

The Basis of Union and Division

by Watchman Nee

The sermon emphasizes the scriptural method of founding a church, the ground of receiving anyone into the church, and the oneness of the Spirit as the secret of Christian unity and separation.

Scripture: Acts 2:47, Romans 8:9, Romans 14:1, 1 Corinthians 1:12, 1 Corinthians 12:13, 2 Corinthians 13:5, Ephesians 4:3-6, Colossians 1:27, 1 John 4:20

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Local Church Membership"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the scriptural basis for the formation of local churches, asserting that a church is simply a group of believers in a specific locality who have received Christ. He argues that membership in a local church is based solely on being a believer and residing in that locality, without any additional conditions or denominational barriers. Nee warns against divisions based on leaders, doctrines, or social distinctions, stressing that true unity comes from the indwelling Spirit of Christ in all believers. He encourages Christians to recognize their oneness in the Spirit and to maintain fellowship with all believers in their locality, regardless of differences. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the biblical understanding of the church as a local assembly of all God's children in a given area.

Transcript

THE FORMING OF LOCAL CHURCHES

In the previous chapter we observed that the word "church" was only mentioned twice in the Gospels. It is used frequently in the Acts, but we are never explicitly told there how a church was formed. The second chapter speaks of the salvation of about three thousand men, and the fourth chapter of a further five thousand, but nothing whatever is said about these believers forming a church. Without a single word of explanation they are referred to in the following chapter as the church

--"And great fear came upon the whole church" (5:11). Here the Scriptures call the children of God "the church," without even mentioning how the church came into being. In Acts 8:1, immediately after the death of Stephen, the word is again used, and the connection in this case is clearer than before. "There occurred in that day a great persecution against the church which was in Jerusalem." From this passage it is obvious that the believers in Jerusalem are the church in Jerusalem. So we know now what the church is. It consists of all the saved ones in a given locality.

Later on, in the course of the apostles' first missionary tour, many people were saved in different places through the preaching of the gospel. Nothing is mentioned about their being formed into churches, but in Acts 14:23, it is said of Paul and Barnabas that "they had appointed elders for them in every church." The groups of believers in these different places are called churches, without any explanation whatever as to how they came to be churches. They were groups of believers, so they simply were churches. Whenever a number of people in any place were saved, they spontaneously became the church in that place. Without introduction or explanation of any kind, the Word of God presents such a group of believers to us as a church. The scriptural method of founding a church is simply by preaching the gospel; nothing further is necessary, or even permissible. If people hear the gospel and receive the Lord as their Savior, then they are a church; there is no need of any further procedure in order to become a church.

If in a given place anyone believes on the Lord, as a matter of course he is a constituent of the church in that place; there is no further step necessary in order to make him a constituent. No subsequent joining is required of him. Provided he belongs to the Lord, he already belongs to the church in that locality; and since he already belongs to the church, his belonging cannot be made subject to any condition. If, before recognizing a believer as a member of the church, we insist that he join us, or that he resign his connection elsewhere, then "our church" is decidedly not one of the churches of God.

If we impose any conditions of membership upon a believer in the locality, we are immediately in an unscriptural position, because his being a member of the local church is conditioned only by his being a believer in the locality. All the saved ones who belong to the place in which we live belong to the same church as we do. I mean by the church a scriptural church, and not a man-made organization. A local church is a church which comprises all the children of God in a given locality.

Let us note well that the ground of our receiving anyone into the church is that the Lord has already received that one.

"Him who is weak in faith receive...for God has received him" (Rom. 14:1, 3). "Therefore receive one another, as Christ also received you" (15:7). Our receiving anyone is merely our recognition that the Lord has already received him. Our receiving him does not make him a member of the church; rather, it is that we receive him because he is already a member. If he is the Lord's, he is in the church. If he is not the Lord's, he is not in the church. If we demand anything beyond his reception by the Lord before admitting him to fellowship, then we are not a church at all, but only a sect.

WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE CIRCLE

In any place where the gospel has been proclaimed and people have believed on the Lord, they are the church in that place, and they are our brethren. In the days of the apostles the question of belonging or not belonging to a church was simple in the extreme. But things are not so simple in our days, for the question has been complicated by many so-called churches that exclude those who should be in the church, and include those who should be outside. What sort of a person can be rightly considered a constituent of the church? What is the minimum requirement we can insist upon for admission to church fellowship? Unless the qualifications for church membership are clearly defined, there will always be the danger of excluding from the church those who truly belong to it and including those who do not.

Before we proceed to discover who really belongs to a local church and who does not, let us first inquire who belongs to the universal Church and who does not, since the condition of membership in a church is essentially the same as in the Church. When we know what kind of persons belong to the Church, then we

know also what kind of persons belong to a church.

