere, but now it is these informal apostles who do such work. We admit they are far inferior to the early apostles, that they are not worthy to be called apostles; nevertheless, we cannot but acknowledge them as doing part of the apostolic work. These men are those whom God uses in today's ruinous state of the Church as apostles.

God uses these servants to save sinners and to gather believers together. They are therefore the most qualified persons to help those believers whom they lead and to know who among them should receive honor and act as elders. We who labor in apostolic work are only helping the brethren to submit to these local men. We must be careful lest we fall into the traditional concept of apostolic succession or the special teaching that bishops have apostolic authority. Suppose, for example, that brother Chu is laboring in Potung and that he has led people to Christ. If he asks brother Wang to come to appoint elders, the latter will not know whom to appoint, for only brother Chu knows the local condition. He has led them and nourished them. He knows their spiritual state because he cares for their souls. He alone can help the brethren there to submit to those few among them who function as elders.

We cannot but submit to authority. May God give us humility. If we are not to act as elders, then we are to submit to people who are

as elders. We need to learn to be submissive people. If our flesh has been deeply judged, we will view submission to be something easy, beautiful and sweet. But wherever the flesh is *not* judged, the church will never be built there. If the brethren have their flesh dealt with, there will be no problem in submission. Hence those who do the work of apostles ought to assist the brethren to see who should act as elders and how they should submit to these men.

Qualifications of Elders

The qualifications of elders is clearly described in the Scriptures. The elders must be able to rule their families as well as their own selves. They must know how to deal with outsiders. They must have firm assurance of God's truth and be apt to teach the truth. Let us briefly describe the various qualifications as follows:

(1) *Self-controlled*. Why must elders be self-controlled? Because how can one rule over the church if he is unable to control his temper? To rule over one's own heart and spirit is harder to do than anything else. He who is not in subjection to the authority of Christ cannot make others submit to Christ. Paul's letters of 1 Timothy and Titus speak of elders being temperate and not brawlers. These traits all point to the matter of self-control.

Furthermore, an elder must be the husband of one wife. All who have concubines cannot be elders, because this would indicate that there is lack of self-control.

(2) *Rule over one's house well*. He who does not know how to rule his own house is unfit to rule the church. How can he manage the brethren if he cannot manage his own children? Eldership is a position, not a gift. To be an evangelist is to have a gift, but to be an elder speaks of having a position in the church. For this reason, an elder needs to be experienced and capable of ruling. And his house is his test. If he is unable to be a good husband and good father for his

wife and children to submit to him, he cannot be an elder in the church. God uses an elder's own wife and children to test him first as to whether or not he is able to deal with brothers and sisters.

Then, too, God uses a person's work such as in a business firm, at school, or at a hospital to test that one. If he is able to manage a business or to run a school, he may have the potential for governing the church. Should he be totally unable in these matters, then how can he rule the church of God?

(3) *Good testimony.* An elder must have a good testimony from those that are without the church. Because he must represent the church, sometimes he will have to contact the world. If he does not have a good testimony before the world, the entire church will be despised. A person who has a bad name in the world may not necessarily be bad, for the greedy, selfish, unclean Adamic world almost always speaks evilly of people; rarely does it speak well of anyone, especially of the Christian. But if that man has a good name in the world, then there must indeed be some good about him. Hence, a good testimony is what is an acceptable qualification; a bad name cannot be acceptable.

(4) *Holding firmly the truth of God.* An elder manages church affairs, not the affairs of a business firm. Managing the latter does not require the bearing of a testimony, a faithfulness to truth, or an ability to teach the Bible. An elder, though, must be apt to teach the brothers and sisters. He is the doorkeeper of the church. If all the brothers want to preach, what has to be done? The elders will need to discern who should and who should not speak. Those who are flippant and without a good testimony should not speak. The elders can either encourage or discourage brothers. And thus the elders need a firm grasp of truth so that they may correctly decide; if not, they will fail to discern and will thus consider every brother to be good in speaking.

Furthermore, elders must be able to discern and decide in other matters. They must know what teaching is false and not allow it to enter the church, and what truth they must accept into the church. In this way, the brethren will not become confused.

The Responsibility of the Elders

(1) *Elders are bishops.* The Bible calls the elders bishops. The work of a bishop is to oversee from above, he having special insight in seeing beforehand any danger in the assembly, both individually and corporately. With there being so many brothers and sisters in the church, it is inevitable that there will be sins, strifes, dishonesty, debts, or other such infamous deeds among them. These matters await the attention of the responsible brothers who act as elders. For the leaven must not be permitted to come into the assembly. It is therefore the duty of these informal elders to deal with such confusions. They will visit these brothers and sisters who have created problems and try to deal with these situations. When such dealings occur, the brethren should learn to submit to the decisions of the elders, for they have the authority of the Lord.

The authority advocated by the Roman Catholic Church is too excessive. Its failure lies in having the appearance but not the reality of authority. To have the right authority, its authority figures must be joined to the source of authority which is God himself.

(2) *The elders decide and express the views of the church.* Concerning the views of the church, the elders are the ones to publicly express them. It is not left to the individual brethren to freely express their opinions as being those of the church. Otherwise, this will overturn the authority of the elders. All public declarations, reports and doctrinal views must be decided and/or promulgated by the elders. A believer may speak only for himself, but the elders speak for the entire assembly. Because they themselves are subject to the Head, they are able to speak on behalf of the church.

(3) *The elders oversee the sisters meetings.* The Bible calls for only the brothers to be elders, and not the sisters as well. The place which God assigned to the sisters is not one of ruling, but one of being ruled. God does not permit women to rule the church. In the Bible there are mentioned deaconesses as well as deacons, but there is no woman elder. This would indicate that in the management of church affairs, God sets man as head of the women. Sisters should therefore learn to be submissive by God's grace. They may serve as they are given gifts; but they should leave decisions to those who are responsible as elders.

Sisters, for example, may bear witness to other sisters who want to be baptized or to break the bread, but the final decision is left to the elders. Being gifted by God, sisters may indeed receive honor from the brethren. Yet from the Scriptures we see that authority is more important than gift, that truth is more essential than ability.

As another example, if the sisters want to have a sisters meeting of the church at a certain time, they may express their thought and desire to the responsible brothers, who will consider whether such request is proper and give their consent accordingly. And thus the sisters move in unity instead of moving independently. Their meeting will then be reckoned as one of the church meetings.

Why must the sisters go through such a procedure? Because they are usually more emotional, hence more easily deceived. The elders have the responsibility of protecting the sisters. Every matter which pertains to the church should be decided by one of the responsible brothers. And as the sisters are under the proper covering, they are protected and so are kept from many problems.

In all corporate, not private, matters the elders should take responsibility. This includes the sisters.

(4) *The elders take care of all matters concerning meetings and preaching.* Those who serve as elders must restrain any wrongdoing in the church. In a church meeting, for instance, some brothers—who do not have the gift of teaching, yet love to teach as if addicted to it—might stand up and say things which ought not be said. (Strangely enough, the more gifted that people are, the less they like to speak, because they want to be hidden. I wish more of them would be less reserved and speak more.) Those who act as elders must therefore restrain whatever is improperly done. If there is any inappropriate prayer or speaking or report from any of the brethren, the elders should explain to them after the meeting so that it will not be repeated. If not, the same act will recur and the weak brethren will be offended or harmed.

Please note that there is no strict organization among us. We will receive all believers who are in the denominations. Our door is wide open. All in the denominations who are saved can come and break bread with us. However, if said people, after breaking bread with us, should purposely draw away some brothers and sisters to their homes to listen to some divisive teachings, such action should be reported immediately to the elders so that division may be prevented. Today we are not without personal liberty, but we can enjoy the limited freedom of the assembly only under the authority and arrangement of God. How often a little leaven may be introduced and soon a party is formed to the detriment of the whole lump. Brethren must therefore take note of these things and learn to submit to authority lest they do something unapproved.

(5) *The elders decide on matters pertaining to the Lord's Day meetings and on the writing of commendatory letters.* The elders should decide whether the meeting on the Lord's Day should be in the morning or in the afternoon. Regarding letters of commendation, it is not for just any brother to write as he pleases. Naturally, anyone can introduce people to the brethren at other localities, but only the elders can write on behalf of the church. This ought to help us to see

that the elders are responsible for the whole assembly. They are to oversee all things in the church. The elders must learn to exercise authority and to do things well, while the brethren must learn how to submit.

(6) *Elders are to set examples.* After elders are recognized, they deserve the respect of the brethren. At the same time, they themselves should take up responsibility with fear and trembling. They ought to see themselves as really being without any authority. The Bible lays the two sides of this truth together in a marvelous way. From the viewpoint of the brethren, the elders represent God's authority, and therefore they must submit. From the viewpoint of the elders, they deem themselves to be without authority. Now upon hearing about the authority of the elders, will we not be fearful lest they misuse their divinely delegated authority? What if they try to lord it over us? But God in His word speaks to the elders on this wise: "The elders therefore among you I exhort . . . Tend the flock of God which is among you, exercising the oversight . . . ; neither as lording it over the charge allotted to you, but making yourselves ensamples to the flock" (1 Peter 5.1-3). By this we see that the elders do not have any authority in themselves; they only have the authority of God. Only when they are in Christ, fully understanding God's mind and accordingly expressing it, do they really have authority. They are not to lord it over the flock, but need to be careful of themselves that they submit to God's authority and thus be examples to the flock. Only in this way will brothers and sisters see their authority. On the one hand, the brethren should submit to the authority of Christ which the elders represent. On the other hand, the elders must see that they have no authority in their own selves; they are simply to be examples (see 1 Timothy, Titus, and Acts 20 for more details on the authority of the elders.)

(7) *Accusation against an Elder.* 1 Timothy tells us this: "Against an elder receive not an accusation, except at the mouth of two or three witnesses" (5.19). In this matter, we must notice two things.

First, there must be a written accusation. A spoken accusation is not to be accepted because people can so easily change their words and hence there not be sufficient evidence. Second, there must be two or three witnesses. To rely on but one person's witness is not trustworthy. The Bible requires two or three as a minimum number of witnesses. In view of this, workers or special envoys of the workers must take special care in dealing with such matters as accusations against an elder. Once again, let me call your attention to this fact, that since there are no official apostles nor official elders today, people who function in the work of the apostles or elders are responsible for undertaking such discipline as may be required in such a situation.

Elders in Relation to Elders of Other Assemblies

God's gift is not restricted by environment; but position is limited to environment. God's giftings in such areas of ministry as evangelism, pastoring or teaching may be exercised anywhere. For these are God's gifts to the whole Church; that is to say, they are for all the local assemblies (see Eph. 4.11,12). Hence one who is doing the work of an apostle should not take care of one assembly and serve as a pastor in the denomination today. The Bible does not give any warrant to having such a position. If one is a teacher, he can teach in whatever place to which he may go. If he cannot preach in one place, he will not be able to preach in another. This is not a matter of knowledge but of God's ordained gift. If the gift is there, notwithstanding the knowledge, people will be helped. What is gift? Gift is the ability which God grants to the body of Christ on the ground of Christ being the Head. Such ability suffers no change. Let me illustrate: A mason can lay bricks whether he is in Shanghai or in Nanking. A tailor can make dresses in Shanghai as well as in Peking. Environment will not change a gift.

Eldership, however, is different. It belongs only to locality. He who is an elder in Shanghai may not be an elder in Nanking, and an elder in Nanking is not an elder in Shanghai. This is because the spiritual condition, background, environment, custom and educational level of each local assembly is different. One who can be an elder in Shanghai may not be an elder in Kiangpei. An elder in the country may not be an elder in the city. It entirely depends on locality. Hence giftings in Scripture are for the whole Church whereas eldership in the Bible is marked for local assemblies. He who is gifted should not stay in only one place but should go to different places to share his gift. An elder, on the other hand, should remain in one place with respect to fulfilling his responsibility.

Let me use the illustration of a mason again. One may be a foreman among the masons in Shanghai. But if he goes to Nanking, his profession will still be masonry, yet he may not be a foreman. Masonry is his ability, and such ability remains in him whenever he goes to Nanking. In like manner, the office and the gift in the Church are two different things. Office or position is for the local assembly, but gift is not for the local assembly alone. What error can easily be committed when an elder in one assembly offers an opinion upon his going to another locality. This is something he should not do unless asked.

Do not conclude that because something is done in a certain way in one assembly it therefore should be done in the same way in another assembly. No, the environmental factors such as education, custom and so forth are different, and hence things cannot necessarily be done in the same way in both places. But gift is not so since it can be exercised in one place just as well as in another place.

Questions

(1) Suppose we announce unofficial elders; will not people consider us as being denominational? How should we answer them?

Let me first explain what we leave behind when we leave the denominations. If we do not know what we have left behind, it is true, we too may become a denomination. According to my understanding, when we leave the denominations, we leave behind two things: (a) various divisions such as are caused by the use of different names for the denominations; and (b) the pastoral system found in denominations. What is the pastoral system? It is bringing the intermediary priestly system of Judaism into Christianity. Unfortunately both Catholics and Protestants have adopted this.

Among the so-called Christian countries, the Roman Catholic Church has adopted the teaching of Judaism. In Judaism, there was this special class of priests who served as an intermediary. For the Jews to approach God they had to go through the hands of the priests because they could not contact God directly. This was clearly shown in the instance of Micah recorded in the book of Judges. Micah of Ephraim made an ephod, but he would need a Levite to be priest in his house (see Judges 17). What is Judaism? In Judaism, men could not worship God directly but needed an intermediary—the priests—between themselves and God. So too is the Roman Catholic Church today. God is on one side and men are on the other. The latter cannot communicate directly but only through the mediation of the “fathers” who are priests. It requires priests to disperse the communion, to preach, and to pray. And such a system brings people back to the Old Testament practice.

The Protestants are divided into national churches and private churches. The Anglicans can be used as an illustration of a national church. In the Anglican Church (Church of England), there are the laity and the sacerdotal class. People in the sacerdotal class are also called priests, just as in Judaism and in the Roman Catholic Church. They too have brought in Judaism: God is above, the people are below, and in between is the sacerdotal class called the priests. In their approach to God, the laity must go through the priests, and hence the latter monopolize all spiritual things.

With respect to private churches in Protestantism—such as the Presbyterian, the Methodist, and so forth—they also have an intermediary class. God is above, the church members are below, and in between are the ministers or pastors. The pastors have become the intermediaries who do all spiritual things for the believers. It is the duty of the minister or pastor to distribute communion, to baptize people, and to preach sermons. They manage everything for their church members; they become the medium between God and men. So that from Judaism up through Roman Catholicism to the present-day variety of denominations in Protestantism, the same system requiring an intermediary class prevails.

What, though, does the New Testament say about this? “Ye are...a royal priesthood,” says Peter (1 Peter 2.9). “He made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father,” says John (Rev. 1.6). We therefore do not need anyone to be a substitute for us believers by standing as mediator between ourselves and God, because we *all* are priests who can approach Him directly: “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the way which he dedicated for us, a new and living way” (Heb. 10.19,20a). It is not through the intermediary characteristic found in Judaism, Catholicism or Protestantism that we draw near to God. Neither are we like the high priest of old who once every year entered the tabernacle or temple’s holiest place of all to meet Jehovah God. No, we today come to Him daily through the Lord Jesus’ blood. All of us are priests, and we may communicate with God boldly at any time.

Hence, what is Christianity under the New Testament? It abrogates the aforementioned intermediary class system. Every believer is directly responsible for himself towards God. Do not make the workers in our midst the intermediary in local churches. There is no such thing among us. We all may go to God. The workers have no special position in the church. For God maintains a direct relationship with the individual believers in the church.

Someone may ask us, Why do you oppose “pastors”? I say in response that I do not oppose “pastors”; I only object to the “pastoral system.” If anyone has the gift of a pastor, we treasure him very much. Yet whether a person has a pastoral gift or not, we must not make anyone into a special priest and introduce a disguised form of priestly system into our midst. Even those with a pastoral gift we will not treat as intermediaries.

I am afraid that, for some brethren, leaving the denominations means throwing away all controls. They think they can thereafter be free to the extent of being lawless—that they may do anything they like. If so, then I would call *that* leaving the *church*, not leaving the denomination. They are not leaving the denominations; they are casting aside authority. To leave a denomination is to leave division and the intermediary pastoral system; it is not to make us isolated, individual believers. In our midst we have God’s ordained authority. When we submit to our brothers, we submit to God’s authority.

