

The Organization of Local Churches

by Watchman Nee

A church is organized with elders chosen from among the local brethren, who take oversight of the church work, and the ideal meeting place of the saints is their own private homes.

Scripture: Acts 6:2, Philippians 1:1

Topics: "Church Organization", "Mutual Responsibility"

Description

Watchman Nee discusses the organization of local churches, emphasizing the distinction between the roles of ministers, elders, and deacons. He argues that modern concepts of church organization, which prioritize a minister, a building, and formal services, diverge from the early church's practices where local elders governed and believers met in homes. Nee highlights that the church is not defined by its physical structure but by the community of believers, and that true church meetings involve mutual participation rather than passive attendance. He stresses the importance of local governance by elders and the need for believers to actively engage in their spiritual growth and responsibilities. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the principles of mutuality and shared responsibility in church life.

Transcript

Having already observed the difference between the work and the churches, between the apostles and the elders, between the basis of a scriptural church and sects, we can now proceed to see how a local church is organized.

According to the present-day conception, three things are regarded as essential to the existence of a church, apart from the group of Christians who constitute its members. These three are--a "minister," a church building, and "church services." The Christian world would question the existence of a church if even one of these three were lacking.

What would one think these days of a church without a "minister"? Call him pastor or anything else you like, but such a man you certainly must have. As a rule he is specially trained for church work, but he may be either a local man, or a worker transferred from some other place. Whatever his background and qualifications, he gives himself exclusively to the affairs of the church. Thus, those in the churches are divided into two classes--the clergy, who make it their business to attend to spiritual matters, and the laity, who devote themselves to secular things. Then of course there must be church services, for which the minister is responsible, and the most essential of these is the Sunday morning gathering. You may call it a service, or a meeting, or whatever you choose, but such a gathering there must be at least every Sunday,

when the church members sit in their pews and listen to the sermon their minister has prepared. And naturally there must be a church building. You may term it a hall, a meeting place, a chapel, or a church; but whatever you care to call it, such a place there must be. Otherwise, how could you ever "go to church" on Sundays? But what is considered essential to a church these days, was considered totally unnecessary in the early days of the Church's history. Let us see what the Word of God has to say on the matter.

THE "MINISTER," OR WORKER, IN CHURCH GOVERNMENT

"Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1:1). In not a single scriptural church do we find any mention of a "minister" controlling its affairs; such a position is always occupied by a group of local elders. And nowhere do we get a clearer or more comprehensive presentation of the personnel of a church than in the verse just quoted from the Philippian letter. The church consists of all the saints, the overseers, and the deacons. The deacons are the men appointed to serve tables (Acts 6:2-6), that is, those who care exclusively for the business side of things. The overseers are the elders, who take the oversight of all church matters. (Acts 20:17, 28, and Titus 1:5, 7 make this quite clear.) And besides the overseers and the deacons, there are all the saints. These three classes comprise the entire church, and no other class of person can be introduced into any church without making it an unscriptural organization.

Before we go on to consider the elders, let us glance for a moment at the deacons. They do not occupy such an important position as the elders, who rule the church; they are chosen by the church to serve it. They are the executors who carry out the decisions of the Holy Spirit through the elders and the church. Because the deacons have actually more to do with assembly life than with the work, we think it sufficient to just make this brief mention of them.

There are two points in connection with the elders that call for special attention. First, they are chosen from among the common brethren. They are not workers who have a special call from God to devote themselves exclusively to spiritual work. As a rule they have their families, and their business duties, and are just ordinary believers of good reputation.

Second, elders are chosen from among the local brethren. They are not transferred from other places, but are set apart just in the place where they live, and they are not called to leave their ordinary occupations, but simply to devote their spare time to the responsibilities of the church. The members of the church are local men, and as elders are chosen from among the ordinary members, it follows that they are also local men (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

And since all scriptural elders are local brothers, if we transfer a man from some other place to control a church, we are departing from scriptural ground. Here again we see the difference between the churches and the work. A brother may be transferred to another place to take care of the work there, but no brother can be sent out of his own locality to bear the burdens of the church in another place. The churches of God are all governed by elders, and elders are all chosen from among the local brethren.

If a group of men are saved in a certain place, and a worker is left in charge of them, then it is inaccurate to refer to that company as a church. If affairs are still in the hands of the worker and have not passed into the hands of the local brothers, then it is still his work; it is not a church. Let us make this distinction clear: the work is always in the hands of the workers, and the church is always in the hands of the local brethren. Whenever a worker is in control of affairs, then it is a question of work, not of a church.

It has been pointed out before that in God's Word there are local elders, but no local apostles. When Paul left Titus in Crete, his object was not that Titus should manage church affairs there, but that he should appoint elders in every place so that they could take charge of affairs. The business of the worker is to found churches and appoint elders, never to take direct responsibility in the churches. If in any place an apostle takes responsibility for the affairs of the local church, he either changes the nature of his office or the nature of the church. No apostle coming from another place is qualified for the office of local elder; the post can only be occupied by local men.

