

PREFACE TO THE CHINESE EDITION

In recent years, God has raised up many brothers and sisters in various places. As a result of seeing the truth concerning the church, they have gathered together to meet in the Lord's name. They have left human organizations and things that are apart from the Bible, and they have come together to serve the Lord with those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. For this, we have to thank the Lord.

Although these scattered brothers who are meeting in the Lord's name have seen much concerning human organizations, they do not have, as yet, a deep enough understanding of the Body of Christ. Although they have given up things that should not be in the church, they have not fully lived out the proper living of the Body of Christ. They have dealt with negative things in a thorough way, but they are not thorough with the positive things yet.

Presently, the urgent need of all those who meet in the Lord's name is the truth concerning the practical living of the Body of Christ on earth. The purpose of the publication of this book, *The Assembly Life*, is to meet this need.

This book is a record of a Bible study conducted by Brother Watchman Nee with the local brothers who were meeting in Shanghai after the Third Overcomer Conference in January of this year (together with some out-of-town brothers who stayed behind after the conference). What is covered mainly deals with the practical aspect of our living. The questions and answers are especially appropriate and useful.

The book is divided into four chapters. The first chapter is on the authority in the church. It can be considered as a chapter on the administration of the church. It shows us that God's church is not without organization on earth; it has organization, yet its organization is unlike that of human organizations today. In the church of God, there is no individual freedom and no possibility of independent movement. If ever an organization is firm and strict, it must be the church. God does not want His children to move freely on earth; He rules over His church through the authority He establishes in the church. We should leave human organizations, but at the same time, we should submit to the God-appointed authority. It is right for us to depart from human organizations, but it is wrong for us to overturn the authority that God has established. Yet it is very difficult for us to keep our position and submit to authority. Many people can submit to God, but they cannot submit to the God-appointed authority. However, only those who can submit to the authority appointed by God can submit to God. Whoever does not remain in his position is unlawful, and whoever does not submit to authority is lawless.

The second chapter is on the practice of fellowship. This chapter shows us that there is only one fellowship in the Body of Christ. This matter is very much

neglected by the churches today. Many people think that as long as they leave the improper fellowship, the denominations, they have been perfected. Yet if a man only departs from improper things but does not acquire proper things, he has not been perfected. Moreover, unless we return to the proper and unique fellowship of the Body of Christ, all of our fellowship is improper, and our leaving of the denominations merely adds more improper fellowship. All of our fellowship must be the fellowship of the Body of Christ rather than only some local fellowship. We must be able to link up with all the assemblies in the whole world who are meeting in the name of the Lord, instead of practicing a fellowship that is merely bound by a locality. It is true that church affairs should be local, but the fellowship of the church should not be simply local. The fellowship of the church is not local but universal. There should not only be fellowship between individuals, but there should also be fellowship among assemblies.

The third chapter is on the way to meet. This chapter can be considered as a kind of spiritual home education. It shows us the common knowledge a brother or a sister should have concerning various kinds of meetings in a local assembly. Although spiritual things cannot be taught, there must be proper teachings before there can be a proper living. A proper living comes out of proper teachings.

The fourth chapter is on the boundary of a local assembly. This chapter deals with the delineation of the boundary of a local assembly. The Bible shows us that God has appointed the city as the unit of a church. The boundary of a local church is determined by the boundary of the city to which it belongs. This God-ordained way maintains the balance in the fellowship of the assemblies in the various places, and it avoids much trouble and confusion. We should not randomly choose from among the few assemblies around us and freely meet there. Rather, we should decide on the place to meet based on the locality in which we belong. If we are in one city, we should not meet with an assembly in another city. Even if the place of meeting in the other city is closer than the place of meeting in our own city, we should still meet in our own city, rather than the other city. If this is not our practice, the fellowship among all the assemblies will not be balanced, and confusion will result. God does not want us to have freedom of movement. Even in the matter of choosing where to meet, God does not allow us to have a fleshly preference and choice.

May God bless this book so that it becomes the light of life to God's children everywhere, not ordinances in letters. "To Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations forever and ever. Amen."

Witness Lee

Shanghai

September 10, 1934

CHAPTER ONE

AUTHORITY IN THE CHURCH

In order to understand authority in the church, we must first understand what authority is. Otherwise, we will not understand authority in the church.