It is recorded in Luke concerning our Lord, “Knew ye not that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2.49) He must indeed be occupied with His Father’s business; even so, at age twelve He went back from Jerusalem with His earthly parents and was subject to them. This is the submission of our Lord. Had we been our Lord we probably would have done differently. We would probably have contended that we must be about the Father’s business and therefore have refused to return. Such would have shown our insubmission. To be occupied with the Father’s business includes to be mindful of the Father’s authority, and this includes God’s authority upon the parents. So that when we submit to them, we are submitting to authority.

Let us never dream that by leaving a denomination we can be lawless and out from under any control whatsoever. To be like this would be worse than those who remain in the denominations, because though the latter may not have God’s *ordained* authority,

they at least have man's authority, whereas we would be insubordinate to the authority of God. The Bible endorses no sect, yet it calls for elders. When we break away from the sects and the denominations which the Bible does not endorse, we do not for that reason also break away from the eldership authority; for the Bible *does* teach and endorse the practice of eldership. We are not to discard eldership simply because it is found in something (denominationalism) which we feel it necessary to break away from. After all, there are brethren in the denominations, too; but can we, again for that reason, break fellowship with them as well? We cannot.

(2) Are elders appointed by God?

“To all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you overseers” (Acts 20.28 mg.). It is said explicitly that the elders are appointed by the Holy Spirit. What the apostles do in making men elders is but expressing the mind of the Holy Spirit.

(3) How about the supply of the elders? Is the way of supplying the elders the same as that of supplying the workers?

There is no difference. The Bible never makes workers who receive no salary a privileged class for receiving supply. Though beyond a certain point Peter fished no more, Paul still made tents. There is no difference nor class distinction between workers with a secular profession and workers without such profession. Elders who are gifted and who give so much of their time to manage church affairs that they are unable to take a secular job should receive double honor. If an elder is not as busy, it is well for him on the one hand to have a job to support himself and on the other hand to manage church affairs.

This is not only true with elders, it also applies to workers. A gifted person may work on a job as well as work for the Lord so long

as his job does not interfere with his work for the Lord. I myself hope I may serve the Lord on the one hand and on the other hand hold down a secular job. I say this not because I am so poor that I am starving. To live by faith is not something extraordinary in holiness. Some people may deem it most spiritual and supernatural. Today believers give too much credit to those who live by faith. It is due to the general declension of faith among Christians.

Actually, living by faith is nothing to be surprised at, for in the early church, this was quite common. As a matter of fact, every believer should have such faith. Everyone who has a job lives by faith. I frequently think that brothers in business have greater faith than I do. Otherwise, how dare they open a shop and purchase with much money many goods in advance. For how do they know there will be any customers?

We know that, in the Bible, elders are viewed as brothers. Among brethren there may be differences in gift and position, but there is no such distinction as being with or without a profession. Making any distinction in the matter of supply is a carry-over from the denominations. People forget that Paul *did* make tents. If, in a denomination, a minister should both pastor a church and take a job as well, he would be misunderstood. Let us, however, not have such a concept.

The Roman Catholic Church states that after a person is ordained, he is thereafter holy. There is an indelible aura about him that separates him from the common people. They forget that the apostle Paul always carried on the work of a tentmaker. We workers today may not have a secular job when we are busy, but when we have time there is no reason why we cannot hold down a job too.

(4) Is it all right for an evangelist to open a school?

It is by all means acceptable for a person to open a school or a store. Paul himself might have opened a tent shop, but it was not for all the believers in Ephesus to jointly open it. It is wrong for the entire church to open a school, hospital, or bakery, but it is all right for some of the brethren to jointly undertake such an endeavor.

(5) Am I correct in saying that in the entire Bible the word “pastor” is mentioned only once, in Ephesians chapter 4?

The word “pastor” in relation to the church is indeed only mentioned in Ephesians 4.11. To be able to pastor is a gift which God gives by way of men to the Church for its building up. Elders are set apart by the apostles for the oversight of a local assembly. But the apostles cannot set apart a gift. They never appoint prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, because these are gifts given by God. For example: Suppose I am owner of a company. I can appoint a foreman and assistant foremen because these are positions. But I cannot appoint a person to be a mason if he does not know how to build with bricks. Similarly, the apostles can only set apart offices such as that of elders, but they cannot set apart prophets, evangelists, pastors or teachers because these as gifts are wholly in God’s hand to give and to appoint.

No one can strive or quarrel over gift. If you see someone excel in preaching, you may want to preach too. Yet unless God permits, you will never make it. For it is said in 1 Corinthians 12.11 that “all these worketh the one and the same Spirit, dividing to each one severally even as he will.” Gifts are not appointed by men, nor obtained through men’s will. They are given to each person by the Holy Spirit according to His pleasure. For instance, the ability to pastor is a spiritual gift which God gives to the Church by the Holy Spirit. And if we see anyone with this pastoral gift, we treasure that one very much. Yet we cannot ordain him as a pastor, just as we cannot ordain a person to be a mason. We should not make a pastor a priest who serves as an intermediary between God and men. We do not reject

“pastors” in the Scriptures; we only oppose the “pastoral system.” Let us be careful lest we bring in any human invention practiced in the denominations.

(6) Can believers vote for elders?

No. Elders are appointed by apostles, by those who nowadays do the work of the apostles. In the Bible men never resorted to the practice of voting except in the one place recorded in Acts when the early church chose the seven men (Acts 6.3-6). Even then, these men were prayed for, and had hands laid on them, by the apostles.

(7) Among the numerous pastors ordained in the denominations, is there not one single true pastor?

According to human ordination, none so ordained becomes a pastor; but according to gift, some of those ordained may indeed have the gift of pastoring. We ought to see, however, that no one becomes a pastor through human examination, seminary study, men’s ordination, or men’s invitation. A true pastor is one gifted by God with the ability of pastoring.

(8) How does the gift of pastoring build up the church?

The Greek word translated “pastor” is only used in Scripture once, in Ephesians 4. The remaining instances of this same Greek word are translated as “shepherd.” Hence the meaning of this word is that of feeding or watching over. When God gives a man a pastor’s gift, he is given the ability to lead the believers in feeding them, in helping them to grow, in teaching them the Bible, and in praying with them.

The evangelist will lead people to salvation, that is to say, he will bring people in. The teacher is able to release the truth so that all may understand the truth of the Scriptures. The pastor can help them

grow. He may not be able to preach, but he certainly knows how to feed the believers.

(9) Can women receive the pastor's gift?

God's *gifting* makes no distinction with respect to sex. The daughters of Philip the evangelist, for example, had the gift of prophesying. A woman may have the *gift* of pastoring.

(10) Can sisters witness, and preach the gospel to unbelieving men?

The Bible neither absolutely forbids nor encourages this. We do not have any distinctive example in the Bible. According to my personal opinion, sisters who exceed their position of being covered may be deemed excessive in this regard. By head covering, I do not mean the physical covering on their heads, though this is also important. I mean the hidden, submissive attitude and posture of heart which God gives to them. Even the brothers must have their heads covered before God, for the brothers are covered by Christ. Christ is the head of all men, and man is the head of woman. Therefore, women must be doubly covered. She is covered on the one hand by Christ and on the other hand by man. The physical covering upon her head expresses a sister's submission to the authority of the brothers, that she does nothing independently. Many things done by sisters are truly precious. It is best if they are covered by the brothers. Therefore, it is not good for sisters to do pioneer works alone.

The words of a sister were once quoted in a Western newspaper. She said how she at one time had done everything by herself. But while she was returning to her own country because of sickness, she began to realize how wrong she had been. Whereupon she confessed her fault before God.

Many think that since there was the case of Deborah in Israel, why can there not be Deborahs today? We need to remember that not all the women of Israel were Deborahs and that Deborah herself had Barak as a covering to her head. All godly women desire to have their heads covered. They honor what God has ordained and they respect the order and position which God has appointed for them. It is rather hard for me to say these things because I am not a sister. Yet if I were a sister, I would feel very much freer to say these things. Sisters should stand on the position of head covering. This does not mean they should not serve. It simply means that God has set the brothers as “protectors” of the sisters. The brothers should be more exposed. And whether it be for glory or shame, such will then fall on the brothers. Yet this is not because the brothers covet the glory of the sisters, it only serves as a means of protecting the sisters and to keep the order of God.

According to her very nature a sister would prefer to stand in an unexposed position; for Paul says, “Doth not even nature itself teach you?” (1 Cor. 11.14) What kind of home is it if the wife stands in her husband’s position and acts as head over her man? Now the same applies to the church. In Proverbs it speaks of a worthy woman who works diligently that her husband may be known at the city gates (31.10-31).

How precious it is to submit to authority—such as servants to that of masters, children to that of parents, wives to husbands, people to officials, and women to men. God stresses authority, whereas Satan emphasizes power. It is already a sign of the fall if we only ask, Am I able?, instead of asking first, Should I? I hope all the sisters will stand in the place of submitting to God’s authority. This question of authority is truly most important. Unfortunately, however, it seems to have little import in the lives of brothers and sisters.

According to the light of the Scriptures, sisters should be silent in church meetings with respect to teaching God’s word. But they

certainly can witness and preach the gospel to men if they stand in the place of their heads being covered.

(11) Can a person have two kinds of gift simultaneously?

Indeed, he can. Sometimes people have even more than two gifts.

(12) Was Peter the first pastor?

We may probably say so.

(13) Why do we mention elders at this time? Will we not be misunderstood as being a sect (or denomination) because of having elders?

Actually we had mentioned this matter of elders several years ago, but at that time we did not see persons being raised up as elders. It was a transitional period for us then. For the Bible says “not [to elevate] a novice” to eldership (1 Tim. 3.6). A novice is one who is green and inexperienced. So that we are definitely told that a novice, one who is a green hand, cannot be an elder. The time is now come, however, for us to deal in our midst with this matter of eldership.

(14) Is it correct to say that among ourselves we have people who are like elders but who do not have the title of elders, just as we do not have the official title of apostles?

True. But to answer more fully, I need first to explain the matter of church ground. Should people ask, Who are you? Are you the church in Shanghai?, how would you reply? You should say we are not the church in Shanghai. If you are asked, Are you the church at Hardoon Road?, you should also answer, no. We do not acknowledge ourselves as the church in Shanghai because aside from us there are many other saved people in the city who are in the denominational churches and who do not meet with us. Neither do we consider

ourselves as the church at Hardoon Road, for there are perhaps other saved souls living along Hardoon Road who do not meet with us. In order to be called the church in Shanghai, all the believers in Shanghai must be included; otherwise, it cannot be recognized as the church in Shanghai.

People will then ask, If you are not the church, what are you? We confess that we are *not* the church, but we are those who assemble on the *ground* of the church. Let me illustrate it in this way. The temple in the Old Testament was magnificently built. It was later burned, and not one stone remained upon another. Suppose one day in Jerusalem some people came and set up a tent on the foundation of the razed temple. If they were asked who they were, they would reply: "We are not the temple; we are a tent set on the foundation of the burned down temple." In like manner do we ourselves meet today. Should we be asked who we are, our answer is, "We are not the church in Shanghai, we are but a number of brothers and sisters in Shanghai who assemble on the ground of the church to maintain the testimony of the church." The temple is now destroyed, it has been destroyed with fire. We are but a tent. All whose eyes are open should know the ruin of the Church today, how it has fallen in outward appearance.

Therefore, we cannot—nay, we dare not—call ourselves the church in Shanghai. We only desire to stand in the light of the church and assemble on the ground of the church. We are not the church in Shanghai, but we do meet on the ground of the church in Shanghai. We stand on the same ground as does the church in Shanghai, yet we are not the church at all. Though we are not the temple, we are nonetheless a miniature of the temple in order to manifest this temple life. Hence the elders and deacons in our midst are non-official in character. The reason we have elders and deacons is because though we are a small tent, we are nonetheless set upon the temple ground, and therefore we must follow the pattern of the temple.

Long after the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, people such as Zerubbabel and Ezra returned to rebuild it. Those old men who had seen the glory of the first temple knew that this rebuilt one was far inferior to the former one. Yet in spite of this fact, people such as Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah still offered sacrifices according to the former ordinance.

The temple mentioned in John chapter 2 was not the original one but was the rebuilt one. Still the Lord Jesus drove out the sheep and the cattle from it, saying: “Make not my Father’s house a house of merchandise” (v.16). This statement our Lord declared by standing on the ground of the temple. Even though this temple was not the original one, yet the ground, as well as the principle, of the temple was nonetheless there. In spite of the falling outwardly, the ground remains. And hence it is possible to maintain the principle of God’s service in a small way.

The nation of Israel was composed of twelve tribes; nevertheless God chose Jerusalem to put His name there. Thrice a year the men of Israel must travel to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices and to worship God. During the time when Rehoboam was king, the nation was divided into Judah and Israel. Judah had two tribes who still worshiped God in Jerusalem. Israel had ten tribes with Jeroboam as their king. According to God’s command, the people must go to Jerusalem three times annually to worship Him. Jeroboam was afraid if his people went to Jerusalem three times a year their hearts might return to the king of Judah and rebel against him. Accordingly, he selected what people deemed to be a good location—even Bethel—and made a golden calf, set up an altar, and ordered his people to worship there instead of going to Jerusalem. At that time a young prophet was sent to reprimand him by prophesying against the altar and giving a sign. When Jeroboam heard the word of the prophet, he stretched out his hand, saying: “Lay hold on him” (1 Kings 13.4). But his hand dried up and he could not draw it back. Jeroboam let the prophet go. This shows that though the nation was *divided*

outwardly, the principle of serving God together in Jerusalem must still not be lost. The Bethel that was set up by man could never replace the Jerusalem of God. Outward law could not substitute for God's decision. The break in politics could not alter the principle of God. Consequently, outward destruction, defeat and ruin cannot change the principle ordained by God.

During the time of the dividing of the Promised Land, nine and a half tribes of the children of Israel were allocated God's Promised Land on the west side of the Jordan River, but two and a half tribes chose instead to stay in the territory on the east side of the Jordan. After the allocation was completed under the hand of Joshua, the two and a half tribes built a great altar by the bank of the river Jordan. When the congregation of the children of Israel heard about it, they went up to fight against the two and a half tribes because the latter had built "an altar besides the altar of Jehovah our God" (Joshua 22.19). It was not only sinful to rebel against Jehovah, it was sinful to offer any burnt-offering, meal offering or peace-offering on any altar besides the altar of God.

How did the two and a half tribes answer? They said they had no desire to establish a new center of worship, and that furthermore, what they had built was not to be a new altar of offering but to serve as a witness that they had a portion in the Land. The altar in front of the tabernacle of God alone was the place of worship (see Joshua 22). These two and a half tribes represent the spiritually defeated ones, but even they could not alter the principle which God had ordained. Therefore, even after the nation was divided and was no longer one as in the time of David, the children of Israel must still worship in Jerusalem.

Today in spite of the division and failure and outward ruin of the church in Shanghai as well as in many other places, we must still stand on the ground of the church to worship God. And hence it is by

this principle that we have our elders. We now have elders in our midst, but they are not official as in the denominations.

(15) Will God withdraw His gifts?

Gifts are given by God. They will not be withdrawn. We can have three different attitudes towards God's gifts: (a) we can misuse the gifts as did the Corinthian believers; (b) we can bury a gift as did the servant spoken of in Matthew 25; or (c) God can withhold a gift due to our unbelief.

(16) May we ask for gifts?

We may, for it is clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 14.1: "Desire earnestly spiritual gifts."

(17) What is meant by misusing gifts?

God does not withdraw gifts, but at the judgment seat of Christ He will ask us how we exercised our gifts. To misuse a gift is to use it according to man or for his own glory, just as the Corinthian believers did. God does not withdraw His gifts, "for the gifts and the calling of God are not repented of" (Rom. 11.29). For example, a sister may take it upon herself to teach in the church and as a result men are helped. We will ask, If sisters are supposed to be silent in the assembly, why, then, are men helped? For although this is the exercising of a gift, it is nevertheless a misusing of a gift. Let us see that these men are helped only because it is in fact the gift of God. Or as another example, sometimes an evangelist may go to where God has not sent him, and yet some people still get saved. Although people are helped, this too is a misuse of gift. Still another example is that of those who bury their gifts. These are mostly the people with but one talent. They consider their gift too insignificant, and therefore they tend to not use it. But additionally, a gift is sometimes

stopped or ceases to operate because the believer does not appropriate it by faith.