Let us who have been called of God to the work be absolutely clear on this point, that we were never called to settle down as pastors in any place. We may revisit the churches we have founded and help the believers we formerly led to the Lord, but we can never become their "minister" and bear the responsibility of spiritual affairs on their behalf. They must be satisfied with the elders appointed by the apostles and learn to honor and obey them. Obviously it needs more grace on the part of the believers to submit themselves to others of their own number and of their own rank, than to yield to the control of a man who comes from another place and has special qualifications for spiritual work. But God has so ordained it, and we bow to His wisdom.

The relationship between the work and the church is really very simple. A worker preaches the gospel, souls are saved, and after a short lapse of time a few of the comparatively advanced ones are chosen from among them to be responsible for local affairs. Thus a church is established! The apostle then follows the leading of the Spirit to another place, and history is repeated there. So the spiritual life and activity of the local church develops, because the believers bear their own responsibility; and the work extends steadily because the apostles are free to move from place to place preaching the gospel and founding new churches.

The first question usually asked in connection with a church is, "Who is the minister?" The thought in the questioner's mind is, "Who is the man responsible for ministering and administering spiritual things in this church?" The clerical system of church management is exceedingly popular, but the whole thought is foreign to Scripture, where we find the responsibility of the church committed to elders, not to "ministers" as such. And the elders only take oversight of the church work; they do not perform it on behalf of the brethren. If, in a company of believers, the minister is active and the church members are all passive, then that company is a mission, not a church. In a church all the members are active.

The difference between the elders and the other members is that the latter work, while the former both work themselves and also oversee the others as they work. Since the question of elders has been dealt with elsewhere, we shall make no further reference to it here.

THE MEETING PLACE

Another thing which is considered of vital importance to the existence of a church is a church building. The thought of a church is so frequently associated with a church building, that the building itself is often referred to as "the church." But in God's Word it is the living believers who are called the church, not the bricks and mortar (see Acts 5:11; Matt. 18:17).

According to Scripture it is not even necessary for a church to have a place definitely set apart for fellowship. The Jews always had their special meeting places, and wherever they went they made a point of building a synagogue in which to worship God. The first apostles were Jews, and the Jewish tendency to build special places of worship was natural to them. Had Christianity required that places be set apart

for the specific purpose of worshipping the Lord, the early apostles, with their Jewish background and natural tendencies, would have been ready enough to build them. The amazing thing is that, not only did they not put up special buildings, but they seem to have ignored the whole subject intentionally. It is Judaism, not Christianity, which teaches that there must be sanctified places for divine worship. The temple of the New Testament is not a material edifice; it consists of living persons, all believers in the Lord. Because the New Testament temple is spiritual, the question of meeting places for believers, or places of worship, is one of minor importance. Let us turn to the New Testament and see how the question of meeting places is dealt with there.

When our Lord was on earth, He met with His disciples at times on the hillside and at times by the sea. He gathered them around Him now in a house, again in a boat, and there were times when He drew apart with them in an upper room. But there was no consecrated place, where He habitually met with His own. At Pentecost the disciples were gathered in an upper room, and after Pentecost they either met all together in the temple or separately in different houses (Acts 2:46), or at times in the portico of Solomon (Acts 5:12). They met for prayer in various homes, Mary's being one of them (Acts 12:12), and we read that on a certain occasion they were assembled in a room on the third floor of a building (Acts 20:8).

Judging from these passages, the believers assembled in a great variety of places and had no official meeting place. They simply made use of any building that suited their needs, whether a private home, or just a room in a house, or else a large public building such as the temple, or even a wide space like the portico of Solomon. They had no buildings specially set apart for church use; they had nothing which would correspond to the "church" of today.

"And on the first day of the week, when we gathered together to break bread, Paul conversed with them....And there were a considerable number of lamps in the upper room where we were gathered together. And a certain young man named Eutychus was sitting in the window" (Acts 20:7-9). In Troas we find the believers meeting in the third story of a building.

There is a delightfully unofficial air about this gathering, such a contrast to the present-day conventional services, with the church members all sitting stiffly in their pews. But this Troas meeting was a truly scriptural one. There was no official stamp upon it; it bore the marks of real life, in its perfect naturalness and pure simplicity. It was quite all right for some of the saints to sit on the window-ledge, or for others to sit on the floor, as Mary did of old. In our assemblies we must return to the principle of the upper room. The ground floor is a place for business, a place for men to come and go; but there is more of a home atmosphere about the upper room, and the gatherings of God's children are family affairs. The last supper was in an upper room; so was Pentecost, and so again was the meeting here. God wants the intimacy of the upper room to mark the gatherings of His children, not the stiff formality of an imposing public edifice.

That is why in the Word of God we find His children meeting in the family atmosphere of a private home. We read of the church in the house of Prisca and Aquila (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19), the church in the house of Nymphas (Col. 4:15), and the church in the house of Philemon (Philem. 2). The New Testament mentions at least these three different churches that were in the homes of believers. How did churches come to be in such homes? If in a certain place there were a few believers, and one of them had a house large enough to accommodate them all, they quite naturally assembled there, and the Christians in that locality were called "the church in the house of So-and-so."