How can we know who is a Christian and who is not? "If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not of Him" (Rom. 8:9). According to the Word of God, every person in whose heart Christ dwells by His Spirit is a true Christian. Christians may differ from one another in a thousand respects, but in this fundamental matter there is no difference between them: one and all have the Spirit of Christ dwelling within them. If we wish to know who belongs to the Lord, then we only need to discover whether he has the Spirit of Christ or not. Whoever has the Spirit of Christ is inside the Church circle, and whoever does not have the Spirit of Christ is outside the circle. A participant of the Spirit of God is an essential part of the Church of God; a non-participant of the Spirit of God has no part in the Church. In the Church universal this is true; in the church local this is also true. "Test yourselves whether you are in the faith; prove yourselves. Or do you not realize about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you, unless you are disapproved?" (2 Cor. 13:5). There is a subjective line of demarcation between the Church and the world; all within that line are saved, and all without that line are lost. This line of demarcation is the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

THE ONENESS OF THE SPIRIT

The Church of God includes a vast number of believers, living at different times, and scattered in different places throughout the earth. How has it come about that all have been united into one universal Church? With such differences in age, social position, education, background, outlook, and temperament, how could all these people become one church?

What is the secret of the oneness of the saints? By what means has Christianity caused these people, with their thousand differences, to become truly one? It is not that, having a grand convention and agreeing to be one, Christians become united. Christian unity is no human product; its origin is purely divine. This mighty mysterious oneness is planted in the hearts of all believers the moment they receive the Lord. It is "the oneness of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3).

The Spirit who dwells in the heart of every believer is one Spirit; therefore, He makes all those in whom He dwells to be one, even as He Himself is one. Christians may differ from one another in innumerable ways, but all Christians of all ages, with their countless differences, have this one fundamental likeness--the Spirit of God dwells in every one of them. This is the secret of the oneness of believers, and this is the secret of their separation from the world. The reason for Christian unity and for Christian separation is one.

It is this inherent unity that makes all believers one, and it is this inherent unity that accounts for the impossibility of division between believers, except for geographical reasons. Those who do not have this are outsiders; those who have it are our brethren. If you have the Spirit of Christ and I have the Spirit of Christ, then we both belong to the same Church. There is no need to be united; we are united by the one Spirit who dwells in us both. Paul besought all believers to endeavor "to keep the oneness of the Spirit" (Eph. 4:3); he did not exhort us to have the oneness, but merely to keep it. We have it already, for obviously we cannot keep what we do not have. God has never told us to become one with other believers; we already are one. Therefore, we do not need to create oneness; we only need to maintain it.

We cannot make this oneness, since by the Spirit we are one in Christ, and we cannot break it, because it is an eternal fact in Christ; but we can destroy the effects of it, so that its expression in the Church is lost. Alas! that we have not only failed to preserve this precious oneness, but have actually so destroyed the fruits of it, that there is little outward trace of oneness among the children of God.

How are we going to determine who are our brothers and our fellow members in the Church of God? Not by inquiring if they hold the same doctrinal views that we hold, or have had the same spiritual experiences; nor by seeing if their customs, manner of living, interests, and preferences tally with ours. We merely inquire, Are they indwelt by the Spirit of God or not? We cannot insist on oneness of opinions, or oneness of experience, or any other oneness among believers, except the oneness of the Spirit. That oneness there can be, and always must be, among the children of God. All who have this oneness are in the Church.

In your travels has it not sometimes happened that on a boat or train you have met a stranger, and after only a few moments of conversation you have found a pure love for him welling up in your heart? That spontaneous outgoing of love was because of the one Spirit dwelling in both hearts. Such inner spiritual oneness transcends all social, racial, and national differences.

How can we know whether or not a person has this oneness of the Spirit? In the verse immediately following Paul's exhortation to keep the oneness of the Spirit, he explains what those have in common who possess this oneness. We cannot expect believers to be alike in everything, but there are seven things which all true believers share, and by the existence or absence of these we can know whether or not a person has the oneness of the Spirit. Many other things are of great importance, but these seven are vital. They are indispensable to spiritual fellowship, and they are at once the minimum and the maximum requirements that can be made of any person who professes to be a fellow believer.

SEVEN FACTORS IN SPIRITUAL ONENESS

"One Body and one Spirit, even as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). A person is constituted a member of the Church on the ground that he possesses the oneness of the Spirit, and that will result in his being one with all believers on the above seven points. They are the seven elements in the oneness of the Spirit, which is the common heritage of all the children of God. In drawing a line of demarcation between those who belong to the Church and those who do not, we must require nothing beyond these seven lest we exclude any who belong to the family of God; and we dare not require anything less, lest we include any who do not belong to the divine family. All in whom these seven are found belong to the Church; all who lack any of them do not belong to the Church.

(1)ONE BODY. The question of oneness begins with the question of membership of the Body of Christ. The sphere of our fellowship is the sphere of the Body. Those who are outside that sphere have no spiritual relationship with us, but those who are inside that sphere are all in fellowship with us. We cannot make any choice of fellowship in the Body, accepting some members and rejecting others. We are all part of the one Body, and nothing can possibly separate us from it, or from one another. Anyone who has received Christ belongs to the Body, and he and we are one. If we do not wish to extend fellowship to anyone, we must first make sure that he does not belong to the Body; if he does, we have no reason to reject him (unless for such disciplinary reasons as are clearly laid down in the Word of God).