(18) Can a person know his gift?

Sometimes one knows, yet sometimes he does not know but other people know. They know by the fruit of his labor. The Corinthian believers knew they were gifted. How pitiful, some reflect, that Moses did not know his face shone. Thank God that Moses did not know. If he *had* known, his face might not have shone. Let us let other people decide what our gift is.

(19) If the misuse and the burying of gift will incur God's judgment, would it not be better not to ask for a gift lest we be judged?

The more gifting a believer receives, the more opportunity for him to serve. For those believers who have not been dealt with by God, it may appear better not to ask for gifts lest they be judged. But for those who know God, they should ask for more gifts for the sake of the church and not for themselves. We long that God will raise up many gifts.

(20) How do we know we have misused a gift?

In the parable of the talents in Matthew 25.14-30, there are three different kinds of gifts: one of five talents, one of two talents, and one of one talent. These gifts are distributed to three different classes of servants. They all are charged to trade with them. Gift is capital. After the servants receive the gifts to trade with, they may do business resulting in either profit or loss. If they make a profit, the owner will not suffer; if they incur loss, the owner will suffer. A brother with the gift of evangelism will save souls. But if his work is done not in accordance with God's will but to glorify self, to meet

needs, or to mind the things of men, he will lose spiritual power though not the power of the gift.

Today many servants of the Lord are leading meetings everywhere—saving, reviving and helping many people. Among them are the truly gifted of God, yet we may also notice that though they have gifts, some do not stand on the ground God wants them to take. We may wonder why they can still save, revive, and help people. This actually is the misusing of gifts. They can save souls and revive believers because they have God's gifts. It is His gift that saves, revives or helps. Such misuse of a gift is highly dangerous. For God will not say anything or do anything today. But wait until we all come to the judgment seat of Christ and then we shall all render our accounts. The reckoning on that day will be based on the gifts given to us today.

Never infer that as long as our work is well done, is prosperous or is well received by men, everything must be right. We need to guard against the misuse of gifts. Frequently a believer preaches for the sake of fame and praise of men, and his conscience knows this is wrong. Once a brother returned from preaching the gospel in a certain place. I asked him about the work he had done this time. His answer was: "I went and I returned. A few people were saved. But I still do not know if it was God's will for me to go." This is the misuse of gift. Today God entrusts this gift to you and me; He will reckon with us at the judgment seat. Nevertheless, let us keep a daily account with God lest in consideration of the many years we have, we may use our gifts carelessly.

Gift is a kind of spiritual ability, power or knowledge which God gives to man to help him work. For example, I may have good penmanship. Notwithstanding my fellowship with God being good or bad, I can still write well. I can write well *in* God's will, and I can write well *outside* God's will. Likewise is it with a gift. To exercise gifts in the will of God will help people; to exercise gifts outside the

will of God will also help people. The difference is in spiritual value. Since this sin of misusing gifts will not be reckoned with until we stand before the judgment seat of Christ, it behooves us to be careful lest we work to gain glory and praise for ourselves. This will be misusing our gift.

(21) Does every believer have a gift?

Yes, he has at least one talent. There is no servant without a gift. 1 Corinthians 12 says that “to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit to profit withal. For to one is given . . . and to another . . .” (vv.7,8). Hence everyone has a gift. All who are born again have gifts, though not all have the same gift. Respecting the gifts which build up the whole body, there are only five kinds mentioned in Ephesians 4. Regarding the gifts which help the growth of local assemblies, there are the many kinds mentioned in 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12. Not all believers have the gifts of Ephesians 4, but all may have one of the gifts of Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12.

(22) How do we know we are not misusing gifts?

In order not to misuse the gifts, we must accept the cross of Christ. For this cross—the cross which cuts off the flesh—is the foundation. The reason why there are problems in local assemblies is because brothers and sisters are not willing to accept the cross of Christ. All which comes out of the resurrection of Christ is for the body of Christ. The difficulties in the church stem from those things which people dig out from the tomb. If we are willing to accept the cross of Christ, and let it do a deeper work in us so as to take away our own ambition, we then will not misuse our gifts. It is just as we have mentioned before concerning elders. Who is unfit to be an elder? He who hopes to be an elder when he hears about elders. Who is fit to be an elder? He who considers himself unfit when he hears about elders. All who aspire to rule are unfit to rule; no authority can

be placed in his hands. Only those who do not think of ruling may rule.

(23) Why, then, does 1 Timothy 3.1 (mg.) say that “if a man seeketh the office of an overseer, he desireth a good work”?

This statement was uttered out of a fear of people shrinking back. Today there are too many Peters who refuse to have their feet washed. The drawing back of the flesh is as fleshly as the boasting of the flesh. Here we have another evidence of the two sides of truth. 1 Timothy 3 also says: “not a novice, lest being puffed up he fall into the condemnation of the devil” (v.6). The Lord discourages these people to aspire for eldership lest they become proud and fall into the trap of the devil. But those who consider themselves useless and their flesh as weak tend to shrink back. So the Lord encourages them by saying that “if a man seeketh the office of an overseer, he desireth a good work.” To those who *want* to be elders, God pronounces them to be unfit; but to those who are fit and yet draw back, He says to them to go ahead.

May brethren see the two sides of the flesh. It either boasts or shrinks back. Never take the boasting of the flesh as courage, nor the withdrawing of the flesh as humility. If we look at our strong point, we will incline to be proud; if we look at our weakness and failure, we will tend to shrink back and do nothing. Let us not confuse boasting with courage and withdrawing with humility. What is humility? It is not looking at the good as well as the bad in oneself. Hence true humility is not looking at self at all. Courage is being strong in the Lord. It comes by looking at Him. So that Ephesians 6.10 says for us to “be strong in the Lord, and in the strength of his might.” He who measures himself and claims to be adequate is boasting. Such, though, is no strength at all.

It is therefore possible for us to look to the Lord on the one hand and not look at ourselves on the other, to be strong on the one hand

and to be humble on the other. And such is victory. The defeat of many people is due to the fault of seeing either the power of the flesh or the weakness of the flesh, thus leading to either boasting or withdrawing. We can apply this principle not only to the matter of elders and deacons but also to our daily affairs.

(24) What does the passage in Ephesians 4 which speaks of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers refer to—people, things, or titles?

Ephesians 4 points to people, whereas 1 Corinthians 12 points to things. The first passage states that God gives to the Church these five classes of people—some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers. The second passage declares that the gifts which God gives enable some to prophesy, some to speak in tongues, and so on. Paul, for instance, was God's gift to the Church: he was an apostle. But he had many gifts bestowed upon him, such as prophesying, speaking in tongues, healings, and so forth. The gifts which the Holy Spirit manifested in Paul have profited people of all ages. His work continues even today.

(25) How do we deal with brothers who are lawless in the meeting?

In case a person disturbs the meetings persistently and yet he has not committed any sin that warrants his being excommunicated, he should be strictly dealt with according to the teaching of Romans 16.17: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned; and turn away from them." Take note of him and turn away from him (that is to say, do not maintain fellowship with him). No church affair should be put into the hand of such people.

(26) If an elder has a problem, how do you deal with it?

The elders in the Bible are plural in number. If one elder has problems, the other elders can deal with him.

(27) If the elders are not officially appointed, any accusation against them would have to be unofficial too. Is that correct?

That is correct.

The Deacons

Deacons in the Scriptures are the brethren who serve people. In the church there must not only be responsible brothers like elders but also servants such as deacons. The church needs people who make the decisions and who supervise the brethren. It also needs people who specialize in serving people, and to take care of many mundane matters. Those who decide on things and supervise the church are the elders, while those who execute things as ordered and who help people are the deacons. God needs elders to be watchmen; He also needs deacons to do things and run errands for the believers. For example, the handling of funds belonging to the meeting is the work of the deacons, while the decision over the use of these funds belongs to the elders. What is decided by the elders is to be communicated to the brethren through the deacons. The elders are like foremen, and the deacons are like laborers. The deacons make no decision of their own; they simply carry out the orders of the elders. The deacons assist the elders in church affairs. We hope there will be brothers and sisters raised up in our midst to be deacons and deaconesses.

Questions

(1) Are deacons chosen by vote?

No. The selection of deacons during the time of the early apostles was not done by majority vote. Those deacons were already under

the scrutiny of the apostles; they were manifested naturally. The biblical way of choosing deacons was for them to be naturally manifested. People who were fit to be deacons were chosen by the church and recognized by the apostles. This is the way we should follow.

(2) Why, then, was the apostle Matthias chosen by casting lots (Acts 1.20-26)?

This is because the Holy Spirit had not yet come. The disciples did not know which one should fill the vacancy left by Judas. Accordingly, they selected two men and cast lots to decide the one who would fill the apostolic office.

(3) Did not the disciples choose the seven deacons as recorded in Acts 6?

Acts 6 does not state explicitly that those seven men were deacons. It only shows us that the work they did was like the work of deacons. We can only call them deacons by the work which they did. Later on, we find in Acts that Philip was one of the seven, but again it does not plainly say he was one of the seven deacons. So that though the fact of their being deacons is mentioned in the Scriptures, there is no clear statement that the deacons were elected. I think the appointment of deacons should take place in the same way as the appointment of elders. They should be appointed by the apostles or those sent by the apostles. If there is a gap in the Bible that does not clearly show us what to do in a particular matter, we need to be very careful in pursuing such.

(4) When should the elders and the deacons be appointed?

As early as possible.

(5) If there are only three brothers in a local assembly, who will be elders and who will be deacons?

These brothers have to act as both elders and deacons. In the entire Bible, only the Letter to the Philippians gives a complete picture of church order: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1.1 mg.). By this we know that a local church is composed of the saints, the elders, and the deacons.

(6) Why does 1 Timothy say: “And let these also first be proved; then let them serve as deacons, if they be blameless” (3.10)?

Deacons are active workers. They usually are younger people. They must be tested lest they do things according to their flesh and blood. Send them out on errands a few times before deciding if they are fit to be deacons.

(7) If in a locality a few brothers start to meet, should there be deacons first or elders first?

Because there needs first to be people bearing responsibility before there can be the breaking of bread, the elders should come first and then the deacons. This is the teaching in Acts. Antioch is a good example. At the establishing of a local church, people should be taught to submit to elders as well as to one another. If not, in a church of five brethren there will be five parties. Though they may break the bread and remember the Lord, they do not discern the body. They do not see themselves as the body of Christ. Each of them instead thinks only of his own self and is his own head. Hence we must learn to submit to elders and to one another.

The Practice of Fellowship

2

The Church Is One

The Bible teaches that the Church is one. The Church which Paul belonged to is the same Church to which we all belong. Our Church is the Church also of the apostle John, Martin Luther, Calvin and all the other regenerated people throughout Church history. The Church of the Bible has no distinction as to time, geography, or race. In the eyes of God, from the beginning to the end, past and present, at home and abroad, there is only one Church, not two or more Churches. The Bible recognizes the body of Christ, which is one and one only. There can never be two bodies of Christ because there is but one Head. Though the members are many, the body is one. Hence all the saved people, ancient and modern, at home and abroad, form one Church, one body.

Why, then, are there “the churches” in various places? Since the Letter to the Ephesians speaks of one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism and one God (Eph. 4.4-6), why do the Scriptures mention the churches? Is there any contradiction in the Bible? For it speaks of one body on the one hand and the churches on the other. This tells us of the different aspects of the Church. Actually, there is only one Church, for the body of Christ is one. But in different localities, there may be as many as three to five thousand believers gathered together or as little as two or three (Matt. 18.20). In any city or village where a group of believers is gathered together, those believers there are the church in that city or village. The Scriptures most emphatically employ the phrase “the church in (or at)” such and such a place. The word “in” shows us that the Church is one, even though its various members are scattered and sojourn in many, many localities. The Bible treats all the believers who sojourn

in a given locality as constituting the local church, a miniature representative of the one and only Church.

One thing is exceedingly precious: “We, who are many, are one bread” (1 Cor. 10.17). The “we” here includes all the believers. There is only one loaf. Hence do not imagine that there is one loaf in Shanghai and another loaf in Peking, and so forth. From the physical viewpoint, there may be tens of thousands of loaves throughout the world; from the spiritual viewpoint, however, there is but one bread loaf before God. Why is there but one loaf? Because being in the flesh we are restricted by time and space. If it were possible, all the believers in the entire world would break one loaf of bread together. But we know that that is not possible. Even so, though all the believers in all the different places throughout the world break the bread respectively, before God there is but one bread loaf being broken. The bread which the hands of the brethren in Shanghai touch is the same bread which the brethren in Peking and the brethren in Hanchow touch. The bread which is broken everywhere represents the one body of Christ. For God has only one Church in the world. And this Church is spread out throughout every city and every village world-wide. And the churches which are thus spread out are called the churches in these cities and villages. For the sake of convenience, these churches in the many cities and villages of the world are called “the churches of God” (2 Thess. 1.4; 1 Cor. 11.16; cf. also 1 Thess. 2.14). In actuality, the churches of God are the Church of God. The Lord calls us to break bread lest we forget the churches at various places. We are not to be an independent church, but to be joined with others as one Church. This is why we use one bread loaf to aid us in recognizing that though there are many believers—past and present, at home and abroad—and many local churches, there is nevertheless but one loaf of bread.

The bread which we believers world-wide break may amount to tens of thousands of loaves, yet the body of Christ which the bread represents is only one. The Lord that the bread speaks of is also one.

So that all the miniature local churches stand for the entire body of Christ. A local assembly may have only fifty people gathered together, but what it represents is the entire body of believers, both past and present, at home and abroad. The bread which any local assembly breaks, however small that assembly may be, represents Peter, Paul, Martin Luther, Wesley, and you and me. Wherever the local assembly is, it is a representation of the body of Christ. Therefore no church may take independent action. In all its actions it must take the entire body into consideration. In the meeting, you should not see just the few brothers and sisters who sit by you; instead you should see the entire body of Christ. What you do is not only related to the brothers and sisters immediately around you but it is also related to the whole body of Christ. Because we are one body, what you as a member do is what the body of Christ does. One member may affect the whole body.

The Chinese who live in the South Seas are mainly Fukien and Kwangtung* in origin. In many cities and villages in the South Seas there are Overseas Chinese Fraternities. Though the number of the members of these fraternities varies, wherever the fraternities are in power, the Chinese which they represent are in power; and wherever these fraternities are under oppression, the Chinese they represent also come under oppression. Now just as these fraternities represent China throughout the South Seas, so we in the place where we sojourn represent the Church. From this we can readily perceive the relationship the action of each local assembly has to that of the entire body of Christ, as well as the mutual relationship that obtains among these local assemblies themselves. Though you may be only a miniature church in a single locality, God will nonetheless use this miniature church to manifest the universal Church. So that the small local assembly here is to represent the all-inclusive body of Christ.

* Two southern mainland Chinese provinces.—*Translator*

For this reason it cannot but maintain relationship with other local assemblies as well as with brothers and sisters in other places.

Being Received to Break Bread

If a brother is being received by you to break bread with you, you do not receive him just to your particular assembly. The fact of the matter is you receive him into the churches of God, into the House of God. When we receive a person in Shanghai, we think of the assemblies in Hanchow and Peking. If they will not receive him, we should not receive him either because we receive on their behalf. We cannot take independent action. We must discern the body of Christ. If what we do personally cannot represent the assembly where we are, then we should not do it. Unless a matter is decided unanimously by the entire church, it should not be done, for it will not be the action of the body but an independent move instead. The Bible advocates only body action, not independent action.

Why do we inquire diligently when a brother asks to be received at the table? Because we receive him not only for the brethren in Shanghai but also for the brethren in Hanchow, Peking and other places. If he travels to other places later on, he will be received by the brethren at other places on the basis of a letter of recommendation from the local assembly in Shanghai because they believe in what the brethren in Shanghai have done. Hence, for the sake of the brethren at other localities, we must be careful in receiving anyone to the Lord's table.