Everything must begin at the beginning. When a church is founded, the believers from the very outset must learn to meet by themselves, either in their own homes or in some other building which they are able to secure. Of course, not every church is a church in a house, but a church in a house should be encouraged rather than considered as a drawback. If the number of believers is great and the sphere of the locality wide, they might need to meet, as the saints in Jerusalem did, in different houses (which may mean homes, halls, or any other building) instead of in one house. There was only one church in Jerusalem, but its members assembled in different houses. The principle of houses still applies today. This does not mean that the whole church will always meet separately; in fact, it is important, and of great profit, for all the believers to gather together quite regularly in one place (1 Cor. 14:23). To make such meetings possible, they could either borrow or rent a public place for the occasion, or, if they have sufficient means, they could acquire a hall permanently for the purpose. But the meeting place for the believers could generally be in a private home. If this is not available, and not suitable, of course other buildings could be acquired. But we should try to encourage meetings in the homes of the Christians.

The grand edifices of today, with their lofty spires, speak of the world and the flesh rather than of the Spirit, and in many ways they are not nearly as well suited to the purpose of Christian assembly as the private homes of God's people. In the first place, people feel much freer to speak of spiritual things in the unconventional atmosphere of a home than in a spacious church building where everything is conducted in a formal manner; besides, there is not the same possibility for mutual intercourse there. Somehow, as soon as people enter those special buildings, they involuntarily settle down to passivity, and wait to be preached to. A family atmosphere should pervade all gatherings of the children of God, so that the brothers even feel free to ask questions (1 Cor. 14:35). Everything should be under the control of the Spirit, but there should be the liberty of the Spirit too. Further, if the churches are in the private homes of the brethren, they naturally feel that all the interests of the church are their interests. There is a sense of closeness of relationship between themselves and the church. Many Christians feel that church affairs are something quite beyond them. They have no intimate concern in them, because in the first place they have their "minister" who is specially responsible for all such affairs, and then they have a great church building which seems so remote from their homes, and where matters are conducted so systematically and with such precision that one feels overpowered and bound in spirit.

Still further, the meetings in believers' homes can be a fruitful testimony to the neighbors around, and they provide an opportunity for witness and gospel preaching. Many who are not willing to go to a "church" will be glad to go to a private house. And the influence is most helpful for the families of the Christians. From early days the children will be surrounded by a spiritual atmosphere, and will have constant opportunity to see the reality of eternal things. Again, if meetings are in the homes of the Christians, the Church is saved much material loss. One of the reasons the Christians survived the Roman persecutions during the first three centuries of Church history, was that they had no special buildings for worship, but met in cellars and caves and other inconspicuous places. Such meeting places were not readily discovered by their persecutors; but the large and costly edifices of today would be easily located and destroyed, and the churches would be speedily wiped out. The imposing structures of our modern times convey an impression of the world rather than of the Christ whose name they bear. (The halls and other buildings required for the work are quite another matter; we are speaking here only of the churches.)

So the scriptural method of church organization is simple in the extreme. As soon as there are a few believers in a place, they begin to meet in one of their homes. If numbers increase so that it becomes impracticable to meet in one house, then they can meet in several different houses, but the entire

company of believers can meet together once in a while in some public place. A hall for such purposes could either be borrowed, rented, or built, according to the financial condition of the church; but we must remember that the ideal meeting places of the saints are their own private homes.

Meetings connected with the work are arranged along totally different lines, and are entirely under the auspices of the workers. They are on the principle of Paul's own rented house in Rome. As we have seen, when Paul reached Rome a church was already in existence there, and the believers already had their regular gatherings. Paul did not use the meeting place of the church for his work, but rented a separate place, as he stayed for a prolonged period in Rome. In Troas he only stayed for a week, so he did not rent a place there, but simply accepted the hospitality of the church. When he went away, the special meetings he had been conducting there ceased, but the brethren in Troas still continued their own meetings. If a worker intends to remain for a considerable period in any place, then he must obtain a separate center for his work and not make use of the church's meeting place. Frequently such a center will require more extensive accommodation than the meeting place of the church. If the Lord calls some of His servants to maintain a permanent testimony in a given place, then the call for a special building in connection with the work may be much greater than the need of premises is in connection with the church. It is almost essential to have a hall if the work is to be carried on in any place, whereas the homes of the brethren will nearly always meet the needs of the church meetings.

THE MEETING

Before we consider the question of meeting, let us first say a few words concerning the nature of the Church. Christ is the Head of the Church and "we who are many are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Rom. 12:5).

Apart from Christ, the Church has no head; all believers are only members, and they are "members one of another."

Mutuality expresses the nature of the Church, for all the relationships among believers are of one member to another, never of a head to the members. All those who compose a church take their place as members of the Body, not one occupying the position of head. The whole life of the church, and all its activities, must be stamped by this characteristic of mutuality.

But the nature of the work is quite different from that of the church. In the work there are active and passive groups. The apostles are active, and those among whom they labor are passive, whereas in the church all are active. In the work, activity is one-sided; in the church it is all-round.

