

The Work and the Churches

by Watchman Nee

The work of the apostles and the local church are distinct and separate, with the apostles responsible for the work and the elders responsible for the church.

Scripture: Acts 28:30, 1 Corinthians 12:28

Topics: "Apostolic Ministry", "Local Church Governance"

Description

Watchman Nee emphasizes the distinction between the work of apostles and the local churches, asserting that the apostolic ministry is foundational to the establishment of churches, but the two should not interfere with each other. He explains that while apostles are responsible for the work of spreading the gospel and founding churches, local churches are to be managed by elders who oversee the spiritual needs of their community. Nee warns against the confusion that arises when the responsibilities of the church and the work are mixed, leading to sectarianism and a loss of the local character of the church. He stresses that the ultimate goal of all apostolic work is to build up local churches, not to create separate entities or organizations. The sermon calls for clarity in understanding one's role, whether as an elder or an apostle, to ensure the health and growth of the church.

Transcript

THE APOSTLES AND THE CHURCHES

In regard to the universal Church, God first brought it into being, and thereafter set apostles to minister to it (1 Cor. 12:28); but in regard to the local churches the order was quite otherwise. The appointment of apostles preceded the founding of local churches. Our Lord first commissioned the twelve apostles, and thereafter the church in Jerusalem came into existence. The Holy Spirit first called two apostles-- Paul and Barnabas--to the work, and thereafter a number of churches sprang into being in different places. So it is clear that the apostolic ministry precedes the existence of the local churches, and consequently it is obvious that the work of apostles does not belong to the local churches.

As we have already observed, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me now Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." The service that followed the apostles' separation, which we generally refer to as their missionary campaigns, the Holy Spirit referred to as "the work." "The work" was the object of the Spirit's call, and all that was accomplished by Paul and his associates in the days and years that followed, all that for which they were responsible, was included in this one term, "the work." (The term "the work" is used in a specific sense in this book, and relates to all that is included in the missionary efforts of

the apostles.)

Since churches are the result of the work, they cannot possibly include it. If we are to understand the mind of God concerning His work, then we must differentiate clearly between the work and the churches. These two are quite distinct in Scripture, and we must avoid confusing them; otherwise we shall make serious mistakes, and the outworking of God's purposes will be hindered. The word "churches" appears frequently in Scripture, so it has been easy for us to arrive at a clear understanding of its meaning and content, but the word "work" is not often used in the specific sense in which it is employed here, with the result that we have paid little heed to it. But the Spirit has used the expression in an inclusive way to cover all that related to the purpose of the apostolic call. Let us then abide by the term which the Spirit has chosen to employ.

It has been repeated again and again, but let us point it out once again, that the churches are local, and nothing outside the locality must interfere with them, nor must they interfere with anything beyond that sphere. Church affairs are to be managed by local men who, on account of their comparative spiritual maturity, have been appointed to be elders. As the work of the apostles is to preach the gospel and found churches, not to take responsibility in the churches already established, their office is not a church office. If they go to work in a place where no church exists, then they should seek to found one by the proclamation of the gospel; but if one exists already, then their work must be distinct from it. In the will of God "the church" and "the work" follow two distinct lines.

The work belongs to the apostles, while the churches belong to the local believers. The apostles are responsible for the work in any place, and the church is responsible for all the children of God there. In the matter of church fellowship the apostles regard themselves as the brethren of all believers in the city, but in the matter of work, they regard themselves as its personnel, and maintain a distinction between themselves and the church. As members of the Body, they meet for mutual edification with all their fellow members in the locality; but as ministering members of the Body, their specific ministry constitutes them a group of workers apart from the church. It is wrong for the apostles to interfere with the affairs of the church, but it is equally wrong for the church to interfere with the affairs of the work. The apostles manage the work; the elders manage the church. It follows then that we must be clear about our call. Has God called us to be elders, or to be apostles? If elders, then our responsibility is confined to local affairs; if apostles, then our responsibility is extra-local. If elders, then our sphere is the church; if apostles, then our sphere lies beyond the church, in the work.