Must Recognize Gifts

If a person is being recognized by the brethren in other assemblies as being a pastor, teacher, or evangelist, he should be able to shepherd, teach, or preach the gospel in Shanghai too. The brethren in Shanghai should recognize his gift, because a person will not lose

his gift through changing places geographically. Let a local assembly, therefore, recognize the gifted person already recognized by other assemblies. For office may change through the change of locality, but gift will remain the same despite the geographical change. Office is restricted to locality, but gift is not so restricted. For this reason, a local assembly must exercise great care in discerning whether a person is gifted, since it is done not only for its own locality but also for the brethren in other localities. We must truly think of the whole Church of God.

Co-Workers

Concerning this matter of co-workers, let me illustrate it first with one incident. A worker at a certain place had the desire to invite another brother to come and work with him. He asked whether it was a good idea to invite that brother. I told him that he had really no need to ask me, for he ought to know himself. Suppose he introduced that brother to Peking or Shanghai or Nanking; would the brethren receive him? He answered probably not. So I said that that being the case, he could not invite that brother either. For if he were to acknowledge that brother as a fellow-worker, he would actually be bringing in that brother to work with all those who worked with him. He would be receiving that brother not only for himself and for the few who met in his local assembly but also for the entire body of Christ—even for the apostle Paul and others like him if they were still living today on earth. He would be receiving that brother into the Work on behalf of Paul and Peter and others. He would be adding one more co-worker to them. In essence, he would be taking an independent action. But all independent actions must be rejected because they have no place in the body of Christ. Therefore, each and every assembly should exercise caution and refrain from taking any independent action but learn to follow God in coordinating each action with other assemblies.

Must Meet Where Church Ground Is

Suppose a person from here has fellowship with a brother in Peking while on a visit there. When this brother from Peking comes to Shanghai, he should have fellowship with us too. If he comes to Shanghai and has no fellowship with us, something is wrong.

Brother Yu had fellowship with a few brothers from the West on Kuling Mountain. They met together often. But when he came to Shanghai, it happened that two of the brethren from the West also came to Shanghai. They stayed here for several months, yet they never came to break bread with us. When I asked brother Yu about this, I was told that they were too busy to come. I knew, however, that they had other reasons for not coming to the meeting. This shows independent action, not body action. If they could fellowship with brother Yu in Kuling, why could they not have fellowship with the people in Shanghai with whom brother Yu fellowships? It was not right for them to have fellowship with brother Yu and not to have fellowship with the brethren in Shanghai who regularly had fellowship with brother Yu. For when they chose to fellowship with brother Yu, they chose to fellowship with all who have any fellowship with brother Yu. They should not choose an individual meeting to have fellowship with; they should choose to have fellowship with all meetings that have fellowship with one another.

For example, today you come to break bread in our meeting here in Shanghai. You come because you consider this to be a better place to hear good messages. And so you have fellowship with the brethren who meet here. Later on, you go to Peking. There is also a meeting there that has fellowship with us here. But it is rather weak and has only a little over ten people meeting together. But in addition, there is in Peking a well known preacher who speaks well and yet he has no fellowship with us. When you arrive in Peking, you deliberate within your heart whether you should meet with those weak brethren or go to hear the famous preacher. If you go to the place where the

famous preacher is, you are taking independent action. Since you are in fellowship with us here, you will be in fellowship with the brethren there with whom we have fellowship. You cannot choose where to meet. This is the principle of body fellowship. You cannot move independently.

We frequently think we may choose the place to meet according to our pleasure. If so, then we do not realize we do not have that option, but must choose the place where God wants us to be. For in the meeting we receive the greatest blessing, bear the greatest responsibility, and also accept the greatest restriction. Wherever we go, we go to where the church ground is. Do not speculate about how denominations bind people, for our fellowship binds people more strongly than does sectarianism. Yet what *they* have is legal organization; what *we* have is body organism. I suspect that nothing in the world binds people together more strongly than the principle of the body. None of the members of our physical body can freely move for a single day. Even a small finger cannot be free for a day. Our bonding is the bonding of the body, therefore there is no independency.

May we truly see the body of Christ and how we may not take independent action. After believing in the Lord, we are not only saved through faith, we must also take our place as brethren. We are not only Christians, we are brethren to one another. This is brotherly love.

Each Is Responsible

Practically speaking, we would like to ask the question—What is the responsibility of the brethren? Each brother or sister must not only bear the responsibility of the local meeting but also consider all the brothers and sisters who are in Christian fellowship throughout the earth. To be truly Scriptural, we must look beyond China and see all the brethren throughout the world. For we participate with them in

the fellowship of God and of His Son. Today we have a drawback, which is, that those who meet in Shanghai see only the brethren in the Shanghai meeting. Those who meet in Peking see only the brethren in the Peking meeting. Believers lack a world vision and love. This is a great deficiency. Just as many people only see their sins and how through faith in Christ they have received forgiveness without then connecting it in the slightest to the notion of brotherly fellowship, so there are many who only consider the local brethren who are seen without giving any thought to the brethren in other places who are not seen. Neither of these is the will of God.

The salvation work of God is to obtain living stones for the building of the spiritual house. If stones are scattered, they cannot be a spiritual house. But as we together break the bread, we manifest the entire body of Christ. Hence, each of us who breaks bread is responsible to the entire body of Christ; that is to say, each is responsible towards all who are in fellowship everywhere. Each time we receive a brother to break bread with us, we ought to show him that in breaking bread he must discern not only the Lord's body (His personal body broken for us on the cross), but also discern the body of Christ (His corporate body, the Church). It is sinful not to discern the body. All the brethren who break bread ought to know what are the Scriptural conditions for anyone to break bread; namely, (1) he or she must be a saved person; and (2) he or she must be a person who has not committed the sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5. Besides these two conditions, we also should inform them of the responsibility they bear. They are to be responsible not only to the local church gathering but also to gatherings elsewhere. Should they fail to see their responsibility, we must not refuse to receive them, but we should nonetheless exhort them to consider very carefully such relationship. For in the breaking of bread, we remember the Lord, but we also take up the responsibility of fellowship towards the Church.

Now this that I have been enunciating is not a new practice. It has existed since the beginning of the Christian era. Whenever a brother arrives at a certain place, he should seek out other brethren for fellowship. No one should go to another area for four or five months without ever trying to find a meeting place. Before he leaves his home area, a person should first ask the responsible brothers to give him a letter of recommendation, and then inquire if there is any meeting where he can have fellowship. And if it so happens that there are two or three meetings in the new place to choose from, let him select the meeting which stands on church ground. By so doing, the brethren there will derive benefit from him and he will derive benefit from them. And let him always keep in mind that he is as much responsible to the church in the place to which he goes as he was to that of the place he leaves. He ought to behave in the new place as a brother.

If we all keep the fellowship of the saints according to the teaching of the Scriptures, how precious such fellowship will be. Our responsibility is towards the entire body of Christ, not simply towards the local assembly where we are. We should be interested in and concerned with the affairs of all the brothers and sisters throughout the world. May God bring us back to this original position.

Responsibility between Assemblies

The Bible tells us that what God ordains for one assembly He also ordains for another. If the decision of two assemblies is different, something must be wrong. Either the decision of the one assembly is wrong or the decision of the other assembly is wrong. 1 Corinthians gives the clearest instruction on the management of church affairs. We are told that this letter was written “unto the church of God which is at Corinth,...with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ *in every place*” (1 Cor. 1.2). In other words, all the

churches operate according to the same principle. This letter, for instance, speaks about the head covering of the sisters. Paul concludes his instruction by saying: “if any man seemeth to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the *churches of God*” (11.16). The apostle does not allow the action of one assembly to be different from that of the other. Thus, we realize we cannot be independent. One assembly must consider the other assemblies. Whenever we do anything, we should think about its relationship to other assemblies. It is not possible for a sister not to cover her head in Peking yet cover her head in Shanghai. The practice of all the churches of God is the same. Again, “as in *all the churches of the saints*, let the women keep silence in the churches: for it is not permitted unto them to speak” (14.33b,34). That the women are not to teach in the church is a practice kept by all the churches of the saints.

Since the assemblies in various localities have been established at different times, the conditions of these assemblies will also vary. Some may be clear on church truth; some others may not be very clear. What must we do then? We should be humble enough to learn from the other assemblies. “Ye became imitators of us, and of the Lord,” observes the apostle elsewhere in his writings, “having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1.6); and again: “ye, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 2.14). Here we are told that the church at Thessalonica imitated the churches in Judea. Why did the church at Thessalonica imitate them? Because the gospel was first preached to the Jews in Judea and hence the churches there were more spiritually advanced. No assembly may act independently. It is not just the individual believers who ought not act independently, even an assembly of believers should not act independently.

Independent Assembly

If someone plans to set up an assembly which will have no fellowship with other assemblies, that group does not stand on the ground of the church. For let us see that there was no church mentioned in the Bible which did not care for the other churches. It is not the will of God that we care only for the churches in China and cut off all relationships with the churches abroad. For before God, there is no distinction between Chinese and foreign churches. The Church of God is found throughout the world. Unless it is impossible to find any assembly standing on church ground in other countries, we ourselves will lose the ground of the body if we limit our fellowship to China.

What a Sect Is

I am fearful lest unlawful believers should rise up in our midst who lust after fame and the authority of the elders. If they cannot achieve their objective here, they will go to virgin soil—say, a village or an island—to preach the gospel and to win souls in order to gather some saved ones together, begin to break bread, and appoint elders and deacons. And they may do everything according to the Scriptures, yet ultimately they will have no communication with us. They will hold tight to their own locality. They will reckon that they can ignore us and go their separate way. Yet will they realize that in so doing they shall be going the sectarian way by not gathering on the ground of the church? Those who may conduct themselves in such a manner are as the sects mentioned in the Bible because their fellowship will be limited to a few hundred people. Even though all the meetings, the breaking of bread, and the appointment of elders and deacons may be according to the Scriptural procedure, their fellowship will still be limited to but one locality, and therefore they will be sectarian.

If the fellowship of an assembly is limited to merely its own locality and not also to the wider realm of the body of Christ which includes all believers everywhere, then that assembly is a sect. Furthermore, if the fellowship of any assembly includes only believers in several localities and still not the entire body of Christ both past and present and at home and abroad, it also is a sect. And finally, if a number of lawless people should go out from us here and set up another meeting whose fellowship is limited only to that meeting, that too is a sect.

Suppose the brethren in Chefoo endorse the policy of exclusivism. They labor well and do everything according to the Scriptures; yet they refuse to have fellowship with anybody else. They are a sectarian group from which you must be delivered. Each sect has its special mark. If any group should take the limits of its locality to be the limits of its fellowship, it is a sect. We must not only see whether what people do is according to the Scriptures or not, we must also inquire as to whether they consider themselves to be a sect or not. Any meeting which does not belong to the body of Christ is to be rejected. If we wish to serve God well, we must learn not to violate His command and learn to accept the unity of the brethren. We cannot limit ourselves to merely one locality but should try in spiritual things to be one with assemblies in other localities. This does not suggest that the standard of our conduct is set by majority vote; rather, it is by the unanimous decision of the brethren. Oneness and one accord is the work of the Holy Spirit, while majority vote is man-made.

The principle of the Open Brethren* is for each local assembly to take care of its own affairs and to have nothing to do with matters belonging to other assemblies. And hence, people excommunicated from the assembly in Nanking could break bread in the assembly in

* Referring to a wing of the Plymouth Brethren.—*Translator*

Shanghai. The Open Brethren even claim that they have never quarreled with other assemblies. According to their practice, of course, they cannot quarrel—since Shanghai will take care of Shanghai only and Nanking will take care of Nanking only. Each assembly can live in peace since each of them lives separately. The fact of the matter is, however, that these Open Brethren do have their quarrels. If in a meeting of an Open Brethren assembly some people differ in doctrine, they can go out and form another assembly. Open Brethren can even have several separate assemblies in one locality, and with no fellowship being conducted among them. And yet they claim that they do not quarrel with anybody! Each Open Brethren believer can run to the kind of assembly which pleases him. I ask, Is there any difference between this way and the denominational way? In truth, I can see no difference except in the size of the assemblies. Actually, neither the Open Brethren way nor the way of the denominations is the teaching and practice shown in the Scriptures.

Taking Same Action

Suppose the assembly in Shanghai excommunicates a brother, and yet the assembly in Nanking receives him. The assembly in Shanghai cannot for this reason excommunicate the assembly in Nanking. It may, however, raise a question with the assembly in Nanking. For whoever is excommunicated from one assembly is excommunicated from all assemblies; and whoever is received by one assembly is received by all the assemblies of God. Such a relationship will manifest the reality of the body of Christ.

Nonetheless, there is the other side of the truth which we must not overlook. The government of each assembly is locally independent. Shanghai cannot overturn, or interfere with, the decision of Nanking; and vice versa. Yet in making decisions, either Shanghai or Nanking needs to remember how its decision will affect other assemblies. Extra care needs to be taken. Even though no assembly may interfere

with the government of another, each assembly must seek to know the will of God with singleness of purpose and to not act rashly because it is locally governed. It may ask the help of another assembly in order to reach a decision which will be in accordance with the Lord's will as well as with the Lord's word. The heart of the matter is whether the flesh has been dealt with or whether it is spiritual. If the answer is positive, an assembly will consider other assemblies.

Suppose the assembly in Nanking has received an unsaved person inadvertently and later recommends him to the assembly in Shanghai. On the day the letter of commendation arrives in Shanghai, that person becomes a brother in Shanghai, and therefore he is no longer under the government of the assembly in Nanking. It is now up to the assembly in Shanghai to deal with the case. There is no need for the assembly in Shanghai to consult with the assembly in Nanking. However, if a brother is wrongly excommunicated by the assembly in Shanghai and he later goes to Nanking where the brethren there discover the error, those in Nanking cannot receive this excommunicated brother at once but should first write to Shanghai and inquire about the case. Whether he will be received or not depends on how the assembly in Shanghai responds.

This whole matter rests on our flesh being put on the cross. Even the relationship of assembly is based on this principle. If we are wrong, we should submit to our brethren. If we insist on carrying out *our* opinion, we will soon become a sect. Sometimes a brother may deem himself infallible; then he himself is a sect. Hence, we must judge the flesh with severity, putting it to death that we may live in the Holy Spirit while we manage church affairs. Otherwise, if the flesh is left unjudged, each will do what he likes, with there being no way possible to manage affairs of the church well. The self in each one of us must be dealt with. This teaching of the Scripture applies equally to assemblies as to individuals.

Questions

(1) Suppose a brother came to Shanghai with a letter of commendation from the assembly in Tsinan. He is later excommunicated by the assembly in Shanghai. Is it necessary for Shanghai to inquire of the brethren in Tsinan before excommunicating that brother?

When a brother comes with a letter of commendation from the assembly in Tsinan, he will be received accordingly by the assembly in Shanghai. If he is found out later to be unsaved, he can be excommunicated. He is received because the brethren in Tsinan have given him a letter of commendation. We must believe in the words of the brethren in Tsinan and receive him. But afterwards in dealing with him we have no need to notify the brethren in Tsinan. This is because after that brother is introduced and received, he is now a brother in the assembly in Shanghai. And hence, the assembly in Shanghai has the authority to deal with him.

(2) Can we go elsewhere to break bread? Is it contrary to Scriptural truth?

Suppose there are two groups in the same locality that have the breaking of bread. We need to discern which one stands on the ground of the church. If both stand on church ground, they ought to have fellowship and be one group. One group but separate meetings. Whoever is received at the Lord's table by one is automatically received by the other. There is no need to be received again because we are now one fellowship group.

(3) Is it all right if I break bread with a group of weak brethren and go to another place to hear a famous preacher?

It is not forbidden to go elsewhere to hear the word. But one thing must be clarified. Your fellowship with the people where you go to

hear the word will be restricted. This is because unless the preachers as well as their works aim at the purpose of God, what they do may not be considered as God's work according to the Scriptures. I have already mentioned elsewhere that God's work is not an evangelistic band, an endeavor society, a Sunday school program, a Bible class, a revival meeting, and so forth. God's work from start to finish is one, which is to say, the Church. What God aims at doing in a locality is the establishing and building up of the local assembly there. Any attempt which falls short of this aim—failing to do that much—is not reckoned as God's work. I do not mean to say that evangelistic meetings, Bible classes, revival meetings, and so forth are not good. I am only saying that if these are all which are being done, without having the building of the local assembly as their objective, they come short of God's purpose. For such endeavors actually lower the purpose of God. All the works which God did as recorded in the book of Acts were never less than the contributing to the building up of the local assembly.