What is authority? In the whole universe, nothing is harder to understand than authority. Two things are very difficult to explain in the Bible: glory and authority. Many people can understand holiness, righteousness, and patience; they may comprehend these matters a little. But what is God's glory, and what is God's authority? Man cannot understand them and explain them. God's glory is related to God Himself, while God's authority is related to His government. God Himself is glorious, while His government is executed through His authority. God's authority was the principle by which He organized the universe. He rules the universe through authority. (Today, we will only mention the matter of authority in brief. We will wait for another day to discuss the subject in detail.) How did God create the heavens and the earth? He created by His authority. How did God restore this world? He restored by His authority also. On the first day when God created light, He did not gather all of the electricity together and make light; He only gave a command and said, "Let there be light," and there was light. The second day God said, "Let there be the firmament," and there was the firmament. God commanded with His word, and He acted according to His authority. He did not act according to His power or His ways. His word signifies His command, which represents His authority. Can you see that God only exercised His authority? God created the universe with His authority, and He rules the universe with His authority. Both the beginning of the universe and the maintenance of the universe are the result of God's authority.

In the beginning, after the universe was created, God appointed a cherubim as the archangel to rule over everything. God was over everything, and He ruled over the spirit-endowed animals and over all things through the archangel, the cherubim. Sin is lawlessness, and lawlessness is just the overthrowing of God's authority. Lawlessness was the reason the archangel fell and became Satan and also the reason sin entered the universe. The archangel attempted to overturn God's authority because he desired to uplift himself to become equal with God. Sin entered the world because Eve would not submit to Adam. She acted without Adam's command and ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Although the world is filled with sin today, authority is still the principle of God's government. In many things, we can see God's appointed authority. For example, wives should submit to their husbands, servants to their masters, students to their

teachers, citizens to the officers, and subordinates to their superiors. All of this is ordained by God. God desires that man submit to authority because the authorities are not only appointed by God, but they also represent God. This is why Romans clearly says that there is no authority except God. Therefore, no Christian student should boycott classes, no Christian worker should strike, no Christian children should dishonor their parents, and no Christian citizen should engage in a revolution. If anyone does these things, he is not just overturning those he directly opposes, he is overturning God's authority. God created the universe with His authority, and He maintains the universe with His authority. What is sin? It is lawlessness—refusing to submit to authority. "Sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). Both Satan and Adam overturned God's authority; by this both sinned. Whoever does not recognize authority and submit to authority is a lawless one, and he has sinned.

Many believers have never realized such a wonderful thing as authority. Yet if a man wants to be a good believer, he has to know what authority is. Authority represents God. If one traces authority to its ultimate source, he will see that authority is just God. Therefore, a Christian must not only submit to the head of a nation or to all its ministers, but he must submit even to a policeman on the street because the latter has authority. He represents not only the government, but God as well. You cannot despise him just because he earns a few dollars a month. Authority is something that issues from God. The Bible is very strict about this matter. Paul, Peter, and Jude all said that we should not revile those in high position. Therefore, in our conversation, we cannot accuse or criticize the head of our government. It is difficult for a Christian to be an editor of a newspaper because one can hardly avoid criticizing the superiors in political commentary. The book of Jude records the incident of Michael arguing with the devil over the body of Moses. Michael dared not revile Satan. He would only say, "The Lord rebuke you," because he was once the subordinate of Satan. There was a time when Michael was under his authority. Therefore, Michael only said, "The Lord rebuke you." He would not speak on his own; he only invoked an authority higher than Satan's—God's authority. He knew what authority was. Therefore, he dared not revile Satan himself.

When our Lord was on earth, He was also fully under authority. During His youth, He was under the authority of His parents, and He kept all the ordinances. He was the Creator. Yet He was limited by every one of man's limitations. He told His mother, "Did you not know that I must be in the things of My Father?" (Luke 2:49). If we were there, we would not have gone home with our parents. But the Lord was different; He went back with them. When He began to work, He was under the authority of the government. During His trial, He was still under the authority of the government. He did not revile the government; rather, He

allowed it to do whatever it wanted to do to Him. We can see that no one has ever been as submissive to authority as our Lord.