The reason God called apostles and entrusted the work to them is that He wished to preserve the local character of the church. If any church exercises control over work in another locality, it at once becomes extra-local, and thereby loses its specific characteristic as a church. The responsibility of the work in different places is committed to apostles, whose sphere extends beyond the locality. The responsibility of the church is committed to elders, whose sphere is confined to the locality. An Ephesian elder is an elder in Ephesus, but he ceases to be an elder when he comes to Philippi, and vice versa. Eldership is limited to locality. When Paul was at Miletus, he wished to see the representative members of the church in Ephesus, so he sent for the Ephesian elders. But no request was sent to the Ephesian apostle, for the simple reason that there was none. The apostles belong to different places, not to one place alone, whereas the sphere of the elders is strictly local, for which reason they take no official responsibility beyond the place in which they live. Whenever the church tries to control the work, the church loses its local character. Whenever an apostle tries to control a church, he loses his extra-local character. Much confusion has arisen because the divine line of demarcation between the churches and the work has been

lost sight of.

RESPONSIBILITY -- SPIRITUAL AND OFFICIAL

Just as the apostles have spiritual but no official responsibility regarding the church, so the elders, and the whole church, have spiritual but no official responsibility regarding the work. It is commendable if a local church seeks to help in the work; but it is under no official obligation to do so. If the members of the church are spiritual, they cannot but regard the work of God as their work, in which case they will count it a joy to help in any way. They will recognize that, while the official responsibility for the work rests on the apostles, the spiritual responsibility is shared by all the children of God, and consequently by them. There is a vast difference between spiritual and official responsibility. In the matter of official responsibility there are certain prescribed duties, and one is in the wrong if one fails to perform them. But in the matter of spiritual responsibility there are no legal obligations. Therefore, any neglect of responsibility does not register as an official shortcoming, but it does register as a low spiritual state. From an official point of view, the responsibility of the work rests upon the apostles. If they lack the needed help, they cannot demand it; but if the church is spiritual, its members will see the meaning of the Body and will gladly assist in the work and give towards it. If the church fails in spiritual responsibility, the apostles may have difficulties which they should not have, and the church will suffer spiritually. On the other hand, the responsibility of the church rests officially upon the elders; therefore, the apostles should not take upon themselves to do anything directly there. They may and should assist the church by their counsel and exhortations. If the local believers are spiritual, they will willingly receive such help; but should they be unspiritual, and in consequence reject the help the apostles offer, their failure is spiritual and not official, and the apostles have no option but to leave them to their own resources. The church does not come within the sphere of the work and is consequently outside the sphere of their authority. Again let us repeat, the churches are local, intensely local; the work is extra-local, and always extra-local.

REPRESENTATIVES OF THE MINISTRY OF THE BODY -- INDIVIDUALS, NOT CHURCHES

There is a definite divine reason for the fact that the work is entrusted to individual apostles and not to local churches; but before we enter into that, let us examine the fundamental difference between the activities of a church as a body and the activities of a brother as an individual. It may be all right for a brother (or for several brothers) to go into business, but it would be all wrong for a church to do so. It might be quite in order for one or more brothers to open a restaurant or a hotel, but that would not be in order for a church. What may be perfectly permissible in the case of brothers, as individuals, is not necessarily permissible in the case of a church, as a company. The business of the churches consists in the mutual care of their various members, such as the conduct of meetings for breaking of bread, for the exercise of spiritual gifts, for the study of the Word, for prayer, for fellowship, and for gospel preaching. The work is beyond the sphere of any church as a corporate body; it is the responsibility of individuals, though not of individuals as such.

There is no scriptural precedent for such work being undertaken by a church, as, for instance, hospitals, or schools, or even something on a more definitely spiritual plane such as foreign missions. It is perfectly in order for one or more members of a church to run a hospital, or a school, or to be responsible for mission work, but not for any church as a whole. A church exists for the purpose of mutual help in one place, not for the purpose of bearing the responsibility of work in different places. According to God's Word, all the work is the personal concern of individual brothers called and commissioned by God, as members of the Body, and not the concern of any church as a body. The responsibility of the work is always borne by one

or more individuals.

The important point to note is that the Body of Christ in its ministry aspect is not represented by local churches, but by individuals who are the gifts given by God to His Church. A local church has not been chosen by God to represent the Body where ministry is in view. When God wants any representatives of the Body to express its ministry, He chooses certain individuals, who are the functioning members, to represent that Body. The whole thing is clear in the last part of 1 Corinthians 12.