Today in the church there are people who teach the truth, who lead souls to Christ, who search the Scriptures, and proclaim the gospel. These things the believers must do. Nevertheless, we need to hold fast to God's purpose and to aim at the Church. What we are afraid of is that many works, though very good, fall short of God's work which is the Church. We believe there are indeed people with gifts outside of us; but we also believe that if we are more faithful, God will also raise up in our own midst such gifted persons. If we live in God's light, there will be no need to go elsewhere to hear the word of God.

(4) Some believers criticize the truths which we hold and keep themselves strictly to their own Bible class; yet they come to break bread with us and to speak at the breaking of bread meeting. How should we deal with such people?

If in a certain locality there exists such an exclusive type of Bible class, it does not meet according to the principle of the Church. Their work falls short of God's aim, and therefore it is not His work but a human imitation of it, since the work of God is always aimed at and centered in the Church. Though such a Bible class and so on are good and blessed by the Lord, these are not deemed to be His work. We may say that God's work is truly *in* them, because we cannot ignore the fact of what the Lord does in their works. Indeed, we would be offending God if we were to say there is not the work of God in their works. Nevertheless, the *purpose* of their works is not centered in building up the Church of God.

If these people come to break bread, we should be most happy to receive them. We are not receiving them according to the denomination which they represent, yet we cannot refuse them simply because they are still in their denomination.

If a person in the denomination is saved, we can receive him to break bread with us, but we must be careful in receiving him to preach. If he is not clear on church truth, we can have fellowship with him in life, but not necessarily in work. For we do not know what he will speak about. There are many people with whom we may have fellowship in life, but not in work. This is the principle which the apostle Paul held to.

Note also the following situation: "Now I beseech you, brethren, mark them that are causing the divisions and occasions of stumbling, contrary to the doctrine which ye learned; and turn away from them" (Rom. 16.17). Hence the brethren should avoid people who cause divisions. The elders can notify us of whom we should avoid and with whom we should fellowship. Let the brethren learn to obey.

(5) When we receive a person to the breaking of bread, should we not inquire about the following four things?—(1) Is he a saved person? (2) Has he committed the manifest sins mentioned in 1

Corinthians 5? (3) Is he willing to be committed to the group? and (4) Will he be open to fellowship with the brethren here? Suppose a person is saved and he does not have the sins which might otherwise keep him away from the table. Suppose, too, that he wants to break bread with us, yet he will not be responsible towards the group nor fellowship with the brethren. On the contrary, he tries to interfere with church affairs. How should we deal with such people?

Please note that (1) and (2) are the conditions for receiving a person to the Lord's table, but that (3) and (4) are those which relate to the discerning of the body. If a person does not discern the body, he eats and drinks judgment to himself (1 Cor. 11). This is something which all the elders or responsible brothers must clearly understand. As to the discerning of the body, this has two sides: (1) to discern this body as the body of the Lord Jesus. We break bread in order to remember the Lord Jesus himself. This is why we come to eat and to drink at His table. (2) to discern this body as being also the entire body of Christ. As we gather to break bread, we are not only conscious of all here who break bread together as the body of Christ but also of all those everywhere else who are redeemed by the precious blood. If a Japanese believer comes to our midst to break bread with us, we still must acknowledge him as a beloved brother in the Lord. Suppose England invades Tibet and the international atmosphere grows tense. When a brother from England comes to our midst to break bread with us, we must likewise consider him to be our beloved brother in Christ. We must not be influenced by human discrimination; instead, we must be governed by the relationship which exists within the body of Christ.

For this reason, therefore, when such a person who refuses to discern the body comes into our midst for the breaking of bread, you may discuss with him if he is willing to discern the body. Is he willing to be responsible to the church for all his actions? If he is unwilling, we still cannot keep him from breaking bread, because he is already saved. Yet he must be told that he will eat and drink

judgment to himself if he does not discern the body, and thus it would be rather unprofitable for him spiritually.

(6) Will such eating and drinking judgment to oneself become so serious as to reach the point of death?

If the church group is holy and it knows how to exercise God's authority, such a thing may indeed happen. Why is the breaking of bread so serious? Because if you confess that this is the body of Christ and acknowledge that you are a part of it, and yet you fail to discern the body as mentioned earlier, then this means you are bearing false witness and such a witness will disgrace God. For the breaking of bread is a testimony to the angels, to the demons, and to all the principalities and authorities. The false testimony you may give will bring disgrace to God. He may be lenient towards an ignorant person, but He shall be severe with one who knowingly bears false witness.

(7) If a brother is sick, must he be anointed by the elders before he can be healed?

A believer may be sick due to various reasons: he may be ill through his carelessness towards natural environments or through Satanic attack or through his disjoining himself from the body of Christ. If a believer is disjoined from the body of Christ through his not holding fast the Head and not taking his proper position in the body, he needs to know first how he became disjoined before he asks the elders of the church to anoint him with oil.

Anointing means causing him to return to his rightful place in the body of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. We all know we are members of Christ's body. And just as a member is in the flow of the circulation of the life and blood of the physical body, so a member of the body of Christ is in the flow of the circulation of the life and blood of Christ. The running down of precious oil from

Aaron's head to the entire body as spoken of in the Old Testament (Psalm 133) is a picture or type of this very matter. As long as a member stands in his or her place in the body, the precious oil will flow to that one. And thus will that member receive the protection of the precious oil and be kept from sickness. For all who stand in their rightful places in the body of Christ are under the anointing of the Head. The precious oil is on the head of Christ, from whence it flows to us. Having the oil, we have health. Having the oil, we have life. A believer is sick in this case because he has been disconnected from the body of Christ so that the life and anointing of the Head is unable to flow to him.

“Is any among you sick? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord” (James 5.14). It says here to call for the *elders* to anoint a person with oil, because the elders represent the church, and thus they represent the body of Christ. Anointing with oil is to bring this sick believer back under the anointing of the Head. If he is brought back under such anointing, his sickness shall be healed.

(8) Such being the case, can those who represent the church tell the brother who is sick that they will anoint him with oil so that he may be healed?

Indeed they can. Except that before the anointing there must first be the confession of sins and prayer: “Confess therefore your sins one to another” (James 5.16a). Such confession of sins is necessary because there has been an obstacle to the mutual relationship within the body. After sins are confessed and the cause for being disjoined is removed, the member is returned to his original place in the body. If there remains an obstacle, the anointing would be useless. Hence first let the obstacle be removed. Let all criticism and controversy with the brethren be cleared up. Even the elders need to confess sins one to another so that all possible obstacles are removed and the relationship in the body of Christ can be restored. Then the anointing

with oil will cause the anointing on Christ's head to flow to that member.

(9) How should we deal with people who have not committed the sins in 1 Corinthians 5 but nonetheless continue to disturb the meetings of the assembly in spite of repeated warnings from the elders?

Notify all the brethren to keep away from them. For the elders especially bear spiritual responsibility in this area. If there happens to be such a person who disturbs the meetings, the elders should deal with him in prayer. We ought to know that it is a matter of great seriousness to deal with a brother through prayer. If the responsible brothers will indeed seriously deal with the situation in one accord, a most tragic and grave consequence will most likely come upon such a person, for God will use the authority which He has established to judge the case. When the Corinthian case appeared, Paul chided them for not being able to deal with it. Those who act as elders must know how to deal with such situations; otherwise, the flesh—if left unchecked—will become so corrupted as to more than likely incur very serious consequences later. Hence, let us all learn to be obedient people. With our flesh under control, we will not have much of a problem.

(10) What is meant by meeting on church ground? How do we know our group is standing on church ground?

Let me make an announcement: we are both most open and most exclusive in the areas of breaking bread and fellowship. Open, because we receive all the children of God without discrimination against anyone. Exclusive, because any church fellowship that on the one hand may actually practice many of the things which we practice—such as baptism, the breaking of bread, elders and deacons, and so forth—and yet on the other hand does not stand on church ground, is not good enough for us.

Just because a fellowship has the appearance of following the Scriptures does not mean that it is necessarily standing on the ground of the church. This question of church ground needs to be answered affirmatively before we can join ourselves with it.

What is meant by referring to a church group as standing on church ground?

Two things are essential: (a) It is *not a sect*. What is the difference between a sect and a church? A church includes all the believers, whereas a sect includes only part of the believers. A sect raises a wall in the church to separate itself off from others who also belong to the church. A sect is not able to stand on the ground of the church because (1) those in a sect take on a special name which the entire church body does not do; (2) those in a sect emphasize a special truth which the whole church body does not emphasize; and (3) those in a sect practice a special fellowship (that is to say, membership) other than the fellowship of the entire body of Christ. A group which stands on church ground has neither a special name other than the general name of the church, nor does it have any special truth nor special membership.

(b) It is *living out the body*. Although we may observe a group which does not have a special name or creed or membership and which—in its appearance—meets according to the Scriptures, we must inquire further if such a group lives out the life of the body. For not all who are not sects stand on the ground of the church. They may not be a sect negatively speaking, but positively speaking, they may not know what the body of Christ in the church truly is.

You should try to discern if a group takes up the responsibility of the local assembly in its locality. If there are other small gatherings in the locality of a similar nature, do those in the first group seek diligently to unite with them to become, together, the local assembly? Does the first group help the other gatherings to see the

nature of a local assembly? Or do those in the first group let the scattering of the various gatherings continue without making any effort to unite them so that none can really represent the nature of the local assembly? Do those in the first group try their best to accommodate all the children of God, or do they build up a stronghold around themselves to take care of their small fellowship alone? If the latter is true, they are not standing on the ground of the church.

Now even if this group *has* taken up the responsibility of the local assembly, you will want to further inquire as to whether or not that group practices “localism”—that is to say, is it only concerned with its own locality by failing to recognize that the Church of God is universal and hence failing to maintain fellowship with other assemblies that stand on similar church ground? If it in fact *does* refuse to fellowship with other local assemblies elsewhere, thus depriving them of the opportunity to march forward together as one, it has not yet taken the church ground.

I suppose all of us have already come to know that there is only the local assembly in view in the Bible. Due to the outward ruinous appearance of the Church today, however, the division among God’s people is so serious that no group of believers—including ourselves—can freely call itself the local assembly. We here, for example, can only say we are meeting on the ground of the local church. Though we are not “the local church,” we nevertheless stand on local church ground.

(11) If there is spread a Lord’s table anywhere which accepts all God’s children, can we say that the brethren there stand on church ground?

The first thing to be settled is to understand what is meant by standing on church ground. We know that for any group of believers to be standing on church ground it must not be a sect; but this

understanding is only a negative one. Positively understood, a group must manifest the life of the body of Christ, which is to say, that it is not independent but is willing to walk together with all non-sectarian brothers and sisters wherever found. Though the Church is now in ruin, there are still people who remain outside of man-made sects. We ought to walk together with all who do not belong to any sect. And by so doing we shall stand on the ground of the church.

Actually this expression of standing on church ground needs especially to be employed in our day when the ruin of the Church can be seen on every hand. When the Church was one, before there were sects and many man-made things, everybody stood on church ground and manifested the life of the body of Christ. But now the Church in its appearance is today quite desolate, and people have divided themselves into sects according to human opinions. There is therefore the need for some believers not to divide into sects and to stand on the ground of the church. If they do so, they will manifest on behalf of the whole Church the life of the body of Christ which it ought to exhibit.

Today in many places believers have seen the error of sectarianism, but they have not seen what the body of Christ is. It is good that they are non-sectarian; yet this is but negative in nature. Though the Church today does not have the appearance of unity, those who have been delivered from this disunity still have the obligation of walking according to the principle of the oneness of the Church. Hence even if somewhere a Lord's table is open to all God's children, we need to further inquire if that group's work and testimony and fellowship are joined with all who have been freed from sects. How can we, who do not belong to any sect, fail to be united together as in the time when there was no sect? All who do not belong to the sects must manifest the life of the body which the Church as a whole ought to have. For this reason, people who claim to be non-sectarian but still will not work and fellowship with all others who are themselves equally non-sectarian are really

independent in nature. Though they are willing to receive all God's children at the Lord's table, they have neither stood on the ground of the church nor known what the body of Christ is. Such a table is in actual fact *not* the Lord's table because the loaf on that table does not represent all the saints.

How to Meet

3

There are different kinds of meetings, yet two things must be observed about all of them:

(a) *Arrive early.* It is most unkind towards others to be late to a meeting because you cause them to wait for you: “Wherefore, my brethren, when ye come together to eat, wait one for another” (1 Cor. 11.33). There are many who do indeed observe this Scripture verse; however, instead of their waiting for others, they let the others wait for them. Everyone must try to arrive early lest people have to wait for the latecomers.

The evils of late arrival are several in number: (i) It causes the meeting to have a late start and a late ending. This will inconvenience sisters who have responsibilities for cooking and taking care of children. (ii) In the breaking of bread meeting, hymns which have *already* been sung may be called for again by the late arrivals. This will create repetition. (iii) It has happened that a breaking of bread meeting may have already begun; nevertheless, latecomers may initiate new starts, thus resulting in having perhaps four or five different beginnings! We need to learn to be led by the Holy Spirit in how we remember the Lord. Each time at such a meeting for the remembering of the Lord, it may commence differently—sometimes it commences with the sufferings of the Lord, at other times it may commence with the forgiveness of our sins, and at still other times, with the glory of the Lord, and so on. Yet because the latecomers do not know how the meeting has started, their prayers and hymns may not at all fit in with the spirit of the meeting already in progress. For the above reasons, therefore, it is better to arrive early and then wait than it is to arrive late.

(b) *Stand to speak.* It is best in the meetings for the brethren to stand and speak. Speaking while seated does not produce sufficient

sound to be easily heard; it may also conflict with the voices of other brothers, for when one who is seated mentions a hymn with his head bent down, he cannot observe whether some other brother has already simultaneously stood up to pray. Our ears are simply not as quick as our eyes. By our standing up, the incidence of having two persons speak at the same time can often be avoided. Hence let us remember that before anyone prays or speaks or mentions a hymn we should look around to see if anybody else has already stood up. Though this seems to be a small matter of etiquette, it is something which ought to be observed.

(1) Breaking of Bread Meeting

The first point to be noticed is that in a breaking of bread meeting, we come to remember the Lord; therefore, everything must be centered upon Him. We ought to know that prayer in the forms of asking and interceding are not suitable at such a time. Through our prayers we should praise and thank the Lord and not, at this time, remember our needs in prayer. Let it be pure praise and thanksgiving. According to the light given believers in the Scriptures, such a meeting is divided into two parts: before the breaking of the bread, the heavenly Father is put before us. Before the bread is broken, God will lead us into remembering the Lord himself. And hence, all praises and thanksgiving are centered upon the Lord. Before the bread is broken, what we see is the Lord Jesus as the only begotten Son because He alone is the Son. But after the bread is broken, we see the Lord Jesus as the firstborn Son, for we now have a part in the Son as the many sons. Before the bread is broken, the Lord Jesus is the grain of wheat; after the bread is broken, this grain of wheat has fallen into the ground and died and has thus borne many grains. In discerning the body of Christ, we see the Lord as the Firstborn who will lead many sons into glory as spoken of in Hebrews 2. He will lead many sons in praises in the midst of the congregation. This is not, however, a law which must be implemented in every meeting.

Yet if we are willing to learn to be led of the Spirit, we will understand how in such a corporate spiritual exercise we will be led step by step to the Father.

On that “last night” the Lord Jesus first led His disciples in eating the Passover feast, then they sang a hymn and went out to the Mount of Olives. The so-called “songs of degrees” or “songs of ascents” is that collection of the 150 Old Testament Psalms which were sung after the children of Israel had kept the Passover and eaten the Passover feast. As they walked up the fifteen steps to the temple, they sang these psalms. Similarly, upon our having eaten the bread, we too should go up to praise God. Let the Lord himself lead us to approach the Father. Our hymns are all “songs of ascents”—that is to say, a rising of our spirits higher and higher after the bread is broken. This is true not only according to the teaching of the book of Hebrews, the example of our Lord, and the instruction of these psalms; it is also according to our personal spiritual experience. After we were saved, did we not thank and praise the Lord first, and then worship God?