Once when Paul was judged and stood before the court, he willingly submitted to the authority there. When the high priest's accusations became too much, Paul said, "God is going to strike you, you whitewashed wall" (Acts 23:3). When the others rebuked him for reviling God's high priest, Paul became quiet and allowed them to accuse him. According to the Bible, nothing is greater and more important than the matter of authority.

The other side of authority is submission. Therefore, the Bible mentions authority, on the one hand, and submission, on the other hand. The Bible also pays considerable attention to the matter of submission. Submission and authority are related one to the other. If a man submits, he comes under God's authority. Otherwise, he overturns God's authority.

In the church God has also appointed His authority, and we should submit to this authority. In the world, in the community, and in our homes, we should submit to authority. God has ordained us to do one thing, which is to submit to authority. We have to lay hold of this one point: whoever wants to overturn any authority overturns God. Do not think that we can submit to God and, at the same time, disobey our parents, husbands, superiors, headmasters, principals, or other men with authority. There is no such thing. If we cannot submit to God's appointed authority on earth, we can never submit to God. In the same way, those who cannot submit to authority in the church cannot submit to God.

I am afraid that many brothers and sisters have come to meet with us for different reasons. Some have come for the purpose of practicing mutual love and mutual care. This, of course, is very good. But we have to realize that we are not without authority among us. There is authority among us, and we ought to submit to authority. Christians often think that once they leave the denominations, they can act as they please. They think that we are all the same and that no one can rebuke anyone else. They think that they can be lawless Christians. Actually, we have to realize that if we leave the denominations just because we want to be free from any kind of control or domination, this kind of presumptuous leaving of the denominations is a big mistake. Those who come to meet with us have to know that we are more bound by authority.

There are three reasons that a man leaves a denomination: (1) He is disappointed in the denominations. For example, he may expect to become a pastor. However, when his wish is not fulfilled, he disagrees and leaves. (2) He does not have freedom in the denominations. He feels that he is limited and controlled by men, and he thinks that by leaving the denominations, he can be a free evangelist. He will not have to take a salary and be controlled by men, and he can act according to his own wish. Actually, before God there is no such thing as a free evangelist.

Today, we only have the Body life. We are restricted by the church and do not have any freedom of our own. (3) He sees the divisiveness in the denominations and that divisions are of the flesh. *At the same time*, he may see the Body of Christ and realize that everything he does has to be limited by the brothers and that he should learn to be a member in the Body. (Yet many people do not see the Body. They have merely left a big denomination and become a small denomination in themselves. They have not seen that they should be restricted among the brothers and sisters.)

Of the three kinds of people mentioned above, only the third kind is right in God's eyes. God's goal is to have the Body life and to take away all independent movement. God has His authority in the church, and He desires to manifest His authority in the church. Therefore, every member should learn to submit to God's authority and be restricted by the other members. Therefore, on the negative side, every brother should see how wrong denominationalism is, but on the positive side, he should see that there are no independent activities in the Body life.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PRACTICE OF FELLOWSHIP

THERE BEING ONLY ONE CHURCH

The Bible says that there is only one church. The church which Paul was in is the same church that we are in. The church that we are in is the same church that the apostle John, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and all regenerated persons are in. The church in the Bible is not separated by time, locality, or race. There is only one church, which exists at all times and in all places. There are not two churches. The Bible only recognizes one Body of Christ and never recognizes two, because there is only one Head. Although there are many members in the Bible, the Body is singular. Therefore, all saved persons past and present, here and elsewhere constitute one church and one Body. If this is the case, why are there "churches" in different places? Since Ephesians mentions one Body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God, why does the Bible mention churches also? Is this not a contradiction? Why is it that, on the one hand, there is only one Body, but on the other hand, there are many churches? This shows us that there are different views in the Bible concerning the Body of Christ and the local churches. Strictly speaking, there is only one church, in the same way that there is only one Body of Christ. However, in each locality, there may be as many as three to five thousand believers, or there may be as few as two or three, as described in Matthew 18. As long as there is a group of believers meeting together in a city or

a town, that group of believers constitutes the church in that city or town. Therefore, in the original language, the Bible clearly shows us that the church is "the church in such-and-such place." The word *in* indicates that there is only one church, which is scattered and sojourning in different places. The Bible calls the meeting of those who sojourn and meet together in one place a local church; it serves as a miniature representation of the unique church.