It was never the thought of God that His work should be done on any other basis than that of the Body, because it is actually the natural functioning of the Body of Christ. It is the activity, under the direction of the Head, of those members who possess special faculties. We have already pointed out that the local church represents the Body in its life aspect, and the functioning members represent the Body in its ministry aspect. The local church is called to manifest not so much the service, as the life of the Body, while the apostles, prophets, and teachers, as such, are called to manifest not so much the life, as the service of the Body. That is the reason God did not entrust the work to any local church as a body, but to individuals. But it is the latter, not the former, who represent the Body, if the latter are functioning members of the Body.

Therefore, we find that the two apostles who went out from Antioch were not sent forth to the work by the whole church but by several ministers in the church, because in the matter of service and work it is the latter, not the former, who represent the Body. So the work is the responsibility of individuals who are called and commissioned by God, and not the responsibility of the whole church.

But, let it be clearly understood, by individuals we do not mean individuals as individuals, but as functioning members representing the Body. God has never sanctioned that anyone take up an individualistic line in His work. Free-lancing, without due coordination with other members of the Body, has never been a divine manner of work. This cannot be too strongly emphasized; nor can it be too strongly emphasized that in His work God uses individuals to represent the Body, not local churches. Therefore, while the work is the responsibility of individuals, it is not the business of just any individual who cares to take it up, but only of such as are called and sent forth by God, and are equipped with spiritual gifts for the task. Only those who represent the ministry of the Body can bear the official responsibility of the work. The work is undertaken by individuals, but only by such as represent the Body in its ministry aspect, for they, not the entire church, are responsible for it. It is not individuals, as individuals, that undertake the work, but individuals as representing the Body of Christ.

If our work is that of an apostle, it must be clearly distinguished from the local church. It may seem quite unimportant to some that any distinction be made between the work and the church. They may think it of no consequence that the responsibility of the work be in the hands of individual members, not the whole church, and that the apostles be responsible only for the work, not for the church; but the principle is a scriptural principle, and its outworking is of great importance and has tremendous effects, as we shall presently see.

"HIS OWN RENTED DWELLING"

The church in Rome is a good illustration of the foregoing. Before Paul visited Rome, he had written to the church there expressing an intense desire to see them (Rom. 1:10-11). From his letter it is obvious that a church had been established in that city prior to his arrival. When he actually reached Rome, the church there did not hand over local responsibility to him, nor did they say (as a church today probably would),

"Now that an apostle has come into our midst, he must take over the responsibility and be our pastor." Instead, we find this amazing record in the Word: "And he remained two whole years in his own rented dwelling and welcomed all those who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the things concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness, unhindered" (Acts 28:30-31). Why did Paul live in "his own rented dwelling" and preach and teach from there and not from the already existing church? Some may suggest that because he was a prisoner he would not have been allowed to take meetings in the church; but there would have been little difference between taking meetings in the church and in the house. If he was granted permission to rent a house and preach and teach there, why should he have been refused permission to preach and teach in connection with the church?

Moreover, we need to remember that the Word does not state the reason Paul rented a house and preached and taught there; it only mentions the fact. The fact is that he did rent a house and did preach and teach there, and that fact is enough for us. It is enough for our guidance. Further, God has made it clear that he was under no necessity to do so. No pressure whatever was brought to bear upon him, for he acted "with all boldness unhindered."

Then what is the meaning of the rented house? We must remember the divine economy of words in Scripture, and we must realize that neither the occurrence, nor the record of it, was accidental. There is no room for chance happenings or unimportant records in God's Word. All that is written there is written for our learning, and even a seemingly casual remark may enfold a precious lesson. Moreover, this book is the book of the Acts of the Apostles, who moved under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, so the record in question is also one of the acts of the apostles, and is therefore not a chance happening, but an act under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Here in two short sentences we have an important principle, namely, that the apostolic work and the local church are quite distinct. A church had already been established in Rome; therefore, the members must have had at least one meeting place, but they did not request that Paul take control of the local church, nor did they make their place of meeting Paul's center of work. Paul had his own work in his own rented house quite apart from the church, and apart from their meeting place, and he did not take over the responsibility of the local church affairs.