(2)ONE SPIRIT. If anyone seeks fellowship with us, however he may differ from us in experience or outlook, provided he has the same Spirit as we have, he is entitled to be received as a brother. If he has received the Spirit of Christ, and we have received the Spirit of Christ, then we are one in the Lord, and nothing must divide us.

(3)ONE HOPE. This hope, which is common to all the children of God, is not a general hope, but the hope of our calling, that is, the hope of our calling as Christians. What is our hope as Christians? We hope to be with the Lord forever in glory.

There is not a single soul who is truly the Lord's in whose heart there is not this hope, for to have Christ in us is to have "the hope of glory" in us (Col. 1:27). If anyone claims to be the Lord's, but has no hope of heaven or glory, his is a mere empty profession. All who share this one hope are one, and since we have the hope of being together in glory for all eternity, how can we be divided in time? If we are going to share the same future, shall we not gladly share the same present?

(4)ONE LORD. There is only one Lord, the Lord Jesus, and all who recognize that God has made Jesus of Nazareth to be both Lord and Christ are one in Him. If anyone confesses Jesus to be Lord, then his Lord is our Lord, and since we serve the same Lord, nothing whatever can separate us.

(5)ONE FAITH. The faith here spoken of is the faith--not our beliefs in regard to the interpretation of Scripture, but the faith through which we have been saved, which is the common possession of all believers; that is, the faith that Jesus is the Son of God (who died for the salvation of sinners and lives again to give life to the dead). Anyone who lacks this vital faith does not belong to the Lord, but all who possess it are the Lord's. The children of God may follow many different lines of scriptural interpretation, but in regard to this fundamental faith they are one. Those who lack this faith have no part in the family of God, but all who possess it we recognize as our brothers in the Lord.

(6)ONE BAPTISM. Is it by immersion or by sprinkling? Is it single or triune? There are various forms of baptism accepted by the children of God, so if we make the form of baptism the dividing line between those who belong to the church and those who do not, we shall exclude many true believers from our fellowship. There are children of God who even believe that a material baptism is not necessary, but since they are the children of God, we dare not on that account exclude them from our fellowship. What then is the significance of the one baptism mentioned in this passage? Paul throws light on the subject in his first letter to the Corinthians. "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (1:13). The emphasis is not on the form of baptism, but on the name into which we are baptized. The first question is not whether you are sprinkled or immersed, dipped once or three times, baptized literally or spiritually; the important point is this: Into whose name have you been baptized? If you are baptized into the name of the Lord, that is your qualification for church membership. If anyone is baptized into the name of the Lord, I welcome him as my brother, whatever the manner of his baptism. By this we do not imply that it is of no consequence whether we are sprinkled or immersed, or whether our baptism is spiritual or literal. The Word of God teaches that baptism is literal, and is by immersion, but the point here is that the manner of baptism is not the ground of our fellowship, but the name into which we are baptized. All who are baptized into the name of the Lord are one in Him.

(7)ONE GOD. Do we believe in the same personal, supernatural God as our Father? If so, then we belong to one family, and there is no adequate reason for our being divided.

The above seven points are the seven factors in that divine oneness which is the possession of all the members of the divine family, and they constitute the only test of Christian profession. They are the possession of every true Christian, no matter to what place or period he belongs. Like a sevenfold cord the oneness of the Spirit binds all the believers throughout the world; and however diverse their character or circumstances, provided they have these seven expressions of an inner oneness, then nothing can

possibly separate them.

If we impose any conditions of fellowship beyond these seven--which are but the outcome of the one spiritual life, then we are guilty of sectarianism, for we are making a division between those who are manifestly children of God. If we apply any test but these seven, such as baptism by immersion, or certain interpretations of prophecy, or a special line of holiness teaching, or a so-called Pentecostal experience, or the resigning from any denominational church--then we are imposing conditions other than those stipulated in the Word of God. All who have these seven points in common with us are our brothers, whatever their spiritual experience, or doctrinal views, or so-called church relationships. Our oneness is not based on our appreciation of the truth of our oneness, nor on our coming out from all that would contradict our oneness, but upon the actual fact of our oneness, which is made real in our experience by the indwelling Spirit of Christ.

LOCAL CHURCHES

Now what is true of the universal Church is also true of a local church. The universal Church comprises all those who have the oneness of the Spirit. The local church comprises all those who, in a given locality, have the oneness of the Spirit. The Church of God and the churches of God do not differ in nature, but only in extent. The former consists of all throughout the universe who are indwelt by the Spirit of God; the latter consists of all in one locality who are indwelt by the Spirit.

Anyone wishing to belong to a church in a given locality must answer two requirements--he must be a child of God, and he must live in that particular locality. Membership in the Church of God is conditioned only by being a child of God, but membership in a church of God is conditioned, firstly, by being a child of God and, secondly, by living in a given locality.

In nature the Church is indivisible as God Himself is indivisible. Therefore, the division of the Church into churches is not a division in nature, life, or essence, but only in government, organization, and management. Because the earthly church is composed of a vast number of individuals, a measure of organization is indispensable. It is a physical impossibility for all the people of God, scattered throughout the world, to live and meet in one place; and it is for that reason alone that the Church of God has been divided into churches.