When we recognize the fundamental difference between the nature of the work and the church, then we shall easily understand the scriptural teaching concerning the meetings which we are about to consider. There are two different kinds of meetings in Scripture--the church meeting and the apostolic meeting. If we are to differentiate clearly between the two, we must first understand the different nature of church and work. Once we see that clearly, a glance at the nature of any meeting will make it obvious to what sphere it belongs; but if we fail to realize the distinction, we shall constantly confuse the church with the work. In the early Church there were meetings which were definitely connected with the churches, and others that were just as definitely connected with the work. In the latter only one man spoke, and all the others constituted his audience. One stood before the others, and by his preaching directed the thoughts and hearts of those who sat quietly listening. This type of meeting can be recognized at once as a meeting connected with the apostolic work, because it bears the character of the work, that is, activity on the one

side and passivity on the other. There is no stamp of mutuality about it. In the church meetings, "each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation" (1 Cor. 14:26). Here it is not a case of one leading and all the others following, but of each one contributing his share of spiritual helpfulness. True, only a few of those present take part, but all may; only a few are actual contributors to the meeting, but all are potential contributors. The Scriptures show these two distinct kinds of meetings--apostolic meetings, which are led by one man, and church meetings, in which all the local brethren are free to take part.

The apostolic meetings may be divided into two classes -- for believers and for unbelievers. The meeting which was held immediately after the Church came into existence was an apostolic meeting for unbelievers (Acts 2:14). The gatherings in the portico of Solomon (Acts 3:11) and in the house of Cornelius (Acts 10) were of the same nature, and there are still other records of similar meetings in the book of Acts. They were clearly apostolic meetings, not church meetings, because one man spoke and all the others listened. Paul's preaching at Troas was to the brethren (Acts 20). Whether it was in the church or not, it was still apostolic in nature, for it was one-sided, the apostle alone speaking to the whole assembly, and not the various members taking part for their mutual edification. Paul preached to the brethren at Troas because he was passing through that place, and any apostle passing through a place as he did would be free to respond to an invitation from the brethren to help them spiritually. Then when Paul was in Rome, the believers came to his rented room to hear

him witness (Acts 28:23, 30-31). This work again is specifically apostolic in nature, because one man is active, while the others are passive.

The second kind of meeting is mentioned in the first Epistle to the Corinthians: If therefore the whole church comes together in one place, and all speak in tongues, and some unlearned in tongues or unbelievers enter, will they not say that you are insane?...What then, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up. If anyone speaks in a tongue, it should be by two, or at the most three, and in turn, and one should interpret; but if there is no interpreter, he should be silent in the church, and speak to himself and to God. And as to prophets, two or three should speak, and the others discern. But if something is revealed to another sitting by, the first should be silent. For you can all prophesy one by one that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of prophets are subject to prophets; for God is not a God of confusion but of peace. As in all the churches of the saints (4:23, 26-33).

This is obviously a church meeting, because it is not one man leading while all the others follow, but each gifted one contributing to the meeting as the Spirit directs. In the apostolic meetings there is a definite distinction between the preacher and his audience, but in this kind of meeting any gifted member of the church may be preacher and any may be audience. Nothing is determined by man, and each takes part as the Spirit leads. It is not an "all-man" ministry, but a Holy Spirit ministry. The prophets and teachers minister the Word as the Lord gives it, while others minister to the assembly in other ways. Not all can prophesy and teach, but all can seek to prophesy and teach (v. 1). An opportunity is given to each member of the church to help others, and an opportunity is given to each one to be helped. One brother may speak at one stage of the gathering and another later on; you may be chosen of the Spirit to help the brethren this time, and I next time.

Everything in the meeting is governed throughout by the principle of "two or three" (vv. 27, 29). Even the same two or three prophets are not permanently appointed to minister to the meetings, but at each

meeting the Spirit chooses any two or three from among all the prophets present. That such assemblies are assemblies of the church is seen at a glance, because the stamp of mutuality is clearly upon all the proceedings.

There is only one verse in the New Testament which speaks of the importance of Christians meeting together; it is Hebrews 10:25: "Not abandoning our own assembling together, as the custom with some is, but exhorting one another; and so much the more as you see the day drawing near." This verse shows that the object of such assembling is to exhort "one another." This is obviously not an apostolic meeting, for it is not a case of one man exhorting the entire assembly, but all the members bearing equal responsibility to exhort one another. A church meeting has the stamp of "one another" upon it.

There are several purposes for which the church meets, as recorded in Scripture. First, for prayer (Acts 2:42; 4:24, 31; 12:5); second, for reading (Col. 4:16; 1 Thes. 5:27; Acts 2:42; 15:21, 30-31); third, for the breaking of bread--which are not meetings presided over by a single individual who bears all responsibility, since reference is made to "the cup of blessing which we bless...the bread which we break" (1 Cor. 10:16-17; Acts 2:42; 20:7); and fourth, for the exercise of spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 14). The last type of meeting is a church meeting, for the phrase "in the church" is used repeatedly in the passage which describes it (vv. 28, 34-35). Of this meeting it is said that all may prophesy. How different from one man preaching and all the others sitting quietly in the pew listening to his sermon! That meeting has no place among the different gatherings of the church, for its nature makes it evident that it is an apostolic meeting, and being an apostolic meeting, it belongs to the sphere of the work, not of the church. Meetings where activity is one-sided do not come within the scope of the church, for they lack the distinctive feature of all church gatherings; and where any attempt is made to fit them into the church program, much trouble is sure to result.