Every apostle must learn to live in "his own rented dwelling" and work with that as his center, leaving the responsibility of the local church to the local brethren.¹ The work of God belongs to the workers, but the church of God belongs to the locality. Any work in a given place is only temporary, but any church in a given place is always permanent. The work is movable; the church is stationary. When God indicates that an apostle should move, his work moves with him, but the church remains. When Paul thought of leaving Corinth, the Lord showed him He had further ministry for him in the city, so Paul remained for eighteen months -- not permanently. When Paul left Corinth, his work left, but the church in Corinth continued, although the fruits of his work were left in the church. A church should not be influenced by the movements of the workers. Whether they are present or absent, the church should move steadily forward. Every one of God's workmen must have a clean-cut line of demarcation between his work and the church in the place of his labors.

The work of the apostles and the work of the local church run parallel; they do not converge. When the apostles are working in any place, their work goes on side by side with the work of the church. The two never coincide, nor can the one ever be a substitute for the other. On leaving a place, an apostle should hand over all the fruit of his work to the local church. It is not God's will that the work of an apostle should take the place of the work of the church, or be in any wise identified with it.

The principle of Paul living in his own rented house shows clearly that the work of the church is unaffected by the presence or absence of an apostle. After Paul's arrival in Rome, the work of the church went on as before, independently of him. Since it was dependent on him neither for its origin nor its continuance, it would be unaffected by his departure.

Work is work, and church is church, and these two lines never converge, but keep running parallel one to the other.

Suppose we go to Kweiyang to work; what should be our procedure? On arrival in Kweiyang we either live in an inn, or rent a room, and we begin to preach the gospel. When men are saved, what shall we do? We must encourage them to read the Word, to pray, to give, to witness, and to assemble for fellowship and ministry. One of the tragic mistakes of the past hundred years of foreign missions in China (God be merciful to me if I say anything amiss!) is that after a worker led men to Christ, he prepared a place and invited them to come there for meetings, instead of encouraging them to assemble by themselves. Efforts have been made to encourage the young believers to read the Word themselves, pray by themselves, witness themselves, but never to meet by themselves. Workers never think of reading, praying, and witnessing for them, but they do not see any harm in arranging meetings for them. We need to show the new converts that such duties as reading, praying, witnessing, giving, and assembling together are the minimum requirement of Christians.

We should teach them to have their own meetings in their own meeting place. Let us say to them, "Just as we cannot read the Word, or pray, or witness for you, so we cannot take the responsibility of preparing a meeting place for you and leading your meetings. You must seek out suitable premises and conduct your own meetings. Your meetings are your responsibility, and a regular assembling of yourselves is one of your chief duties and privileges."

Many workers regard their meetings and the meetings of the church as one and the same thing, but they are not. (See chapter nine.) Therefore, as soon as a few believers are saved, we must instruct them to take full responsibility for their private reading, prayer, and witness, and also for the public meetings of the church.

As for ourselves, while we go on working and keep our work distinct from the work of the church, we must go and have fellowship with the believers in their various local gatherings. We must go and break bread with them, join with them in the exercise of spiritual gifts, and take part in their prayer meetings. When there is no church in the place to which God has sent us, we are only workers there, but as soon as there is a local church, we are brothers as well as workers. In our capacity as workers we can take no responsibility in the local church, but in our capacity as local brothers we go and meet with all the members of the church as their fellow members.

As soon as there is a local church in the place of our labors, we automatically become members. Here is the chief point to observe in the relationship between the church and the work-- the worker must leave the believers to initiate and conduct their own meetings in their own meeting place, and then he must go to them and take part in their meetings, not ask them to come to him and take part in his meetings. Otherwise, we shall become settlers in one place and shall change our office from apostle to pastor; then when we eventually leave, we shall have to find a successor to carry out the church work. If we keep "church" and "work" parallel and do not let the two lines converge, we shall find that no adjustment will be needed in the church when we depart, for it will not have lost a "pastor," but only a brother. Unless we

differentiate clearly in our own minds between church and work, we shall mix the work with the church and the church with the work; there will be confusion in both directions, and the growth both of the church and the work will be arrested.

"Self-government, self-support, and self-propagation" has been the slogan of many workers for a number of years now.

The need to deal with these matters has arisen because of the confusion between the church and the work. In a mission, when people are saved, then the missionaries prepare a hall for them, arrange for prayer meetings and Bible classes, and some of them go as far as to manage the business and spiritual affairs of the church as well. The mission does the work of the local church! Therefore, it is not surprising that in the process of time, problems arise in connection with self-government, self-support, and self-propagation. In the very nature of things, such problems would never have come up for consideration if the principles shown us in God's Word had been adhered to from the very beginning.