We must realize clearly that the nature of all the local churches is the same throughout the whole earth. It is not that the constituents of one local church are of one kind, and the constituents of another local church are of another kind. In nature there is no difference whatever. The only difference is in the localities that determine their respective boundaries. The Church is indivisible; therefore, in nature the churches are indivisible too. It is only in outward sphere that there is any possibility of dividing them. Physical limitations make geographical divisions inevitable, but the spiritual oneness of believers overcomes all barriers of space.

Locality is the divinely-appointed ground for the division of the Church, because it is the only inevitable division. Every barrier between all believers in the world is avoidable, except this one. As long as believers remain in the flesh they cannot exist apart from their dwelling places; therefore, the churches which consist of such believers cannot but be restricted by their dwellings. Geographical distinctions are natural, not arbitrary, and it is simply because the physical limitations of the children of God make geographical divisions inevitable, that God has ordained that His Church be divided into churches on the ground of locality. Such division is scriptural, and all other divisions are carnal. Any division of the children of God

other than geographical implies not merely a division of sphere, but a division of nature. Local division is the only division which does not touch the life of the Church.

Most believers of today are so utterly blind to the scriptural basis of a church that if one asks another, "To what church do you belong?" The first thought of the one questioned is of the specific line of teaching he approves of, or the group of people with whom he has special fellowship, or how his group of Christians is different from others, or perhaps the name that particular group bears, or the form of organization they have adopted--in short, anything but the place in which he lives. Few would answer that question with, "I belong to the church in Ephesus," or "I belong to the church in Shanghai," or

"I belong to the church in Los Angeles." It is our being in Christ that separates us from the world, and it is our being in a given locality that separates us from other believers. It is only because we reside in a different place from them that we belong to a different church. The only reason I do not belong to the same church as other believers is that I do not live in the same place as they do. If I wish to be in the same church, then I must change my residence to the same place. If, on the other hand, I wish to be in a different church from others in my locality, then the only solution to my problem is to move to a different locality. Difference of locality is the only justification for division among believers.

SEVEN FORBIDDEN GROUNDS OF DIVISION

On the positive side we have just seen the ground on which God has ordained that His Church be divided. Now, on the negative side, we shall see on what ground the Church ought not to be divided.

(1)SPIRITUAL LEADERS. "Now I mean this, that each of you says, I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12). Here Paul points out the carnality of the Corinthian believers in attempting to divide the church of God in Corinth, which, by the divine ordering, was indivisible, being already the smallest scriptural unit upon which any church could be established. They sought to divide the church on the ground of a few leaders who had been specially used of God in their midst. Cephas was a zealous minister of the gospel, Paul was a man who had suffered much for his Lord's sake, and Apollos was one whom God certainly used in His service, but though all three had been indisputably owned of God in Corinth, God could never permit the church there to make them a ground of division. He ordained that His Church be divided on the basis of localities, not of persons. It was all right to have a church in Corinth and a church in Ephesus, and quite all right to have several churches in Galatia and a number in Macedonia, for difference of locality justified division into these various churches. It was also all right for the believers to esteem those leaders whom God had used among them, but it would have been quite wrong to divide the churches according to the respective leaders by whom they had been helped.

Paul, Cephas, and Apollos were true-hearted servants of God who allowed no party-spirit to separate them; it was their followers who were responsible for the separation. Hero worship is a tendency of human nature, which delights to show preference for those who appeal to its tastes. Because so many of God's children know little or nothing of the power of the cross to deal with the flesh, this tendency to worship a man has expressed itself frequently in the Church of God, and much havoc has been wrought in consequence. It is in keeping with God's will that we should learn from spiritual men and profit by their leadership, but it is altogether contrary to His will that we should divide the Church according to the men we admire. The only scriptural basis for the forming of a church is difference of locality, not difference of leaders.

(2)INSTRUMENTS OF SALVATION. Spiritual leaders are no adequate reason for dividing the Church; neither are the instruments used of God in our salvation. Some of the Corinthian believers proclaimed themselves to be "of Cephas," others "of Paul," others "of Apollos." They traced the beginning of their spiritual history to these men, and so thought they belonged to them. It is both natural and common for persons saved through the instrumentality of a worker, or a society, to consider themselves as belonging to such a worker or society. It is likewise both natural and common for an individual, or a mission, through whose means people have been saved, to consider the saved ones as belonging to them. It is natural, but not spiritual. It is common, but nevertheless, contrary to God's will. Alas! that so many of God's servants have not yet realized that they are servants of the local church, not masters of a private "church." Churches are divided on the ground of geography, not on the ground of the instruments of our salvation.

(3)NON-SECTARIANISM. Some Christians think they know better than to say, "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos." They say, "I am of Christ." Such Christians despise the others as sectarian, and on that ground start another community. Their attitude is -- "You are sectarian; I am non-sectarian. You are hero worshippers; we worship the Lord alone."