The second point to be noticed in the breaking of bread meeting is to learn to follow the lead which has already been established. Though such a time is devoted to remembering the Lord, the meeting can begin on a variety of diverse notes. Sometimes the sufferings of the Lord are what is emphasized, at other times stress is laid on the glory of the Lord in what He has gone through during His earthly life. We need to recognize the start already made in the meeting and learn to follow the lead. Whether singing or praying, it is best to proceed along that line than to make a new start. Do not try to squeeze into the meeting the meaningful Scripture passage which you may have read that very morning in your private devotions or the favorite song which you usually love to sing. Sometimes the meeting is already ended—with the praises and thanks having been adequately offered; but then, suddenly, a brother will stand up to suggest a hymn or offer a prayer. All this is too personal. We must

instead keep the unity of the meeting, for that is very precious. In the breaking of bread meeting, it really puts to the test just who is a good brother: whether one is concerned with only what is his or with the movement of the meeting!

In a meeting, we must close all our personal activities and follow the corporate movement. If it is but one person in a room, he may sing or pray as he pleases. In a meeting, though, there are more people than merely oneself. Therefore let us not inject too much of our own personal feeling into it. Of course, our thanks and praises are to be personal, for unless they are personal they are false. Nonetheless, though the personal element is always in a meeting, special attention must be paid to that which is corporate. We need to proceed together on one line of thought.

Concerning any word given at the breaking of bread meeting, let us keep in mind that the Lord must be the center. If the Scriptures are read, such must lead people to Him. If a word is given, it too must lead people to focus on the Lord. There is no meeting more important than that of the breaking of bread. In a ministry meeting, people listen concerning the Lord for their own benefit, but in the breaking of bread gathering, we go forth to meet the Lord and to remember Him. It is for the Lord himself.

(2) Bible Study Meeting

In a Bible study meeting, no one brother speaks; rather, all the brethren study together before God. One brother will read a portion of Scripture, and then the other brothers join in speaking and discussing, raising questions, and giving some explanations. Thus will the chapter be read verse by verse. I personally feel that it is a failure if there is not such a Bible study meeting in a local assembly.

In such a meeting, no one leads permanently. Some will get up and read the Scriptures, some will raise questions, and some will try

to answer or explain. The principle which governs such a meeting is that nothing is done to enhance one's own self. Each one should set himself aside before he comes to the meeting. We must learn to express the life of the body. This is not only true regarding the Bible study meeting; it is likewise true regarding all other kinds of meetings. Everything is for the sake of the brethren. In the meeting, you are not trying to express yourself; nor are you waiting passively for others' help. You should learn instead to serve your brethren.

He who serves is greater than he who is served, so says the Lord. Every time each of us comes to a meeting, we should remember we come to be a servant of the brothers and sisters. We come to serve them, not merely to hear a message. We serve not because we are proud of ourselves as being greater and better than the rest, but because this is what we should do. Accordingly, let us not sit in a meeting and wait for other people to speak up first. We may start by asking a question to give people opportunity to answer or to follow the lead. Keep in mind that such a question is not asked only for one's own self or for one's own understanding. It is asked with the hope that others too may be profited. We can ask questions whose answers we already know as well as those which we do not know. Perhaps we know quite a lot, but some new brothers may not have the same knowledge. We should therefore ask questions for them.

In a ministry meeting, those who understand are greatly benefited, while those who do not understand gain little or nothing. We may say that such a time is mainly for people who have knowledge and wisdom (natural wisdom and knowledge are nothing in God's sight). People who are illiterate, dull and slow in understanding can only gain a little. But the Bible study meeting is designed to help the weakest of all believers. In such a meeting we can detect how much the brethren really know. Occasionally, some may ask questions totally unrelated—even nonsensical or laughable—in character. Even so, this represents their need. To us it is an insignificant thing, but to them it is a large matter.

Hence in such a meeting, never deem it too elementary to be profitable to us. Remember that we come to help the meeting. We come to be a servant. Perhaps your absence will cause a great loss to others, but our presence will demonstrate our approval and support of the meeting.

Do we not see that we have erred if we cannot help or serve the brethren? This is because we are mindful only of our spiritual growth and care and not for the welfare of the meeting as well as the well-being of the brethren. We are not willing to help and serve the brethren. In the meeting, all the brethren are expected to learn to be brothers and sisters to them so that all may grow together.

If there is any controversial matter, let it not be mentioned in the meeting. During the past year all our gatherings were blessed by God and showed real progress except on the one occasion when two brothers argued over a certain issue till their faces turned red. This was due to their not knowing how to be brothers. "Him that is weak in faith receive ye," said the apostle Paul, "yet not to doubtful disputations" (Rom. 14.1 mg.). This principle is most important. Any person who insists on arguing is being unkind to his brother. He is not helping his brother; he merely wishes to force through his own opinion. What shall a man be profited if his opinion prevails and yet his brother is not helped?

Consequently, in any meeting, our flesh needs to be bound and self must be delivered to death. It is easy to say these words in ordinary days, but the flesh will be severely tested in the meeting. In ordinary times, we may be impressed by the gentleness or love or patience shown by a certain brother. In the meeting, however, we will discover whether he is really sweet or sour. Let us lay aside all doubtful matters and not argue over them. How unfortunate for any brother to consider his own view worthy of mandatory adoption.

Thus we can see that in a Bible study meeting, there is only one principle—which is that of laying down ourselves. Two bad symptoms are to be avoided in a meeting: pride and withdrawal. Pride due to looking at one's strength; withdrawal due to looking at one's weakness. Seeing his own strength, a person tends to speak much; seeing his own weakness, one tends to shut up. Actually, speaking or remaining silent is equally bad. Wherever self is, there is pride; wherever self is, there is withdrawal. All which is of the flesh must be laid down. If each one speaks to glorify the Lord, every problem is solved

(3) Gospel Meeting

There exists a great misconception among brothers and sisters regarding gospel meetings. Forgive me for mentioning this one matter: Frequently, brothers will call on the phone to inquire if there will be preaching of the gospel in the morning or in the afternoon. What they mean by this question is that if it is a gospel meeting they will not attend since they are already saved. This is a mistake. The issue lies not in whether it is to be a gospel meeting, but rather in whether I should attend in order to strengthen the hand of the brother who preaches so that he will not need to fight the battle alone. It should not be a matter of personal gain but one of a desire to help the brother as well as to help the meeting. Please realize that even if there is not any new word spoken, each time the same gospel is preached it is the glorious good news which none of the saved should ever tire of hearing. By sitting in the gospel meeting, you unknowingly have helped the one who preaches and have strengthened his hand. If you have never had the experience of preaching, you will not understand its significance. But if you do have any preaching experience, you will find great comfort in seeing a brother sitting there. By strengthening your brother you help the meeting, and so you work with God.

What will be the facial expressions of the brothers and sisters sitting in a gospel meeting? The case will often be that if something new is said, they will listen enraptured. If, however, there is nothing new, they will feel cheated in coming, though they may not openly express it. I am really surprised that such difficulty exists concerning a gospel meeting. I feel that God's gospel can be heard a hundred times without it ever losing its freshness, because each time the story of how God loves us is told, it sounds so precious to our ears. We ought to praise God forever for the gospel story.

Some brothers and sisters will simply sit there without showing the slightest trace of anything on their faces. They neither smile nor frown. They are so cool. Such an attitude cannot help the brother who preaches; quite the contrary, it causes that brother to feel bound. He wonders if he has said something wrong to make them react like this. How often some people come and sit there spreading death. There is a kind of facial expression which can freeze a meeting. Hence, when you attend a meeting, it would be good for you to sometimes say an amen to show your sympathy or to nod your head in agreement or to respond with a smile to indicate that you are being helped by what is preached. By so doing you will render spiritual help to the brother who does the preaching, in making him feel he is not there standing alone but is rather supported by all the brethren. All this is important to realize, for your attitude will affect the preacher.

When the word preached touches you, it is very appropriate for you to say an amen. I would not object even if the sound were louder, for not only those in the meeting place say amen, even the angels are likewise responding with an amen. This matter of our support of the one preaching I believe was the scene recorded in Acts 2 on the occasion when Peter rose up to speak. I love this passage of the Scriptures very much because what is noted there was not Peter alone, but the eleven also who stood with him. Though only Peter was speaking, the eleven stood with him to show their agreement. Do

not therefore turn within yourself to see what you may attain or how your inner state may be affected. If the assembly life is good, your personal life will also be good.

(4) Prayer Meeting

In order to see things done or to have the greatest power, the prayer meeting is most helpful. It can best measure spiritual strength. I hope many brothers and sisters will come, and that there will be many prayer burdens.

In a prayer meeting, as with all church meetings, assembly life not only helps a Christian's spiritual life, it also manifests the life of the body of Christ. If we overlook the gathering of the saints, we overlook the life together. And such is a great failure.

At a prayer meeting, things to be prayed for should be mentioned and explained. There ought not be too much speaking. Before we mention anything, let us ask ourselves if we have previously prayed for it at home. If it has not been prayed for at home, do not bring it out to deceive the brethren. Any matter which has not been prayed for at home shows neither need nor worth for prayer. This is a principle, a law. Whatever has not been prayed for personally has no need to be prayed for corporately. Only after it has been prayed for privately and a sense of personal inadequacy still lingers can it then be mentioned publicly in a prayer meeting.

Prayers offered in prayer meetings are heard most as well as least by God. Personal prayers are often heard, but corporate prayers are heard even more. People frequently use words and express sentiments in a prayer meeting which they do not use in their inner chamber. Oftentimes they pray with many words and on many things in a prayer meeting which they never do in their inner chamber. This ought not be so. Actually, whatever has not been a burden to pray for in the inner chamber should not be brought to the prayer meeting to

be prayed for there. Prayer without burden ought not be uttered because it will not be heard by God. What prayer you feel inwardly is also felt by God. The power of prayer offered in a prayer meeting with burden and with one accord far exceeds individual prayer. If this were not true, there would be little point in having public prayer. Prayers offered with one heart without anything discordant existing between believers are most effective. God will surely hear such prayers. Hence the truth of the statement when we say that prayer is work.

Do not pray too long and too much. It is indeed true that prayer is like casting a net, yet it is not one person who casts the net. In case you sense something is left unprayed for, you should secretly ask God to raise up somebody else to pray for it. When I was in England, a Christian friend told me a story about a prayer meeting. There was a brother who prayed for many things. He felt he had prayed too long and ought to stop. Yet he also felt there were still many things which should be prayed for. On the one hand, he was afraid that if he ceased praying, nobody else would continue his prayer; on the other hand, he was apprehensive lest if he continued in prayer, he would occupy too much time. Still, out of consideration for other people, he decided to let some other brother pray. So he silently prayed within himself thus: I as an individual have prayed long enough in the meeting, please secure another brother, Lord, to continue my prayer. As he finished his public praying, somebody else actually continued his prayer and prayed for all the things which waited to be prayed for. So I would say that even if your thoughts are strong and good and many, you too should ask God to raise up other people at the same meeting to pray. God will attend to this request, for He is a living God. In a prayer meeting, we should give other people the opportunity to pray. Thus shall we pray with one accord and in life.

Sometimes God will use one among the brothers and sisters to speak for them. All who are experienced in prayer know how very difficult it is to have suitable words to express a need. Often several

persons have prayed for the same thing, and yet the burden is not discharged. So let us ask God to give us words to express our burden in prayer. Ask Him to raise up one among us who can express God's thought. At times there may be ten persons praying together for a certain matter, and all have prayed well. Nevertheless, the consensus among them still is that none has hit the mark. Suddenly one brother begins to pray; and as he prays, he hits the mark. Everybody senses that this is it, and all will say amen. This is praying in the Spirit. If there is no one who can express the inward need for all in a prayer meeting, that meeting is a failure. On the other hand, if people pray from 7:00 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. and have already arrived at the point of having had the burden discharged, all may go home for there is no need for further prayer. The words of the Holy Spirit are spoken by the Holy Spirit through man to express the mind of God. Such prayer is thorough and prevailing.

In 1926, I was severely ill in Foochow. My whole body turned purple. Three brothers and one sister came to my room to pray for me. The first one prayed with tears, yet I did not feel touched. The second one also prayed fervently, but I still did not sense anything. The third one was known as a prayer warrior, but his prayer too was of no avail. The fourth one to pray was that sister. As she opened her mouth, she prayed: "O God, people in hades cannot praise you, nor do you like them to praise you in hades" (cf. Ps. 115.17, 6.5; Is. 38.18). I instantly felt that this was it. Even before the prayer was ended, I knew I was well. The burden was lifted, and the sickness was healed. That very afternoon I got out of bed, and the next day I was on my way to travel for the Lord's work. Hence let us ask God to use us as a mouthpiece in the prayer meeting so that we may utter the words of the Holy Spirit to express the current burden and need of the brothers and sisters.

I will also mention what happened at the recently concluded conference. Our convocation began on the Lord's Day January 20. At the prayer meeting on the 17th, we prayed especially for this

Victory Conference. Many brethren prayed fervently for many things, and I ardently responded with amens. However, there lingered a sense of need as if a burden had not been uttered. Later on, one brother opened his mouth and prayed: "O God, grant us good weather that it will not be too cold nor raining, nor snowing, and that we may also meet quietly." Everybody at the prayer meeting immediately felt touched, and the amens were louder than in the other prayers. Now before the conference commenced the weather had not been too good. Even in the evening of our prayer time (Thursday), it had been snowing. But on Friday before the conference, both rain and snow stopped. When did it rain again? The Thursday after our conference was concluded. During the whole time of the conference, it had not rained once. Furthermore, in the lane where we met, one family was holding a funeral. The day before the conference, on Saturday, they made a tremendous noise during their funeral observance. But on the second day they stopped. And only after our conference was over did they again begin to observe the funeral service with great noise. Had they done this during the conference, we would not have been able to meet quietly.

Hence in a prayer meeting, we need people to be the mouthpiece of the Holy Spirit. If we have such people, we will have no difficulty. For our difficulty is not knowing the need. Whenever the burden is lifted, the work is done.

(5) Meeting of Brothers or Sisters

Due to the vastness of Shanghai and the scatteredness of the brothers and sisters over the city, there is a special need to have meetings for brothers and for sisters for the sake of fellowship. At such meetings, particular attention is given to fellowship and care. There we may talk about how to be brothers as well as discuss affairs concerning the gathering. We can mention the problems which brothers and sisters from abroad may incur or the employment

situation of the local brethren or any special need among the saints. These are important practical matters. Many things can be corrected in such meetings. We can never be individual, isolated believers; we must learn how to bear each other's burdens. Many are concerned only with their own personal salvation and spirituality; they care not at all how other brothers and sisters fare, for they have no interest in living together. Yet God has not created a special heaven for each one of us. He puts us in a body so that we may help each other and fellowship with one another.

Many poor brethren dare not visit the houses of the rich brethren, nor do the rich brethren like to visit the homes of the poor brethren. In society, there are such distinctions as rich and poor, master and servant; but in the church all these distinctions are abolished. All the differences in the flesh must go through the cross. This is what the cross does for us.

We must not bring to the church meeting that which the cross has already abolished and laid in the tomb. The cross has not only done away with the wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles and between the cultured and the uncultured, but it has also taken away the wall between freemen and bondmen (see Eph. 2.13-16; Col. 3.11; cf. Gal. 3.28). In other words, it has abolished all elements of social status. In the home there is the distinction between master and servant, but in the church there is *no* such distinction. If one brother is a servant in a home to another brother, he should obey his master and be a good servant in that brother's house. And the brother who is the master must also be a good master of the house. But in the brothers meeting or in the breaking of bread meeting, there is no such distinction as between master and servant.

Beware of going into extremes on both sides. The servant must not think that because his master is a brother he can therefore be disobedient; nor should the master fail to control the servant because he is a brother. For there is a difference in the family situation. A

Christian must learn to live properly as a human being. To use another illustration, let us assume that a father and son are both Christians. In their home, they are father and son. In the church assembly, the son can consider his father as a brother. In the family, however, the son must not treat his father as only a brother.

Hence in a brothers meeting, that is to say, when the brothers in the church gather together, they should be brought to the place where they recognize that in the Lord there is neither the rich nor the poor, neither the noble nor the humble, neither master nor servant, neither parent nor children. All these social and class distinctions are abolished in the body of Christ.

In a brothers or sisters meeting, the purpose is for fellowship, for helping to solve practical problems, and for learning to live together. It is not for hearing messages. The danger of many revival meetings is that when the revivalists are gone, the people are scattered. So that God's way is to place all these individually saved people in the various meetings of the church so that they may be joined into one and may be able to help one another.