Anyone who cares enough to be a Christian ought to be taught from the outset what the implications are. Believers must pray themselves, study the Word themselves, and assemble themselves, not merely go to a meeting place prepared by others and sit down and listen to others preach. Going to a mission compound or a mission hall to hear the Word is not scriptural assembling, because it is in the hands of a missionary, or of his mission, not in the hands of the local church. It is a mixture of work and church. If from the outset Christians learned to gather together according to the Scriptures, many problems would be avoided.

THE RESULTS OF THE WORK

When a servant of God reaches a new place, his first business must be to found a local church, unless there is one already in existence, in which case his one concern must be to help the church. The one aim of the work in any place is the building up of the church in that place. All the fruit of a worker's labors must go to the increase of the church. The work in any place exists for the church alone, not for itself. The apostle's goal is to build up the church, not to build up his work or any group of people that may have sent him out.

Wherein lies the failure of missions today? They keep the results of their work in their own hands. In other words, they have reckoned their converts as members of their mission, or of their mission church, instead of building them into, or handing them over, to the local churches. The result is that the mission extends all the while and becomes quite an imposing organization, but local churches are scarcely to be found. And because there are no local churches, the mission has to send workers to different places as "pastors" of the various companies of Christians. So church is not church, and work is not work, but both are a medley of the two. There seems to be no scriptural warrant for forming companies of workers into missions; nevertheless, to regard a mission as an apostolic company is not definitely unscriptural, but for missions to enlarge their own organization instead of establishing local churches is distinctly so.

TWO LINES OF WORK

An apostle should go and work in a certain place if the local church invites him, or if he himself has received a revelation from the Lord to work there. In the latter case, if there is a church in the place, he can write notifying them of his coming, just as Paul notified the churches in Corinth and in Rome. These are the two lines which regulate the work of an apostle -- he must either have a direct revelation of God's will,

or an indirect revelation through the invitation of a church.

Wherever an apostle goes, he must learn to bear his own responsibility, having his own rented dwelling. It may be all right to work in a place, living as the guest of the local church, but it would not be right to impose upon them by taking advantage of their hospitality over an extended period. If a worker expects to stay for any length of time in one place, then he must have his own center of work, and he must not only bear his own personal responsibilities, but also all responsibilities in connection with the work. A local church must bear entire responsibility for its own work, and so must the worker for his. The church as such must not be involved in any financial outlay in connection with the work; the worker alone is liable for all expenses incurred, and he must learn from the very outset of his ministry to look to the Lord for the supply of his needs. Of course, if the church is spiritual, its members will recognize their spiritual responsibility, and will be willing to assist in material ways so that the work of God may go forward, but the worker should take nothing for granted and should bear the entire financial burden, so that it may be manifest that the church and the work are absolutely distinct.

When an apostle comes to a place where a local church already exists, he must never forget that no church authority rests with him. Should he desire to work in a place where the local church does not wish to have him, then all he can do is to pass on to some other part. The church has full authority either to receive or reject a worker. Even should the worker in question have been used of God to found the very church that rejects him, he can claim no authority in the church on that account.

Should he know unmistakably that God has led him to work in that place, yet the local church refuse to welcome him, if they persist in their attitude, then he must obey the command of God and go and work there despite them. But he must not gather believers around him, nor must he on any account form a separate church. There can only be one church in one place. If he forms a separate company of believers where a local church already exists, he will be forming a sect and not a church. Churches are founded on the ground of locality, not on the ground of receiving a certain apostle. Even if the local church refused to receive him, and his work had to be done without its sympathy and cooperation, or even despite its opposition, still all the results of his labors must be for their benefit. Despite its attitude toward the apostle personally, all the fruit of his labors must be contributed to that church. The sole aim of all work for God is the increase and up-building of the local churches. If they welcome the worker, the result of his labors goes to them; if they reject him, it goes to them just the same.

We require deeper spiritual experience and clearer spiritual light if we are to be workers acceptable to God and to His Church. If we wish to overcome difficulties, we must learn to overcome by spirituality, not by official authority. If we are spiritual, we shall submit to the authority of the local churches. It is lack of submission on the part of God's servants that is responsible for the forming of numerous sects. Many so-called churches have been established because workers have been rejected by the churches and have gathered groups of people around them, who have supported them and the doctrines they taught. Such a procedure is sectarian.