But God's Word condemns not only those who say, "I am of Cephas," "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos." It just as definitely and just as clearly denounces those who say, "I am of Christ." It is not wrong to consider oneself as belonging only to Christ; it is right and even essential. Nor is it wrong to repudiate all schism among the children of God; it is highly commendable. God does not condemn this class of Christians for either of these two things; He condemns them for the very sin they condemn in others -- their sectarianism. As a protest against division among the children of God, many believers seek to divide those who do not divide from those who do, and never dream that they themselves are divisive!

Their ground of division may be more plausible than that of others who divide on the ground of doctrinal differences, or personal preference for certain leaders, but the fact remains that they are dividing the children of God. Even while they repudiate schism elsewhere, they are schismatic themselves.

When you say, "I am of Christ," do you mean to say others are not? It is perfectly legitimate for you to say, "I am of Christ,"

if your remark merely implies to whom you belong; but if it implies, "I am not sectarian; I stand quite differently from you sectarians," then it is making a difference between you and other Christians. The very thought of distinguishing between the children of God has its springs in the carnal nature of man, and is sectarian. If we look on other believers as sectarian and consider ourselves to be non-sectarian, we are immediately differentiating between God's people and thereby manifesting a divisive spirit even in the very act of condemning division. No matter by what means we distinguish between the members of God's family--even if it be on the pretext of Christ Himself--we are guilty of schism in the Body.

What then is right? All exclusiveness is wrong. All inclusiveness (of true children of God) is right. Denominations are not scriptural, and we ought to have no part in them, but if we adopt an attitude of criticism and think, "They are denominational; I am undenominational. They belong to sects; I belong to Christ alone"--such differentiating is definitely sectarian.

Yes, praise God I am of Christ, but my fellowship is not merely with those who say, "I am of Christ," but with all who are of Christ. What is of vital importance is not the confession, but the fact. Although these other believers say they are of Paul, of Cephas, and of Apollos, yet in fact they are of Christ. I do not so much mind what they say, but I very much mind what they are. I do not inquire whether they are

denominational or undenominational, sectarian or unsectarian; I only inquire,

"Are they of Christ?" If they are of Christ, then they are my brethren.

Our personal standing should be undenominational, but the basis of our fellowship is not undenominationalism. We ourselves should be non-sectarian, but we dare not insist on non-sectarianism as a condition of fellowship. Our only ground of fellowship is Christ. Our fellowship must be with all the believers in a locality, not merely with all the unsectarian believers in that locality. They may make denominational differences, but we must not make undenominational requirements. We dare not differentiate between ourselves and them, because they differentiate between themselves and others. They are the children of God, and because they make distinctions between themselves and other children of God, they do not on that account cease to be the children of God. Their denominationalism or sectarianism will mean that severe limitations are imposed upon the Lord as to His purpose and mind for them, and this will mean that they will never go beyond a certain measure of spiritual growth and fullness. Blessing there may be, but fullness of divine purpose never.

All believers living in the same locality belong to the same church. This is an unchanging principle. We dare not alter "all the believers in a locality" to "all the undenominational believers in a locality." If we make undenominationalism or unsectarianism the boundary of our church, instead of locality, then we lose our local standing as a church and become a sect. It is not a denominational church, nor an interdenominational church, nor even an undenominational church we are after, but a local church. The difference between a local church and an undenominational church is as vast as the difference between heaven and earth. A local church is undenominational, but an undenominational church is denominational. "The church in Corinth" is scriptural, but "the church of all those who say, 'I am of Christ' in Corinth" is unscriptural. Our work is positive and constructive, not negative and destructive. We are out to establish churches, not to destroy denominations. Human nature is prone to go to extremes; it is so easy for us either to be undenominational ourselves and demand undenominationalism of others, or else to tolerate denominationalism in others and gradually become denominational ourselves. We ourselves must be undenominational, but we must not demand undenominationalism of other Christians as the basis of our fellowship.

Therefore, if we come to a place where Christ is not named, we must preach the gospel, win men to the Lord, and found a local church. If we come to a place where there are already Christians, but on various grounds these believers separate themselves into denominational "churches," our task is just the same as in the other place--we must preach the gospel, lead men to the Lord, and form them into a church on the scriptural ground of locality. All the while we must maintain an attitude of inclusiveness, not exclusiveness, towards those believers who are in different sects, for they, as we, are children of God, and they live in the same locality; therefore, they belong to the same church as we do. For ourselves, we cannot join any sect or remain in one, for our church connection can only be on local ground, but in regard to others we must not make leaving a sect the condition of fellowship with those believers who are in a sect. That will make undenominationalism our church ground, instead of locality. Let us be clear on this point, that an undenominational church is not a local church. There is a vast difference between the two. A local church is undenominational, and it is positive and inclusive; but an undenominational church is not a local church, and it is negative and exclusive.