To emphasize the practical aspect of assembly life, I think that first and foremost the brethren should increase their communication. They must not only show concern but also actually look after each other. Even though there are many things which should be dealt with individually and personally, often times you should also know the problem your brothers or your sisters have. For example: if a brother is unemployed, you should find out why he is unemployed. If he has honestly been laid off, you should mention it at the brothers meeting so that all may help him according to the teaching of James 2. What we need to note here is to do, and not only to believe. To believe alone is useless. Or on the other hand, if that brother lost his job due to dishonesty, then he should be exhorted and helped into repentance. Such matters are not convenient nor suitable to be mentioned in a prayer meeting, a breaking of bread meeting, or a gospel meeting;

but they *can* be raised in a brothers meeting. If a matter touches upon a personal name, it should not be publicly announced—not even in the brothers meeting.

How can we take care of these needy people if we do not know their problems and weaknesses, if we do not know what things have happened in their homes, or whether they are sick or in want? We do not have a hired pastor to look after these people. On the contrary, every brother and sister must do this work. Let it not be that the poor brothers deliberately avoid fellowship with the rich brethren, nor that the rich brethren overlook the needs of the poor brethren. None can cease to be a brother or sister because he or she does not want to fellowship with some other believers. We must demonstrate our togetherness in assembly life by our being real brothers and sisters.

Questions

(1) What kind of meeting is the one described in 1 Corinthians 14?

It is a meeting for the exercising of spiritual gifts. Though we today may not have the riches of such spiritual gifts as was true in the early days, we nevertheless do meet in accordance with that principle.

(2) What type of meeting is pointed to in Hebrews 10.25: “not forsaking our own assembling together”?

There it includes all kinds of meetings.

(3) When is the proper time to actually break bread at a breaking of bread meeting?

The Lord’s Supper is for the sake of remembering the Lord. Hence the earlier the bread is broken, the better. Do not wait till after

Eutychus falls down before the bread is to be broken (Acts 20.9-12). In a breaking of bread meeting we should discover its high tide. It is almost unavoidable that people will bring their family and circumstantial problems, failures and weaknesses into the meeting. It therefore requires some singing or prayers at the start to deliver them from these things. As each spirit is set free and the praise reaches its high point, the time for the breaking of the bread is come. Why can we not break bread at once? This is due to our weakness. When the high tide is reached, the bread should immediately be broken; if not, the propitious moment for doing such will ebb from this point.

(4) Should we give our offering on the Lord's Day at the time of breaking bread?

This really is no problem. The Lord commands us to give on the first day of the week (see 1 Cor. 16.2). The breaking of bread and giving happen to be on the same day, but they are not necessarily to be at the same time.

(5) When should we meet for the Lord's Supper—morning, afternoon, or evening?

The teaching of the New Testament is that it is to be eaten in the evening. Usually breakfast is consumed in a hurry because people are anxious to go to work; for many, lunch is taken outside and not in their homes; only supper is the meal when the family gathers and eats at leisure.

I personally feel it is far better in China to have the Lord's Supper in the evening. This naturally will cause inconvenience to some sisters. Yet in view of the fact that in China the Sunday service in different denominations is usually conducted in the morning or in the afternoon, people might come to eat the bread and drink the cup simply out of habit if the Lord's Supper is held in the morning or in the afternoon, and hence it will be rather difficult to distinguish

between the saved and the unsaved in that case. It will easily offend people if the bread and the cup are passed over them. But if the meeting is held in the evening, there will not be such a problem. People who would attend merely for the purpose of hearing sermons will not come.

(6) At the breaking of bread, do we need to lift up the cup and bless it as in 1 Corinthians 11?

The lifting up of the cup actually follows the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church. Their priests consider themselves as blessing the cup on behalf of the Lord Jesus. Hence, when they lift the cup, they intone the Lord, saying: "This is my body which is for you; ... this is my blood which is poured out for you." Many of the Protestant denominations have also adopted this practice. But we cannot bless in His stead. We believe the Lord is in our midst, and it is still He who blesses. How we bless is but our using the voices of the brothers and sisters in saying to the Lord, "Lord, we thank you." I believe this is according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 10.16). For a brother to stand in the place of the Lord Jesus is in reality to usurp His place. A brother who finally blesses the loaf and the cup is but a brother who serves as the mouthpiece of all the brethren in giving thanks to the Lord. So that really there is no need to lift up the bread and the cup. Any other brother who is in fellowship and is not hindered by evil may get up and give thanks for the bread and the cup for all the brethren.

(7) In the breaking of bread meetings should we stand, kneel, or sit when praying? Is it irreverent not to kneel?

The postures in prayer are raised by this question. The Bible pays little attention to whether we pray sitting, standing, or kneeling. It does not consider not kneeling as irreverent or that kneeling is the sole position for praying. The New Testament records that when the disciples in Tyre sent off Paul and his companions, they with their

wives and children knelt down on the beach and prayed (Acts 21.5). But in the record of Matthew, as the Lord teaches us to pray He says: “Enter into thine inner chamber, and having shut thy door, pray” (6.6). He does not say kneel and pray. The Scriptures cite many occasions of praying with faces covered. The Bible also several times tells of praying to the Lord sitting. It as well speaks of praying with hands lifted up, such as in the case of Moses who on the top of the hill had his hands lifted up (Ex. 17.11). As a matter of fact, the Scriptures often speak of praying with hands lifted up, for the lifting up of hands indicates the asking of God. It serves the purpose of attracting God’s attention. “Pray in every place,” said Paul to Timothy, “lifting up holy hands” (1 Tim. 2.8). It is easy to pray in every place, but it is not so easy to kneel down and pray in every place. We have no problem in lifting up our hands to pray, but we find it impossible to kneel and pray, since there are places where we just cannot kneel. In my opinion, let this matter be left to personal conviction. If the conscience of some compels them to kneel and pray, let them pray kneeling. But to make kneeling a law is unnecessary.

(8) Who should prepare the bread used at the Lord’s Supper?

According to the Scriptures, the bread should be prepared by the deacons—both male and female.

(9) Is it necessary to have a tablecloth as well as another cloth to cover the bread and the cup?

Having the bread and cup covered is a Roman Catholic tradition. They think the elements are not holy if they are not covered. But according to 1 Corinthians 11, the bread and the cup should not be covered, because the breaking of bread expresses the death of our Lord and is to exhibit the Lord’s death. It is nothing less than a testimony. Why then should it be covered? As to having a tablecloth,

this is a matter of absolute freedom. If the table is not too neat, it may be covered with a tablecloth.

(10) If we consider head covering to be a teaching of the Scriptures, why do we not also practice the “saluting of one another with a holy kiss”—which is likewise a Scriptural teaching?

The Bible says to “salute one another with a holy kiss” (Rom. 16.16). The command is not that of kissing one another, but rather that if any one *should* salute with a kiss, let it be holy. The apostle has not exhorted us to kiss one another, since kissing can easily become unholy. The emphasis is on the word holy, not on the word kiss. If there is kissing, let it be holy.

As regards head covering, let me say again that it is highly profitable. In the meeting, sisters should have their heads covered. They should have on themselves the sign of submission to authority—for the sake of the angels. And the authority here, in the original, points to positional authority. Why is it so? Because Satan is also an angel. His “self” demonstrated the first sin, and it was the cause of his fall. His self rose up to resist God and to overthrow His authority. The most marvelous thing in the universe is authority. We ought to know the importance of God’s authority. He uses His word to hold together all things. Even the *name* of Christ is full of authority. God put Satan under His authority, yet Satan tried to overturn God’s authority. The great dragon mentioned in Revelation 12—also called the old serpent—drew within his tail the third part of the stars of heaven (v.4), which means that Satan carried one third of the angels in heaven into his rebellion against God’s authority. This is a well-known fact in the universe. This is the story of how sin was first brought into the universe.

And how did sin enter the world for the second time? It was through Eve. As Eve was created by God, she was to have Adam as her head. Paul declares in 1 Timothy that “Adam was not beguiled,

but the woman being beguiled hath fallen into transgression” (2.14). There is a similarity between the sin in the Garden of Eden and Satan’s sin. This sin is that the woman rebelled against Adam her head. Before she received permission from Adam, she acted on her own. So that sin comes from rebelling against authority, for sin is lawlessness.

Due to the fact that Eve fell in the same principle as Satan had fallen, God so ordains that woman should “have a sign of authority on her head, because of the angels” (1 Cor. 11.10). This sign will serve as a testimony before the angels to let them see that we today no longer do what Eve did on that day. Naturally, many sisters find this hard to accept. It thus becomes a real test to the sisters. Yet if the flesh is willing to be judged, this should constitute no problem. In the Garden of Eden, the woman did not stand in her proper place; but now, in the church, the sisters ought to take their proper place.

(11) Should we exhort sisters who cut their hair to cover their heads?

These small things greatly test our conscience. The first thing is to encourage them to have long hair. If they refuse to have long hair, there is no need to exhort them to cover their heads. For they have already indicated they do not care for the glory which God has given them. A sister has a double covering: one is the natural covering of the hair, the other is the sign of head covering. If the natural covering be overturned, what use will the sign of head covering be to her? Having a sign of covering on her head is something which she must do willingly.

(12) Can a brother wear a hat when he is praying or preaching?

In my own experience, I always take off my hat when I pray. I feel I will dishonor my head if I do not take off my hat. This does not mean that God will not hear if a brother prays with his head covered

or a sister prays without her head covered. But our praying and prophesying have special relationship with the angels in the spiritual realm. Hence the brother ought not have his head covered. According to my personal view, talking to people on the road about the Lord is also related to the spiritual realm, and therefore it is better to take the hat off.

(13) What is the difference between prophesying and preaching?

Not all who can preach and edify people are prophets. For a prophet not only can edify people but also actually predict things. He is able to predict as well as to speak forth the mind of God.

(14) What must be done to the left-over bread and wine at a breaking of bread meeting?

These may be consumed either by some brethren or by fire.

(15) In the breaking of the bread, do we break a piece from the whole loaf or can we pick up some fragments in the plate?

There is no difference, since all come from the same loaf of bread.

4

The Boundary of a Local Assembly

We will now deal with the subject of the boundary of the local assembly—that is to say, how far-reaching is the sphere of a local assembly?

The authority of the elders, which we have mentioned before, is to be exercised within the local assembly, because elders are established for the local assembly. Their position and function are all related to the local assembly. Elders in Shanghai are not elders in Nanking or Peking. Whereas the gifts of God are for the whole Church, the offices are for the local assembly. There are no super elders who can control assemblies other than their local one. Elders can only govern a local assembly.

How extensive is the border of a local assembly? How large a place is required to form a local assembly? Please note that the Bible never divides the Church according to region, nor does it even place several churches under a regional church. Although there are seven churches in Asia being mentioned in Revelation, we do not find in God's word that Ephesus or Philadelphia had been chosen to control the other six churches. We only see seven churches represented by seven golden lampstands. In the Old Testament record there is mentioned the one lampstand with seven branches; but here in Revelation are seven lampstands—not one with seven branches but seven lampstands representing seven separate churches, each emitting light and each bearing responsibility directly to Christ. Whichever church it may be, it accepts the rule of Christ and not the control of other churches. Each lampstand is independent in government, without it being managed by other lampstands. Each is responsible to its high priest, the Son of man who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands. None of them is subject to any of the other churches. Though they are seven churches, they do not join to form a united church and make themselves answerable to a regional

or annual conference. We may say that each is a “congregation” which takes a locality as its limit.

The Bible usually takes a city, the smallest executive governmental area, as the boundary of a local assembly. A local assembly is the unit of the Church in God’s word. It does not join with other assemblies and make the resulting larger church a central church. In other words, in the eyes of God, He has not made Rome as the central church. He never makes any local assembly the center of the churches to be in control of other assemblies. There is no center on earth in God’s government. Even Jerusalem was not a center to the early churches.

This did not rule out the existence of regions in the biblical record. Some places were so similar in conditions and needs that they would receive the same treatment in the record. For instance, it is said of Paul that he “passed through the upper country” (Acts 19.1); again, “from Jerusalem, and round about even unto Illyricum” (Rom. 15.19). These are regions. Galatia, too, was not a single city, but a province. And hence the Bible mentions “the churches of Galatia” (1 Cor. 16.1). The book of Revelation records the seven churches *in Asia*, since Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea were all located in the region of Asia. Asia is a region; Galatia is a province. Let us be clear that although the need, testimony and service of these local assemblies were closely akin to each other, no one church assumed a superior organization and authority over the other nearby churches. Some may think of Jerusalem as having been “the mother church.” Actually there is no such thing as a mother church. To put it another way, each local assembly is locally governed, it being directly accountable to Christ and not answerable to any other organization or assembly. This is to say, in short, that a local assembly is to be the only—yea, is to be the highest and lowest—organization in a locality. There is nothing lower or higher than a local assembly. Since there is no higher court above it to which to appeal, it is the

highest organization in a locality. And because it is the lowest unit of the church on earth, there is nothing lower.

The Bible does not endorse a centralized Rome that controls all the local assemblies. This is because Christ in heaven reserves for himself the position of being the Head. Each and every local church must maintain the testimony of the body of Christ, since each is a miniature manifestation of Christ's body. Each must be directly responsible to Christ and not to any other assembly. Each is under the rule of Christ and not under the control of any other organization.

God purposely set Jerusalem aside lest people would misconstrue that the Church on earth needed a center. He sent apostles out from Antioch (Acts 13) and not out from Jerusalem in order to avoid the misunderstanding that the church in Jerusalem was the mother church with all the other churches serving as her branches. Let us therefore never consider the assembly at Shanghai as the mother church. The assemblies in various localities are subject to Christ directly and not to any other assembly.

This truth concerning the independence of the local assembly is a balance to the truth of the inter-relatedness of the various assemblies in the body life. For God will not tell one assembly not to do something but then tell another assembly to do that very thing. He will guide one assembly in the same way as He guides other assemblies. We earlier saw how the Gentile churches were to imitate the churches in Judea. We also saw earlier how God ordains His churches not to move independently but to keep unity by paying attention to the movement of the body of Christ: for example, whoever has been excommunicated by one assembly should not be received by another assembly. One assembly is bound together with the other assemblies in that it should not act independently. It is not of God that any assembly should move freely on its own without considering the other assemblies. Yet, there is the other side of truth which declares that each assembly is directly responsible to the

Head. How easy for us to go off-balance, but truth must be kept in balance.

Sometimes we may fall into the way of Rome. Whatever Rome decides, all the Roman Catholics must obey. But this is not the balance of truth. What we need is to accept the restraint of the other assemblies in that we agree to march forward together in matters of truth and on the other hand to see that we each are directly responsible to the Head. The churches mentioned in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea) have their own golden lampstands respectively. Each is positioned in its own stand; none of them is somebody else's stand. Each maintains its own place and is accountable to God. And hence the Lord reprimands as well as commends Ephesus itself—He does not put the blame of Ephesus on Smyrna nor transfer the virtue of Ephesus to Smyrna. No church is responsible for any other church, and no church stands by the other church, because all are directly responsible to the Lord and all accept His rule. At the same time, however, God's word declares this: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith *to the churches*" (Rev. 2.7). This illustrates the balance of truth.

On the one hand, the message is addressed to the angel of the church at Ephesus; but at the end of the message *to Ephesus*, it is said to be spoken as well *to the churches*. At the beginning of each of the seven letters, the letter is addressed to the particular angel of the individual churches respectively, but at the end of each letter it is made clear that each letter is for all the churches to hear. It commences with an individual church being directly responsible to God; it concludes with every other church needing to hear the word which God declares to each of the other churches. This indicates how all the churches must keep that which one church receives. As to the responsibility of each church, every one is individually responsible to God; as to the movement of all the churches, there needs to be a concerted action. This explains why the letter is sent to Ephesus but

why it is also applicable to all the other churches. Such is the balance of truth.