Today, alas! this style of meeting is the chief feature of the churches. No meeting is attended with such regularity as this one. Who is considered a really good Christian? Is it not one who comes to church fifty-two Sunday mornings in the year to hear the minister preach? But this is passivity, and it heralds death. Even he who has attended "church" fifty-two Sundays in the year has not really been once to a church meeting. He has only gone to a meeting in connection with the work. I do not imply that we should never have this kind of meeting, but the point is that such a meeting is part of the work and is not part of the church. If you have a worker in the locality, then you may have this type of meeting, not otherwise.

The local church, as a church, has no such meetings. Where they are found in connection with a church, we must discourage them and help believers to see that church meetings are conducted by the church. If apostolic meetings take the place of church meetings, then the church members become passive and indolent, always expecting to be helped, instead of seeking, in dependence upon the Spirit, to be helpful to the other members. It is contrary to the New Testament principles of mutual help and mutual edification. The reason the churches in China are still so weak, after a hundred years of Christian missions, is that God's servants have introduced into the local churches a type of meeting that really belongs to the work, and the church members have naturally concluded that if they attend such services and just passively receive all that is taught them there, they have performed the chief part of their Christian duty. Individual responsibility has been lost sight of, and passivity has hindered the development of spiritual life throughout the churches.

Further, to maintain the Sunday morning preaching, you must have a good preacher. Therefore, a worker is not only needed to manage church affairs, but also to maintain the meetings for spiritual uplift. It is only

natural, if a good address is to be delivered every Sunday, that the churches hope for someone who is better qualified to preach than recently converted local brothers. How could they be expected to produce a good sermon once a week? And who could be expected to preach better than a specially called servant of God? So an apostle settles down to pastor the church, and consequently the churches and the work both lose their distinctive features. The result is serious loss in both directions.

On the one hand, the brethren become lazy and selfish because their thought is only centered on themselves and the help they can receive, and on the other hand, unevangelized territories are left without workers because apostles have settled down to be elders. For lack of activity the spiritual growth of the churches is arrested, and for lack of apostles the extension of the work is arrested too.

Since so much havoc has been wrought by introducing a feature of the work into the churches, and thus robbing both of their true nature, we must differentiate clearly between meetings that belong specifically to the work and those that belong specifically to the church. When God blesses our efforts in any place to the salvation of souls, we must see to it that the saved ones understand, from the outset, that the meetings which resulted in their salvation belong to the work and not to the church, and that they are the church and must therefore have their own church meetings. They must meet in their homes or in other places to pray, study the Word, break bread, and exercise their spiritual gifts; and in such meetings their object must be mutual helpfulness and mutual edification. Each individual must bear his share of responsibility and pass on to the others what he himself has received from the Lord. The conduct of the meetings should be the burden of no one individual, but all the members should bear the burden together, and they should seek to help one another depending upon the teaching and leading of the Spirit, and depending upon His empowering too. As soon as believers are saved, they should begin to assemble themselves regularly. Such gatherings of local believers are true church meetings.

Meetings connected with the work are only a temporary institution (unless the object is to maintain a special testimony in a special place). But the assembling of the believers for fellowship and mutual encouragement is something permanent.

Even should the believers be very immature, and their meetings seem quite childish, they must learn to content themselves with what help they receive from one another and must not always hope to be able to sit down and listen to a good sermon. They should seek revelation, spiritual gifts, and utterance from God; and if their need casts them upon Him, it will result in the enrichment of the whole church. Meetings of recently saved believers will naturally bear the stamp of immaturity at the beginning, but for the worker to take over the responsibility of such meetings will stunt their growth, not foster it. It is the condition of the church meetings, not of the meetings connected with the work, that indicates the spiritual state of a church in any locality. When an apostle is preaching a grand sermon, and all the believers are nodding assent and adding their frequent and fervent "Amens," how deeply spiritual the congregation seems! But it is when they meet by themselves that their true spiritual state comes to light.

The apostolic meeting is not an intrinsic part of the church life; it is merely a piece of work, and it ceases with the departure of the worker. But the church meetings go on uninterrupted, whether the worker is present or absent. It is because the difference has not been realized between meetings for the church and for the work, that it has ever occurred to the brethren to cease to assemble themselves when the worker goes. One of the fruitful sources of spiritual failure today is that the children of God consider the church to be a part of the work; so when there is a sermon to hear, they constitute a willing audience, but if there is no preacher, the meetings automatically cease, and there is no thought of simply gathering together to

help one another.