Let us be clear as to our position. We are not out to establish undenominational churches, but local churches. We are seeking to do a positive work. If believers can be led to see what a local church is--the

expression of the Body of Christ in a locality--they will certainly not remain in any sect. On the other hand, it is possible for them to see all the evils of sectarianism, and leave them, without knowing what a local church is. We must help those, to whom God has been pleased to use us, to understand clearly the truth regarding local churches, and not to lay emphasis on the question of denominations. They must realize that whenever they use the term "we" in relation to the children of God, they must include all the children of God, not merely those who are meeting with them. If when we say "our brethren," we do not include all the children of God, but only those who continually meet with us, then we are schismatic.

I do not condone sectarianism, and I do not believe we should belong to any sect, but it is not our business to get people to leave them. If we make it our chief concern to lead people to a real knowledge of the Lord and the power of His cross, then they will gladly abandon themselves to Him, and will learn to walk in the Spirit, repudiating the things of the flesh. We shall find there will be no need to stress the question of denominations, for the Spirit Himself will enlighten them. If a believer has not learned the way of the cross and the walk in the Spirit, what is gained by his coming out of a sect?

(4)DOCTRINAL DIFFERENCES. In the Greek the word rendered "heresies" in Galatians 5:20 [KJV] does not necessarily convey the thought of error, but rather of division on the ground of doctrine. The Interlinear New Testament translates it as "sects," while Darby in his New Translation renders it "schools of opinion." The whole thought here is not of the difference between truth and error, but of division based upon doctrine. My teaching may be right or it may be wrong, but if I make it a cause of division, then I am guilty of the "heresy" spoken of here.

God forbids any division on doctrinal grounds. Some believe that rapture is pre-tribulation; others, that it is post- tribulation.

Some believe that all the saints will enter the kingdom; others believe that only a section will enter. Some believe that baptism is by immersion; others, that is by sprinkling. Some believe that supernatural manifestations are a necessary accompaniment to the baptism in the Holy Spirit, while others do not. None of these doctrinal views constitute a scriptural basis for separating the children of God. Though some may be right and others wrong, God does not sanction any division on account of difference as to such beliefs.¹ If a group of believers split off from a local church in their zeal for certain teaching according to the Word of God, the new "church" they establish may have more scriptural teaching, but it could never be a scriptural church. To bring error into a church is carnal, but to divide a church on account of error may also be carnal. It is carnality that so often destroys the oneness of the church in any place.

If we wish to maintain a scriptural position, then we must see to it that the churches we found in various places only represent localities, not doctrines. If our "church" is not separated from other children of God on the ground of locality alone, but stands for the propagation of some particular doctrine, then we are decidedly a sect, however true to the Word of God our teaching may be. The purpose of God is that a church should represent the children of God in a locality, not represent some specific truth there. A church of God in any place comprises all the children of God in that place, not merely those who hold the same doctrinal views.

Should we arrive at a place where a church has already been established on clear local ground, and discover that its members hold views which we consider unscriptural, or that they consider the views we hold as unscriptural, if we then refuse to recognize them as the church of God in that locality and withdraw from fellowship, we are divisive. The question is not whether they agree with our presentation of truth, but

whether they are standing on clear church ground.

If our hearts are set to preserve the local character of the churches of God, we cannot fail to come up against problems in our work. Unless the cross operates mightily, what endless possibilities of friction there will be if we include in one church all the believers in the locality with all their varying views. How the flesh would like just to include those holding the same views, and to exclude all whose views differ from ours. To have constant and close association with people whose interpretation of Scripture does not tally with ours, is hard for the flesh, but good for the spirit. God does not use division to solve the problem; He uses the cross. He would have us submit to the cross, so that through the very difficulties of the situation, the meekness and patience and love of Christ may be deeply wrought into our lives. Under the circumstances, if we do not know the cross, we shall probably argue, lose our temper, and finally go our own way. We may have right views, but God is giving us an opportunity to display a right attitude; we may believe aright, but God is testing us to see if we love aright. It is easy to have a mind well stored with scriptural teaching, and a heart devoid of true love. Those who differ from us will be a means in God's hand to test whether we have spiritual experience, or only scriptural knowledge, to test whether the truths we proclaim are a matter of life to us, or mere theory.

Romans 14 shows us how to deal with those whose views differ from ours. What would we do if in our church there were vegetarians and Sabbatarians? Why, we should consider it almost intolerable if in the same church some of the believers kept the Lord's Day and others the Sabbath, and some ate meat freely, while others were strict vegetarians. That was exactly the situation Paul was facing. Let us note his conclusions. "Now him who is weak in faith receive, but not for the purpose of passing judgment on his considerations" (v. 1). "Who are you who judge another's household servant? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will be made to stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (v. 4). "Therefore let us judge one another no longer, but rather judge this: not to put a stumbling block or cause of falling before your brother" (v. 13). Oh, for Christian tolerance! Oh, for largeness of heart! Alas! that many of God's children are so zealous for their pet doctrines that they immediately label as heretics, and treat accordingly, all whose interpretation of Scripture differs from theirs. God would have us walk in love toward all who hold views contrary to those views that are dear to us (v. 15).