If we are truly led of God, surely we can trust God to open doors for us. If a church receives us, let us praise Him; if not, let us look confidently to Him to unlock closed doors. Many servants of God trust Him to open up spiritual truths to them, but they cannot trust Him to open doors for the reception of those truths. They have faith to believe God will give them light, but they have no faith to believe that He will also supply the keys to open human hearts to the light He has given. So they resort to carnal methods, and the consequence is much division among the children of God. If God Himself does not remove the obstacles

in our circumstances, then we must quietly remain where we are, and not have recourse to natural means, which will assuredly work havoc in the Church of God.

THE SPECIFIC MINISTRIES OF THE WORD

All God's servants are engaged in the ministry of building up the Body of Christ, but it does not follow that, because all are in the ministry of the Word, all ministries are the same. Everyone has a different line of ministry. Time and again God has raised up some new witness, or group of witnesses, giving them fresh light from His Word, so that they could bear a special testimony for Him in the particular time and circumstances in which they live. All such ministry is new and specific and is of great value to the Church; but we must bear it well in mind that if God commits a specific ministry to any man relating to certain truths, he must not make his particular ministry, or his particular line of truth, the basis of a new

"church." No servant of God should cherish the ambition that his truth be accepted as the truth. If doors are closed to it, let him wait patiently upon God who gave it until He opens doors for its reception. No separate "church" must be formed to bear a separate testimony. The work of God does not sanction the establishment of a church for the propagation of any particular line of teaching. It knows only one kind of church--the local church; not a sectarian church, but a New Testament church.

Let us lay it to heart that our work is for our ministry and our ministry is for the churches. No church should be under a specific ministry, but all ministries should be under the church. What havoc has been wrought in the Church because so many of her ministers have sought to bring the churches under their ministry, rather than by their ministry serve the churches. As soon as the churches are brought under any ministry, they cease to be local and become sectarian.

When a specific ministry has been raised up of God to meet a specific need in His Church, what should be the attitude of the minister? Whenever a new truth is proclaimed, it will have new followers. The worker to whom God has given fresh light upon His truth should encourage all who receive that truth to swell the ranks of the local church, not to range themselves around him. Otherwise, the churches will be made to serve the ministry, not the ministry the churches, and the "churches" established will be ministerial "churches," not local ones. The sphere of a church is not the sphere of any ministry, but the sphere of the locality. Wherever ministry is made the occasion for the forming of a church, there you have the beginning of a new denomination. From the study of Church history we can see that almost all new ministries have led to new followings, and new followings have resulted in new organizations. Thus ministerial "churches" have been established and denominations multiplied.

If the Lord delays His coming and His servants remain true to Him, He will certainly raise up new ministries in the Word.

He will open up special truths to meet the specific needs of His children. Some of the hearers will question the truths, others reject them, and others condemn, while there will be those who gladly respond. What should the attitude of God's servants be? They must be fully persuaded in their own minds that there can only be one church in one place, and that all truth is for the enrichment of that church. If it receives the truths God's ministers proclaim, let them praise Him; if not, let them praise Him still. No thought must be entertained of forming a separate "church" comprising those believers who support the special doctrines emphasized. If in the local church a number of people receive their teaching, then they must still remain there. No divisive work must be done in the local church. Those who receive the truth may use their spiritual teaching and spiritual power to help their fellow members, but they must not use any divisive

methods to support the truth they have embraced. If we always bear in mind that the churches of God are only formed on the basis of locality, much division among the children of God will be avoided.

Should God entrust us with a special ministry and lead us to a place where no church exists, our first duty is to establish one in the locality, and then contribute our ministry to it. We can establish local churches and contribute our ministry to such churches, but we dare not establish ministerial churches.

Let me illustrate the relation between various ministries and various local churches. One man is a florist, another a grocer.

The most obvious way for them to extend their business is to establish branches in various districts. The florist opens branch shops to sell flowers, and the grocer opens branch shops to sell groceries. This is just like the various ministers trying to establish "churches" according to their ministry. God's plan for His Church is on quite a different line. It is not that the grocer and the florist each seek to open as many branches as they possibly can in order to sell their respective commodities, but that the grocer or the florist, arriving in any place, opens a department store, and having duly established that, he contributes his goods to it, and other tradesmen coming along contribute their wares to the same store. A department store does not just deal in one line of goods; it has a varied stock. The thought of God is not that we should open branch florist shops or branch grocery stores, or stores that specialize in other lines, but department stores. His plan is that His servants should just establish a local church, and then contribute their different ministries to that church. The church is not controlled by one ministry but served by all the ministries. If any company of God's people are open to receive one truth only, then they are a sect.