But how can the local believers be equipped to minister one to the other? In the apostolic days it was taken for granted that the Spirit would come upon all believers as soon as they turned to the Lord, and with the on-coming of the Spirit, spiritual gifts were imparted, through the exercise of which the churches were edified. The usual method which God has ordained for building up the churches is the ordinary church gatherings, not the meetings conducted by the workers. The reason the churches are so weak these days is that workers seek to build them up, through the meetings under their care, instead of leaving it to their own responsibility to edify each other through proper church meetings. Why has it come about that the church meetings of 1 Corinthians 14 are no longer a part of church life? Because so many of God's people lack the experience of the Spirit's on-coming, without which a meeting conducted along the lines of 1 Corinthians 14 is a mere empty form. Unless all those we lead to the Lord have a definite experience of the Holy Spirit coming upon them, it will be of little use instructing them how to conduct their church meetings, for such meetings will be powerless and ineffective. If the Holy Spirit is upon the believers, as in the days of the early Church, He will give gifts to men, and such men will be able to strengthen the saints and to build up the Body of Christ. We see from Paul's first Corinthian Epistle that God so equipped believers with spiritual gifts that they were able to carry on the work of building up the churches quite independently of the apostles. (This does not imply that they needed no further apostolic help. They decidedly did.) Alas!

that nowadays many of God's people set more store by God's servants than by His Holy Spirit! They are content to be ministered to by the gifts of a worker, instead of seeking for themselves the gifts of the Spirit; so true church meetings have given place to meetings under the auspices of the workers.

In 1 Corinthians 14, where a church meeting is in view, apostles have been left out of account altogether! There is no place for them in the meetings of a local church! When the members of a church assemble and the spiritual gifts are in use, prophecy and other gifts are exercised, but there is no mention of apostles for the simple reason that apostles are appointed no place in the meetings of the local church; they are appointed to the work. When the local church meets, it is the gifts that are brought into use; office has no place here, not even that of an apostle. But this does not preclude a visiting apostle from speaking at all in a church meeting. This is illustrated by the fact that Paul took part in the Troas meeting. But the point to be noted is that Paul was only passing through Troas, so his speaking there was merely a temporary arrangement in order that the local saints might benefit by his spiritual gifts and knowledge of the Lord; it was not a permanent institution.

Apostles, as apostles, represent an office in the work, and not any particular gift; therefore, here they are ignored altogether. Not a mention is made of them in this local church gathering. In the organization of the church they have no place at all, because their ministry, as apostles, was not for the churches but for the work. As we have already observed, apostles had no say in the management of the business affairs of any church; but from the fact that no part is allotted them even in the local gatherings for mutual edification, it is clear that God did not even intend that they should bear the responsibility of the spiritual ministry in the churches. God gave gifts to the local brethren so that they could be prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers, and, thus equipped, could carry the burden of spiritual ministry in the locality.

Apostles do not bear responsibility either for the spiritual or material side of affairs in any church; the elders are responsible for the local management, and the prophets and other ministers for the local ministry.

Then have apostles nothing to do with the local church? Surely! There is still plenty of scope for them to help the churches, but not in the capacity of apostles. On the business side of things they can help indirectly by giving counsel to the elders, who deal directly with the church affairs; and on the spiritual side in the church meetings they can minister with any spiritual gifts they may possess, such as prophecy or teaching. Their apostolic office is of no account in a church meeting for the exercise of spiritual gifts. As apostles they cannot exercise any apostolic gift, but as brothers they can minister to their fellow believers by the use of any gift with which the Spirit may have endowed them.

Not only apostles, but even elders as such, have no part in the meetings. In this chapter (1 Cor. 14), elders have no place at all. They are not even mentioned. We have already pointed out that elders are for office, not for ministry. They are appointed for church government, and not for ministry. Office is for government, and gifts are for ministry. In the meetings which are for ministry, it is those who have been gifted by God that count, not those who hold office; so in the church meetings it is the prophets, teachers, and evangelists who take the lead, not the elders. They are the gifted ones of the church.¹

We must differentiate between the work of the elders, and the work of the prophets and teachers. Their work is different, but they are not necessarily different persons. It is quite possible for one person to act in both capacities. The elders are those who hold office in a local church; the prophets and teachers are the gifted ministers in a local church. The elders are for church government at all times; the prophets and teachers are for ministry in church meetings. Whenever there is a church, the Lord not only appoints elders for its government, but also gives gifts to some brothers to constitute them ministers for the meetings. But this does not mean that elders have nothing to do with the meetings. Whenever government in the meetings is necessary, they can exercise authority there. As to ministry, though they cannot minister as elders, yet, if they are also prophets or teachers, they can minister in that capacity. It is almost imperative that elders be prophets and teachers; otherwise, they cannot rule the church effectively.

The point to be remembered is that church meetings are the sphere for the ministry of the Word, not the sphere for the exercise of any office. It is for the exercise of gifts unto edification. Since both apostleship and eldership are offices, one in the work and one in the church, so both of the officers, as such, are altogether out of the meetings. But God will be gracious to His church to give it gifts for its upbuilding. The church meetings are the place for the use of these gifts for mutual help.