This does not mean that all the members of a church can hold whatever views they please, but it does mean that the solution to the problem of doctrinal differences does not lie in forming separate parties according to the different views held, but in walking in love toward those whose outlook differs from ours. By patient teaching we may yet be able to help all to "the oneness of the faith" (Eph. 4:13). As we wait patiently on the Lord, He may grant grace to the others to change their views, or He may grant us grace to see that we are not such good teachers as we thought we were. Nothing so tests the spirituality of a teacher as opposition to his teaching.

The teachers must learn humility, but so must all the other believers. When they recognize their position in the Body, they will know that it is not given to everyone to determine matters of doctrine. They must learn to submit to those who have been equipped of God for the specific ministry of teaching His people. Spiritual gifts and spiritual experience are necessary for spiritual teaching; consequently not everyone can teach.

"Make my joy full, that you think the same thing, having the same love, joined in soul, thinking the one thing, doing nothing by way of selfish ambition nor by way of vainglory, but in lowliness of mind considering one another more excellent than yourselves; not regarding each his own virtues, but each the

virtues of others also" (Phil. 2:2-4). When the churches have laid to heart what Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, then it will be perfectly possible to have only one church in one locality with no friction whatever among its many members.

(5) RACIAL DIFFERENCES. "For also in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and were all given to drink one Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:13). Jews have always had the strongest racial prejudice of all peoples. They regarded other nations as unclean, and were forbidden even to eat with them; but Paul made it very clear, in writing to the Corinthians, that in the Church both Jew and Gentile are one. All distinctions in Adam have been done away with in Christ. A racial "church" has no recognition in the Word of God. Church membership is determined by place of residence, not by race.

Today in the large cosmopolitan cities of the world there are churches for the whites and churches for the blacks, churches for the Europeans and churches for the Asiatics. These have originated through failure to understand that the boundary of a church is a city. God does not permit any division of His children on the ground of difference of color, custom, or manner of living. No matter to what race they belong, if they belong to the same locality, they belong to the same church. God has placed believers of different races in one locality, so that, by transcending all external differences, they might in one church show forth the one life and the one Spirit of His Son. All that comes to us by nature is overcome by grace. All that was ours in Adam has been ruled out in Christ. The whole matter hinges here--are all carnal differences done away with in Christ, or is there still a place for the flesh in the Church? Are our resources in Christ sufficient to overcome all natural barriers? Let us remember that the church in any locality includes all the believers living there and excludes all who live elsewhere.

(6) NATIONAL DIFFERENCES. Jews and Gentiles represent national as well as racial distinctions, but in the Church of God there is neither Jew nor Greek. There is no racial distinction there, and there is no national distinction either. All believers living in one place, no matter what their nationality, belong to the one church. In the natural realm there is a difference between Chinese, French, British, and Americans, but in the spiritual realm there is none. If a Chinese believer lives in Nanking, he belongs to the church in Nanking. If a French believer lives in Nanking, he also belongs to the church in Nanking. The same holds good for Britishers, Americans, and all other nationalities, provided they are born again. The Word of God recognizes the church in Rome, the church in Ephesus, and the church in Thessalonica, but it does not recognize the Jewish church, or the Chinese church, or the Anglican church. The reason the names of cities appear in Scripture in connection with the churches of God is that the difference of dwelling place is the only difference recognized by God among His children. Their life is essentially one, and is therefore indivisible, but the place in which that life is lived cannot but vary as long as they remain in the flesh.

Since the churches are all local, if a believer--whatever his nationality--moves from one place to another, he immediately becomes a member of the church in the latter place, and has no church connection in the place of his former residence.

You cannot live in one place and be a member of the church in another. There is no extraterritoriality in connection with the churches of God. As soon as you exceed the city limit, you exceed the church limit. If a Chinese brother moves from Nanking to Hankow, he becomes a member of the church in Hankow. In like manner, a British brother coming from London to Hankow immediately becomes a member of the church in Hankow. A change of residence necessarily involves a change of church, whereas naturalization has no effect on church membership.

Our fellow workers who have gone from China to the South Sea Islands must be careful not to form an Overseas Chinese church there. It is possible to have an Overseas Chinese Chamber of Commerce, or an Overseas Chinese College, or an Overseas Chinese Club. Anything you like can be Overseas Chinese, but not a church. A church is always local! If you go to any city in a foreign land, then it follows as a matter of course that you belong to the church in that city. There is nothing Chinese about the churches of God.

How glorious it would be if the saved in every city could overlook all natural differences and only consider their spiritual oneness. "We are the believers in Christ in such-and-such a place" is the finest confession a company of Christians can make. Whether Christ is in you or not, determines whether or not you belong to the Church; where you live determines the particular church to which you belong. The question put by God to the world is, "Do they belong to Christ?" The question put by God to believers is, "Where do they live?" Not nationality but locality is the question raised. The churches of God are built on city ground, not on national ground.

The usual conception of an indigenous church, while quite right in some respects, is fundamentally wrong at the most vital point. Since the divine method of dividing the Church is according to locality, not nationality, then all differentiation between Christian and heathen countries is contrary to God's thought. The Church of God knows neither Jew nor Greek; therefore, it knows neither native nor foreigner, neither heathen country nor Christian country. The Scriptures differentiate between cities, not between countries, heathen and Christian. So if we would be in full accord with the mind of God, we must make no difference whatever between the Chinese and foreign church, between Chinese and foreign workers, or between Chinese and foreign funds.