In the Bible God has ordained that the lowest unit of the Church on earth is the local assembly, which at the same time is equally the highest. Every local assembly is a miniature manifestation of the Church universal. There is nothing larger or smaller than it. We need to be careful that whatever we do in Shanghai may be in step with all the churches in China. We need to seek not only to maintain the same step with all the churches in China but also to take the same step with all the local assemblies of the world. Nevertheless, whatever action the church in Shanghai takes, it is directly responsible to God. It is not to be controlled by any other organization. So far as the authority of the church in Shanghai is concerned, nothing is higher than the eldership. This is the boundary which God has ordained. In each city, there is the plurality of elders, but these elders may only govern the local assembly there and not extend their government to assemblies elsewhere. The boundary set by God is to appoint elders in every city; consequently, the authority of the elders cannot extend beyond the city limits. The Bible advocates the local assembly which is then governed only locally. May we maintain this balance of moving together with other assemblies as well as bearing responsibility directly towards God as a local assembly.

The Border of a Local Assembly

Concerning the border of a local assembly, in the New Testament God makes the city to be its boundary. So that the maximum sphere of a local assembly is a city and nothing larger than a city. In the biblical record, there is no church that controls a region, a province, or a county. The city always marks the limit of the church. A city was originally the aggregate of people who lived in the same locality. Let us realize that due to today's complicated life we have such

divisions as county, township, village, and so forth. In the olden days, wherever the people congregated and lived and were protected—that was considered a city (Gen. 4.17). For various reasons, they lived in the city. In the first part of Genesis we find nothing smaller than the city. At the time when Joshua apportioned the land to the Hebrew people, we notice that the place where people lived was still called a city, only now sometimes villages were also mentioned (see Joshua 18.28). When the Lord Jesus sent out His disciples to preach the gospel, they were sent to cities (see Matt. 10). This is because in the biblical account a city was viewed as the lowest unit of the aggregate of people.

Thus the boundary of a local assembly in the Scriptures is according to the limit of such a city. Ephesus, Corinth, and Thessalonica, for example, were all such cities. The border of a local church never exceeds the limit of a city. The province of Asia was such a large area that it had seven churches. Galatia was a region, and hence the phrase “the churches in Galatia” was used. Corinth, on the other hand, was only a city, and so the whole church assembled together there (1 Cor. 14.23). The church in Corinth is but one church. Throughout the New Testament we see that all the local assemblies take the particular city limits as their border.

How wise is the way of God in keeping believers from confusion. For if He were to take the nation as the boundary of the church, the border of the church would then frequently be changed because a nation would fall and thus would the boundary of the church be altered. If God were to use the province as the boundary of the church, the border of the church would also be subject to change since provincial lines can often be altered too. Would not all these cause confusion? Instead, God in His word used neither province nor nation nor other political division as the unit of church boundary. He took instead the city or village as the church boundary because its border and name are not easily changed. We see national, regional, and provincial borders and names frequently altered, but the names

and borders of cities and villages are the least influenced by political change. The names of many villages have remained the same for hundreds of years. Many cities may be ceded to other nations, yet they still remain as civic entities because they are the most durable of political units. For this reason, God has ordained the city limits to be the border of the local assembly. Although we have mentioned the village as a variant unit of church border, in actual fact the village is but a miniature city. Hence God's thought is still the city.

God makes cities the permanent unit of the local assembly. There is great profit in dividing church lines by this method without setting some higher control above it. For if there is sin or failure in one local assembly, it will not contaminate the other assemblies elsewhere. Had God put seven or eight churches under the authority of a few men, the failure of one or two among these men would undoubtedly have affected all these churches. If He had established a center in the province of Asia to control all seven of its churches, the failure of the center would have dragged all the other seven churches down with it. But these seven churches in Asia were respectively responsible to the Lord. Though five of them failed, there were yet Smyrna and Philadelphia which remained faithful. In this way God was able to preserve the weak and the good from the sinful and improper.

Dividing by City Line

What God first created was a garden—the Garden of Eden—and not a city. But what He finally is to obtain is to be the New Jerusalem, which is a city. So that the thought of the city was manifested only after the fall of man had occurred. Before man's fall, trees such as the tree of life and other fruit-bearing trees were planted in the Garden. And a living stream flowed out of the Garden. But since the fall of man, the work of God has ever been to transform the garden into a city. For a garden seems to have neither boundary nor protection. God purposely builds the city for the sake of protection as

well as for boundary. It is to be separated, thus forbidding sin to enter its precincts. God has the city in mind not only for today, but also for the time of the millennium. The Scriptures make clear that some believers will rule five cities, some will rule over ten cities. And even at the time of the New Heaven and the New Earth, God still focuses on the city. For at that time there will be the city of New Jerusalem. He thus lifts up the city because it has a boundary, is separated, distinguishable, easily governed and not easily confused.

Wherever some believers are gathered together in a city, this gathering becomes the local assembly. Other assemblies in other cities cannot interfere with these saints' local affairs. The border of a local assembly is as extensive as the limits of the city. Its boundary, therefore, follows the line of the governmental extent of the city. For God has not left to the brethren or to the elders to decide on its border. The responsibility of the church is to adopt the city or village as determined by the government. The dimension of a city is the dimension of a local assembly. Cities vary in their sizes. Some like Nineveh require a three days' journey to traverse its city limits. Some are like Jerusalem whose radius is only about two miles (John 11.18, "fifteen furlongs"). Bethany is another place, but it does not belong to the city of Jerusalem. Although Jerusalem and Bethany are closely adjacent to each other, the first is a city which has its own border and the second is a village which likewise has its own border. And thus the Bible divides them according to their political divisions. In spite of the fact that some localities are larger while some are smaller, the church cannot make its own division but must follow the political or governmental division. For God uses the governmental division as the accepted dimension of today's local assembly.

How to Meet Separately in One City

We have seen how the assembly in the Scriptures takes a city or a village as its unit. In Shanghai, for example, we meet in two different

places—Wen Teh Lane and Gordon Lane. What is the relationship between these two meetings? Before we deal with this question, let us first consider how the Bible solves this problem when there are too many people meeting in one city. On the Day of Pentecost, three thousand souls were added to the church in Jerusalem. Later on, five thousand were saved. There were consequently many believers in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was different from Corinth. In the latter city not too many people were saved, and hence the entire church could be assembled together in one place (1 Cor. 14.23). But in Jerusalem the entire church could not assemble together in one place because there were too many believers: first, three thousand, then an additional five thousand, and finally those who were being saved daily! They did not have such a huge facility. So that we see that even though they were all together as one, they broke bread in “homes” (see Acts 2.46). This was the difference between the church in Corinth and the church in Jerusalem. In Corinth they met in one place because they were comparatively few in number. In Jerusalem, however, they met in many “homes” because they were too many in number. Accordingly, when there are too many people in a local assembly, they may meet in many “homes.” This is how it is shown to us in the book of Acts.

The people of a local assembly may meet in different homes, but they are still one church. For instance, if in Jerusalem people met in scores of places, can it be said that in Jerusalem there was one church or that there were scores of churches? The answer of the Bible is: there is but one church. For let us recall that God uses the entire city (no matter its size) as the border of the local assembly. The church in a city is always singular in number. In Jerusalem there was only one church. Though there may have been scores of meeting places, the government of the church in Jerusalem was nevertheless one. It had the same group of elders and deacons. The elders in the church in Jerusalem may have functioned as elders in these “homes,” but they could not go to Samaria and function as elders there. This is because a local assembly takes the city as its boundary. Now this is our

situation in Shanghai. According to the legal political division, Shanghai is but one city, and therefore there is but one church. Both the Wen Teh Lane meeting and the Gordon Lane meeting must together be reckoned as one church. When the number of a local assembly is increased, people can meet in different places. Some may ask what number should be reached before there are separate meetings? What is the limitation? Let us recall the incident of the distribution of the loaves by our Lord. Before He multiplied the loaves to feed the five thousand men, He caused the multitude to “sit down in companies, about fifty each” (Luke 9.14). “And they sat down in ranks, by hundreds, and by fifties” (Mark 6.40). In my opinion, since we are the Lord’s sheep, it is easier to be fed by dividing into companies of fifties or hundreds. Such division has several advantages.

(1) The apostles in the early days of Acts did not have money to build a large meeting hall. So they followed the principle of “home meetings” though not necessarily dividing into fifties and hundreds. Thus there was no difficulty in their finding places to meet. We today would rather not have a large central place but instead divide ourselves into fifties and hundreds.

(2) Having hundreds or thousands gathered together to break bread would have been time-consuming and also there would have been no cup and no loaf big enough for such a huge number of people. So it is evident that the many who were saved in the early days did not break bread all in one place. Even in our own day when we ourselves sometimes have two to three hundred people breaking bread together, it would take us one to two hours. Some people can wait but many may not have the strength to wait so long.

(3) For several hundreds assembling together, it is rather difficult to have good fellowship due to the limitation of time. On each occasion a person may know and fellowship with only one or two others. But by that method it would take months and months before a

person could fellowship with all. How can the assembly grow in such a way? If, however, there are only fifty or a hundred gathered together, it is relatively easy to fellowship with one another, and it enhances the growth of the believers. It is also easier for the responsible brothers to take care of all the brethren. When the number becomes too large, it is difficult to give good care. This is therefore a principle we should practice.

It was for this reason, among others, that last year we started to meet in Gordon Lane as well as at Wen Teh Lane. Yet the meeting in Gordon Lane and the meeting in Wen Teh Lane are not two churches but are one church—one entire fellowship—meeting in two “homes.” The responsible brothers in Wen Teh Lane are the same as those in Gordon Lane. When a brother travels from Shanghai to Nanking, he needs to have a letter of recommendation. But for him to go to Gordon Lane from Wen Teh Lane and vice versa, he does not need such a letter.

Concerning City Limits and Suburbs

“And the children of Israel gave unto the Levites out of their inheritance, according to the commandment of Jehovah, these cities with their suburbs” (Joshua 21.3). This passage speaks of cities with their suburbs. “Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field” (Deut. 28.3). This passage speaks of city and field. From the Old Testament record it is understood that every city had its suburbs as well as its fields. These suburbs and fields surrounded the city for the sake of providing the city with necessities. The food the city consumed came from the suburbs and fields. The city obviously could not exist by itself. In addition, the city had to be responsible for its suburbs and fields. Likewise today, the church in the city should bear responsibility not only for the city but also for the suburbs and fields. Whether it is preaching the gospel or building up the saints, the church in the city should take care of its

suburbs and fields; for the latter support the former, and cause the number in the assembly to increase. In other words, the people in the church of the city should also take care of the people in its suburbs and fields. When people are saved in the suburbs, and they are not able to meet by themselves, bring them to the city to meet. This will support the meeting in the city and make it stronger. But after the brethren from the suburbs increase in number, and they have also learned to meet, let them become another “home” or even make the suburb as another “city” unit and begin a new assembly.

Questions

(1) Should we practice the laying on of hands today?

The Bible does mention the laying on of hands, but it is not the same as what people call laying on of hands today. Nowadays, it is always viewed as a case of the “better” laying hands on the “lesser.” But in the Scriptures there is equally the view that the “lesser” can lay hands on the “better” as well as the “better” can lay hands on the “lesser.” As recorded in Acts 8, when the apostles Peter and John laid hands on the Samaritan believers, what they did was a case of the “better” laying hands on the “lesser.” But Acts 13 tells us that in the church at Antioch, when several prophets and teachers ministered to the Lord and fasted, the Holy Spirit said to them: “Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (v.2b). So they laid hands on Barnabas and Saul and sent them away. Now we know from this same passage that Paul and Barnabas were apostles, but they had hands of the prophets and teachers laid on them. Yet in Ephesians 4 the apostles are listed first, then the prophets and the teachers. And hence in Acts 13 we find the “lesser” laid hands on the “better.”

The biblical conception of the laying on of hands is not what people today usually think of—the latter being an action of the “better” performed on the “lesser.” In the Scriptures, laying on of

hands is but an expression of fellowship, sympathy and union. The laying on of hands spoken of in Acts 8 shows that the Samaritans were also joined to the body of Christ even as their baptism testified to their being joined to the death of Christ. The laying on of hands told of in Acts 13 indicates that the church was united with Barnabas and Paul and was in full agreement and fellowship with them. Their going out was the going out of the whole church. Such kind of laying on of hands exhibits to us that it was not only Barnabas and Paul who went abroad to preach the gospel but that the whole church at Antioch went forth with them. So that what the two apostles did was related to the entire church at Antioch. Their laying on of hands spoke not only of their fellowship with the ones who received this token (Paul and Barnabas) but also of the fellowship of the ones who received the laying on of hands with the whole church at Antioch. If anyone would go out from one locality to work for the Lord, it is best if he is sent out by the laying on of hands.

Let us be careful in our wiping out all the traditions of men from Scriptural teaching just as people cleanse dust from the glass. Some do not wipe the dust off but instead break the glass because it is filled with dust. Many may suggest that since we talk about elders and deacons and the laying on of hands we are not different from any denomination. Let us see that there is actually nothing wrong with these things in themselves; but what is wrong is that which men have added on to them. Our purpose today is not to destroy the works of the denominations but to restore the things which God had originally ordained. We cannot forsake biblical realities because of human adulteration. We instead ought to ask if God has so commanded. When I go out to do spiritual work, how many times I expect the brethren to lay hands on me to show that I do not go out alone but that the entire church sends me out. They are one with me.

(2) When Paul laid hands on Timothy, he imparted a gift to Timothy. Is a gift received through the laying on of hands?

What is a gift? It is the ability of a member. In other words, if you are an eye in the body, your gift is seeing; if you are an ear in the body, your gift is hearing. When a person is joined to the body of Christ, he immediately receives a gift. Why, then, did the apostle lay hands on Timothy? In representing the body of Christ, the apostle recognized that Timothy was also a member of that body. It pleases God that such laying on of hands will activate a gift in the person. What Acts 13 expresses is also the union of the body of Christ, although it is not for the manifestation of gifts but for the demonstration of the principle of our working together. Never can prophets and teachers impart gifts to apostles. I believe the laying on of hands should be continued. Nevertheless, Paul warned Timothy to “lay hands hastily on no man, neither be partaker of other men’s sins: keep thyself pure” (1 Tim. 5.22). Hebrews tells us to “not lay again a foundation” (6.1). Both baptism and laying on of hands are included in that foundation. And hence, if we neglect the laying on of hands there will be some flaw in the foundation.

(3) How about receiving people to the breaking of bread? “Him that is weak in faith receive ye” (Rom. 14.1). “Wherefore receive ye one another, even as Christ also received you” (Rom. 15.7). Receiving people is but a part of the procedure. The main question is whether or not there is faith itself, not merely how strong or weak their faith is. The other question is, Will God accept them? We need to know if God will accept them or not. We cannot accept those whom God does not accept.

Concerning this matter of receiving, I would like to mention a few things here:

(a) People who come with letters of recommendation. We should accept all who come with letters of recommendation, though we need to discern where these letters come from. Letters which come from places where their stand on the Christian faith is doubtful cannot be taken at their face value. We cannot accept

people simply on the basis of these letters. But with respect to letters from places where their faith is known, we can believe and also accept the people recommended. We must believe that what these places do are what we too will do.

(b) People introduced by two or three witnesses. We can accept people who are introduced by two or three brethren. The problem lies in people who are passing by or in visitors who break bread with us only once. In my opinion, it is best if two or three brothers can talk with them to find out if they are saved before receiving them.

(c) There are a few things we ought to know before receiving anyone to break bread:

(1) if that person is saved;

(2) if he has committed any of the sins mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5 which are grounds for excommunication;

(3) if he knows that the breaking of bread is not only to remember the Lord but also to discern the body of Christ.

Numbers (1) and (2) are conditions, for a person must be saved and clean before he can partake of the bread. Number (3) is a teaching, the instruction of which he ought to have, that he may stand on the ground of the body of Christ. Otherwise, he will eat and drink judgment to himself.

If a person is saved and he has not committed the sins of 1 Corinthians 5, and even though he may not be able to discern the body, he still can be received, because we must receive those who are weak in faith. However, we should be faithful in instructing people to discern the body, yet without making it a condition for receiving people because this will make us a sect.

(4) After a person is saved, must he be baptized before he can take the bread?

In the case of a newly saved person, it is better for that one to first be baptized and then to break bread. In the Bible we do not find recorded any names of people who have believed for some time but were not baptized. For believing and baptism were simply joined together. Never was a person saved but kept from baptism for several months. Furthermore, we cannot make baptism a condition for breaking bread. Some are only sprinkled and do not know that baptism is a testimony. We ought to receive such people for they belong to God. We must not make baptism a condition for receiving people; we can only take it as a teaching. We cannot excommunicate people who are not baptized. When they truly see the cross, they will obey the truth and be baptized.