All meetings on the "round-table" principle are church meetings, and all meetings on the "pulpit-and-pew" principle are meetings belonging to the work. The latter may be of a passing nature, and not necessarily a permanent institution, whereas the former are a regular feature of church life. A round-table enables you to pass something to me and me to pass something to you. It affords opportunity for an expression of mutuality, that essential feature of all relationships in the church. In the local churches we must discourage all meetings on the "pulpit-and-pew" principle, so that, on the one hand, God's workers shall be free to travel far and wide proclaiming the glad tidings to sinners, and, on the other hand, the new converts shall be cast on the Lord for all needed equipment to serve one another. Thus the churches, having to bear their own responsibility, will develop their own spiritual life and gifts through exercise. It is all right to have an apostolic meeting when a worker visits the locality, but when he goes, meetings of the pulpit-type should be discontinued. Prophets, teachers, and evangelists in the local church may also take such meetings from time to time, but they should be regarded as exceptional, for they foster passivity and do not on the whole make for the spiritual development of the churches.

Let us consult the book of Acts in order to see the example God set for His Church in the beginning. "And they continued steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and the prayers....And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they partook of their food with exultation and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:42, 46). Such were conditions in the early days of the Church's history. The apostles did not establish a central meeting place for the believers, but these "continued steadfastly in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and the prayers." They moved from house to house having fellowship one with another.

We can now draw our own conclusions from the three points we have considered. (1) Wherever there is a group of believers in any place, a few of the more mature are chosen from their number to care for the others, after which all local responsibility rests upon them. From the very outset it should be made clear to the new converts that it is by divine appointment that the management of the church is entrusted to local elders and not to any worker from another place. (2) There is no official meeting place necessary for the church. The members meet in one or more houses, according as their numbers require, and should it be necessary to meet in several houses, it is well for the whole church to congregate from time to time in one place. For such meetings a special place could be obtained either for the occasion, or permanently, according to existing church conditions. (3) The church meetings are not the responsibility of the workers. Local believers should learn to use the spiritual gifts with which God has entrusted them to minister to their fellow believers. The principle on which all church meetings are conducted is that of the "round-table," not of the "pulpit-and-pew." When any apostle visits a place, he could lead a series of meetings for the local church, but such meetings are exceptional. In the usual church gatherings the brethren should all make their special contributions in the power and under the leading of the Spirit.

But to make such meetings of definite value it is essential that the believers receive spiritual gifts, revelation, and utterance; therefore, the workers should make it a matter of real concern that all their converts experience the power of the outpoured Spirit.

If the examples God has shown us in His Word are followed, then no question will ever arise in the churches regarding self-government, self-support, and self-propagation. And the churches in the different localities will consequently be saved much unnecessary expenditure, which will enable them to come freely to the help of the poor believers, as the Corinthians did, or to the help of the workers, as did the Philippians. If the churches follow the lines God Himself has laid down for them, His work will go forward unhindered and His kingdom be extended on earth.

THE MINISTRY, THE WORK, AND THE CHURCHES

In the earlier chapters of this book we have already seen what the ministry, the work, and the local churches are. In this chapter we have seen the connection between the ministry and the local church, and also the difference between the church and the work. Now we can consider more minutely the relationship between the ministry, the work, and the churches, in order to see clearly how they stand, how they function, what their respective spheres are, and how they are interrelated.

In Acts 13 we saw that God had established one of His churches in a certain locality; then He gave gifts to a few individuals in that church to equip them to minister there as prophets and teachers, so that the church might be built up.

These prophets and teachers constituted the ministry in that church. When in life and in gift these ministers had reached a certain stage of spiritual maturity, God sent two of their number to work in other places; and history repeated itself in the churches established by these two apostles.

Do you not see here the relationship between the churches, the ministry, and the work? (1) God establishes a church in a locality. (2) He raises up gifted men in the church for the ministry. (3) He sends some of these specially equipped men out into the work. (4) These men establish churches in different places. (5) God raises up other gifted men among these churches for the ministry of building them up. (6) Some of these in turn are thrust forth to work in other fields. Thus, the work directly produces the churches, and the churches indirectly produce the work. So the churches and the work progress, moving in an ever-recurring cycle-- the work always resulting directly in the founding of churches, and the churches always resulting indirectly in further work.

As to the gifted men raised up of God for the ministry, they labor both in the churches and in the work. When they are in their own locality, they seek to edify the church. When they are in other places, they bear the burden of the work. When they are in the local church, they are prophets and teachers. When they are sent to other places, they are apostles. The men are the same, at home or abroad, but their ministries differ according to the sphere of their service. The prophets and teachers (and shepherds and evangelists), whose sphere is local, plus the apostles, whose sphere is extra-local, constitute the ministry. As the former serve the churches, and the latter the work, the ministry is designed of God to meet the spiritual need in both spheres. Here again we see the relationship between the churches, the ministry, and the work.

The work is produced by the churches, the churches are founded as a result of the work, and the ministry serves both the churches and the work.

In Ephesians 4 we see that the sphere of the ministry is the Body of Christ, which may be expressed locally as a church, or extra-locally as the work. It is for this reason also that apostles, prophets, evangelists, and teachers are linked together, though actually the sphere of an apostle's work is quite different from that of the other three. But all belong to the one ministry, whose sphere of service is the Body of Christ. These two groups of men are responsible for the work of the ministry, the one being gifted by the Spirit that they may be enabled to serve the local church, the other called from among these gifted ones to serve Him in different places and given an office in addition to their gifts. Those who have been gifted use their gifts to serve the Church by serving the church in their locality. Those who have both gifts and apostolic commission serve the Church by serving the churches in different localities.