The thought of the indigenous church is that the natives of a country should be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating, while the thought of God is that the believers in a city--whether native or foreign--should be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Take, for instance, Peking. The theory of the indigenous church distinguishes between Chinese and foreigners in Peking, whereas the Word of God distinguishes between the believers in Peking -- whether Chinese or foreign--and the believers in other cities. That is why in Scripture we read of the churches of the Gentiles, but never of the church of the Gentiles. The attempt to form all Chinese believers into one church shows a lack of understanding in regard to the divine basis of forming churches.

On the one hand, there is no church of the Gentiles in Scripture; on the other hand, we read of "the church of the Thessalonians." It is suggestive that this is the only expression of its kind used in the New Testament. The Word does not speak of the church of the Greeks (a race, or nation), but of the church of the Thessalonians (a city). There is no such thing in the thought of God as the church of the Chinese, but there is such a thing as the church of the Pekinese. Scripture knows nothing of the church of the French, but it does recognize the church of the Parisians. A clear apprehension of the divine basis of church formation--according to the difference of cities and not of countries--will save us from the misconception of the indigenous church. There should be no distinction whatever between Chinese and foreign Christians, between Chinese and foreign workers, or between Chinese and foreign money in any given locality.

(7)SOCIAL DISTINCTIONS. In Paul's day, from a social point of view, there was a great gulf fixed between a free man and a slave; yet they worshipped side by side in the same church. In our day, if a rickshaw coolie and the president of our republic both belong to Christ and live in the same place, then they belong to the same church. There may be a mission for rickshaw coolies, but there can never be a church for rickshaw coolies. Social distinctions are no adequate basis for forming a separate church. In the

Church of God there "cannot be slave nor free man."

In Scripture we have at least seven definite things referred to which are forbidden by God as reasons for dividing His Church. As a matter of fact these seven points are only typical of all other reasons the human mind may devise for dividing the Church of God. The two millenniums of Church history are a sad record of human inventions to destroy the Church's oneness.

OVERCOMERS

The sphere of the church is local, and the local church should on no account be divided. The question naturally arises, if the spiritual life of a local (not denominational) church is very low, can a few of the more spiritual members not gather together and form another assembly? The answer from the Word of God is emphatically, No! God's Word only warrants the establishment of churches on local ground. Even lack of spirituality is no adequate reason for dividing the church.

Should local methods, government, and organization be far from ideal, that still constitutes no reason for division. Even wrong teaching (2 John 9 excepted) is no ground for those who know better to form a separate church. We must lay it to heart that the difference of locality is the only ground for dividing the Church of God. No other ground is scriptural.

We who live in the same locality cannot but belong to the same church. This is something from which there is no escape.

If I am dissatisfied with the local church, the only thing I can do is to change my locality; then automatically I change my church. We can leave a denomination, but we can never leave a church. To leave a sect is justifiable, but to leave a church--whether on account of unspirituality, wrong doctrine, or bad organization--is utterly unjustifiable. If you leave the local church and form a separate assembly, you may have greater spirituality, purer teaching, and better government; but you have no church; you have only a sect.

In the second and third chapters of Revelation we see seven different churches in seven different localities. Only two were not rebuked but actually praised by the Lord. The other five were all definitely censured. Spiritually those five were in a sad state. They were weak, defeated churches; but they were churches for all that, not sects. Spiritually they were wrong, but positionally they were right; therefore, God only commanded those in them to be overcomers. The Lord said not a word about leaving the church. A local church is a church which you cannot leave; you must remain in it. If you are more spiritual than the other members, then you should use your spiritual influence and your authority in prayer to revive that church. If the church does not respond, you have only two alternatives; you must either remain there, keeping yourself undefiled, or else you must change your dwelling place. But this does not apply to a sect. It is futile to seek by a wrong application of these two chapters to keep Spirit-taught believers within a sect, for the seven churches referred to are local churches, not sectarian "churches." However weak they may have been, they were still on the scriptural ground of the Body in the locality. The Word of God has never authorized anyone to leave a church. All groups of believers who base their fellowship on other ground than that of locality are sects, even though they may term themselves churches. It is all right to leave a sect, but it is never right to leave a local church. If you leave a local church, you do so without the authority of the Lord, and you become guilty of the sin of schism in the Body.

What a tragedy it is when a few spiritual members leave a local church, and form another assembly, simply because the other members are weak and immature. Those stronger members should remain in that church as overcomers, seeking to help their weaker brothers and sisters, and claiming the situation there for the Lord. Oh, how prone we are to despise the believers we consider inferior to us, and how we delight to associate with those whose fellowship we find specially congenial. Pride of heart, and a selfish enjoyment in spiritual things, causes us to overlook the fact that a church in any given place should consist of all the children of God in that place; so we narrow down Christian fellowship and make selection among the children of God. This is sectarianism, and it is a grief of heart to the Lord.

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