As apostles our first concern on arrival in a place which has no church is to found one there. As soon as it has been formed, we should seek to serve it with whatever ministry the Lord has entrusted to us, and then leave it. We dare to exercise our ministry faithfully, but having done so, we dare to leave the church open to other ministry. This should be the attitude of all God's workmen. We should never cherish the hope that only "our" teaching will be accepted by any church.

There must be no thought of dominating a church by our personality or by our ministry; the field must be left clear for all God's servants. There is no need to build a wall of protection around "our" particular "flock" to secure them against the teachings of others. If we do so, we are working along popish lines. We can safely trust God to protect our ministry, and we must remember that for "the perfecting of the saints" the varied ministries of all God's faithful servants are necessary.

Local responsibility is with the elders; they must watch the interests of the flock in the matter of ministries.

INSTITUTIONS OF FAITH

It must not be inferred from the foregoing that God has no other workmen but apostles and the various ministers of the Word. Those who work in the ministry of the Word are only a section of God's servants. The work is not the only work.

God has many servants who are bearing the burden of various works of faith, such as schools, orphanages, and hospitals.

Looked at superficially, their work does not seem as spiritual as the work of the apostles or ministers we have just referred to, but in reality it is. Although such faith workers do not go forth as apostles, or teach the Word like the special ministers, yet they are used just as definitely as the others to strengthen the

Church of God.

George Müller's orphanage is just such a faith work. It has resulted in the salvation of many souls. The question arises, where should the fruits of such a work go? Not into an orphanage "church," but into the local church. A work such as that is not a unit sufficiently large to form a church. It is the city which is a church unit, not an institution. No matter how prosperous a work of faith may be, and no matter how many souls may be saved through it, no church can be formed on such a basis; for should there be various workers in one city engaged in various kinds of work, then there would be as many churches as there were such institutions. The boundary of a church is a city, not any institution in a city.

Several years ago I was in Tsinan. Some brothers in Cheloo University asked me if I thought it time for them to begin a meeting for the breaking of bread. I asked, "Do you represent Cheloo University or Tsinan city?" They answered, "Cheloo."

"Then I do not think it is right," I said. Of course, they wanted to know why, so I explained: "The Word of God sanctions the forming of a church in Tsinan, but not in Cheloo. The sphere of Cheloo is too narrow to justify the existence of a separate church. The standard scriptural unit for the forming of a church is a city, not a university."

The fruits resulting from various institutions of faith must not be retained by such institutions. All must be handed over to the local church. Workers must not argue that because they have been the means of salvation to certain souls, therefore they have a special claim upon them and special responsibility for them, and consequently withhold them from uniting with their fellow believers in the locality. Even though there may be regular prayers, and preaching, and a variety of meetings in connection with a Christian institution, those can never serve as a substitute for church fellowship, and no such institution, however spiritual, can be regarded as a church, since it is not founded on the divinely appointed basis of locality. All Christians engaged in efforts of this kind must differentiate clearly between church and work, and they must realize that any sphere narrower than a locality does not justify the forming of a separate church. They dare not pride themselves on their successful work and think it will serve well as a church, but they must humbly join in fellowship with all the other members of the Body of Christ in the place where they live.

All the various God-given ministries have one aim, the establishing of local churches. In the thought of God only one company of people exists, and all His designs of grace center in that one company -- His Church. The work is not a goal in itself; it is only a means to an end. If we regard our work as an end, then our purpose is at variance with God's, for His end is the Church. What we regard as an end in itself is only the means to His end.

There are three things which we must bear clearly in mind. (1) The work and other works are the special concern of the workers, not of the churches, and the sphere of any work is not wide enough to justify its being regarded as a church. (2) All workers must be humble enough to take the place of brothers in the local church. In the sphere of their work they hold the position of God's servants, but in the sphere of the church they are only brethren. In the church there are only children of God; therefore, none of its members are "workers," all are brethren. (3) The goal of all work is the establishment of local churches. If we make our work the basis of a separate unit of God's people, then we are building up a sect, not a church.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/watchman-nee/the-work-and-the-churches/>

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