God uses these men to impart His grace to the Church. Their various gifts enable them to transmit grace from the Head to the Body. Spiritual ministry is nothing less than ministering Christ to His people. God's thought in giving these men as a gift to His Church was that a Christ, personally known and experienced by them, might through the gifts of the Spirit, be ministered to His people. They were given to the Church "for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ."

Thus, in the ministry we have the prophets and other ministers using their gifts to serve the local church, while the apostles, by their office and gifts, serve all the churches. The ministry of these two groups of men is of great importance, because all the work of God--local and extra-local--is in their hands. That is why God's Word declares that the Church of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

And in the offices instituted by God, we have the elders occupying the chief place in the local church, while apostles hold no office at all there. Apostles, on the other hand, hold the chief office in the work, while the elders have no place there.

Apostles rank foremost in the universal Church, and elders rank foremost in the local church. When we see the distinction between the respective offices of apostles and elders, then we shall understand why the two are constantly linked together (Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23). Apostles and elders are the highest representative of the Church and the churches. Apostles hold the highest office in the work, but in the local church they--as apostles--hold no office at all; elders, on the other hand, hold the chief office in the local church, but as elders they have no place in the work.

And in the local church, there are two departments of service, one relating to business management, the other to spiritual ministry. Offices are connected with the management of the church and are held by the elders and the deacons. Gifts are connected with the ministry of the church and are exercised by the prophets and teachers (and evangelists). The elders and deacons are responsible for the management of the church, while the prophets and teachers concern themselves chiefly with the meetings of the church. Should the deacons and elders also be prophets and teachers, then they could manage church affairs and at the same time, minister to the church in the meetings. We must differentiate between the elders and the ministers. In everyday life, it is the elders who rule the church, but in the meetings for edification, the ministers are the ones ordained by God to serve the church. It should be repeated that elders, as such, are appointed for church government, and not for meetings to edify the church. In 1 Corinthians 14, where meetings are in view, elders do not come in at all. But elders, in order to be effective, should also have the gift of a prophet, teacher, shepherd, or evangelist. Yet it must be remembered that when they minister in the meetings they do so, not in the capacity of elders, but as prophets, or teachers, or other ministers. It is in the latter capacity that they have part in the ministry. First Timothy 5:17 makes it clear that the usual sphere of their service is to rule, but some of them (not necessarily all) may also teach and minister.

So the ministry, the work, and the churches are quite different in function and sphere, but they are really coordinated and interrelated. Ephesians 4 speaks of the Body of Christ, but no discrimination is made there between the churches, the work, and the ministry. The saints of the churches, the apostles of the work, and the different ministers of the ministry are all considered in the light of, and in relation to, the Body of Christ. Because whether it be the local church, the ministry, or the work, all are in the Church. They are really one; so while it is necessary to distinguish between them in order to understand them better, we cannot really separate them. Those who are in the different spheres of the Church need to see the reality of the Body of Christ and act relatedly as a body. They should not, because of difference of responsibilities, settle themselves into watertight compartments. "The church, which is His Body," includes the churches, the ministry, and the work. The churches are the Body expressed locally, the ministry is the Body in function, and the work is the Body seeking increase. All three are different manifestations of the one Body, so they are all interdependent and interrelated.

None can move, or even exist, by itself. In fact, their relationship is so intimate and vital that none can be right itself without being rightly adjusted to the others. The church cannot go on without receiving the help of the ministry and without giving help to the work; the work cannot exist without the sympathy of the ministry and the backing of the church; and the ministry can only function when there is the church and the work.

This is most important. In the previous chapters we have sought to show their respective functions and spheres; now the danger is lest, failing to understand the spiritual nature of the things of God, we should not only try to distinguish between them, but sever them into separate units, thus losing the interrelatedness of the Body. However clear the distinction between them, we must remember that they are all in the Church. Consequently, they must move and act as one, for no matter what their specific functions and spheres, they are all in one Body.

So on the one hand, we differentiate between them in order to understand them, and on the other hand, we bear in mind that they are all related as a body. It is not that a few gifted men, recognizing their own ability, take it upon themselves to minister with the gifts they possess; nor that a few persons, conscious of call, form themselves into a working association; nor is it that a number of like-minded believers unite and call themselves a church. All must be on the ground of the Body.

The church is the life of the Body in miniature; the ministry is the functioning of the Body in service; the work is the reaching out of the Body in growth. Neither church, ministry, nor work can exist as a thing by itself. Each has to derive its existence from, find its place in, and work for the good of the Body. All three are from the Body, in the Body, and for the Body. If this principle of relatedness to the Body and interrelatedness among its members is not recognized, there can be no church, no ministry, and no work. The importance of this principle cannot be over-emphasized, for without it everything is man-made, not God-created. The basic principle of the ministry is the Body. The basic principle of the work is the Body.

The basic principle of the churches is the Body. The Body is the governing law of the life and work of the children of God today.

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