We treasure very much the words in Romans 12 which say, "We who are many are one Body." "We" includes all the believers. There is only one bread. Therefore, do not think that we have one bread in Wen-teh Lane and another bread in Gordon Lane, and yet another in Peking or Changchun. Materially speaking, in the whole world there can be hundreds and thousands of loaves, but before God there is only one bread, spiritually speaking. However, we cannot participate in only one bread, because we are limited in our flesh by time and space. If it were possible, all the believers in the world would break only one bread. Although brothers can break bread in Changchun, Peking, Hangchow, or Nan-shu-chow, there is only one bread before God. The one bread that we touch on the Lord's Day evening in Shanghai is the same bread that Brother Luan touched in Hangchow and that Brother Hwang touched in Nan-shu-chow. The bread that is broken in every place and the Body of Christ that it represents is the same bread and same Body of Christ in every place. God has only one church in the world. This one church is scattered *in* all the cities and villages. These scattered churches in the cities and villages are called the churches in those cities or the churches in those villages. For convenience' sake, we call the churches in all the cities and villages the churches of God. Actually, the churches of God are just the church of God. The Lord charges us to break the bread every Lord's Day in order to remind us that the churches in the various localities are not independent churches but are joined as one church. This is why we have the symbol of the one bread. The one bread reminds us that although there are many believers in all places and at all times, and although there are many local churches, we are still one bread.

I do not like to use political figures for illustration, because the subject of politics is too fashionable. But I have to use one today. The Nationalist Party of China respects Mr. Sun Yat-sen to the utmost. All government offices have the picture of Mr. Sun. There may be thousands and tens of thousands of pictures of Mr. Sun, but the person they represent is the same. In the same way, we may be breaking thousands of loaves of bread, but the Body of Christ, which these loaves represent, is just one, and the Lord, whom these loaves represent, is just one. Therefore, the miniature churches in all the places are representations of the whole Body of Christ. When we see a local assembly with fifty people meeting, we should realize immediately that they represent all the believers at all times and in all places. Today in Gordon Lane there are over fifty people meeting. If in Bao-

shan there are only seven or eight people meeting, the bread which they break before the Lord at the Lord's table includes Peter, Paul, Martin Luther, Wesley, and others; it also includes you and me. Therefore, whether it be the meeting in Bao-shan, Hangchow, Soo-chia-tsui, or anywhere else, all these meetings represent the Body of Christ. This is why no church can act independently. All the moves must take care of the whole church. While you are sitting in a meeting, you should not see only the brothers and sisters next to you but the whole Body of Christ. What you are doing affects not only the one or two hundred people who are meeting with you; it affects the whole Body of Christ because we only have one Body. Although you are only a member, what you do is what the Body of Christ does. One member can drag down the whole Body.

Most of the Chinese who live in Southeast Asia are from the provinces of Fukien and Kwangtung. Everywhere in Southeast Asia, whether in a village or in a city, one can find Chinese Associations. The number of members in these associations may vary, but if an association receives respect in one place, it means that the whole Chinese race receives respect in that place, and if an association is persecuted in a place, it means that the whole Chinese race is persecuted in that place. Just as these associations represent China in Southeast Asia, we represent the church in our respective localities. Since this is the case, we can see how intimately related the conduct of an individual church is to the conduct of the Body of Christ. We can also see the relationship between the various assemblies. Although you are a miniature church and a small community within a certain boundary, God intends that this miniature church, this small community, express the large-scale church, the large community. Therefore, what we are doing in the small local churches represents and includes all that the Body of Christ does. For this reason, we have to be related to other local churches and the brothers and sisters in the other localities.

CHAPTER THREE

HOW TO MEET

There are several kinds of meetings, but we have to pay attention to two things with every meeting:

(1) *Come early.* Those who live upstairs in the meeting hall should not wait until the first hymn is sung downstairs before they come down for the meeting. Being late for a meeting is a very unkind thing because it means that others have to wait for you. First Corinthians 11:33 says, "So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another." Not many people practice this verse. Unfortunately, many do not come and wait for others; instead, they want the

other brothers to wait for them. Sometimes we wait from 9:30 to 10:00, and some brothers still have not come. I will say a word especially to the brothers living in Wen-teh Lane. Those who live nearest to the meeting place are often the latest to arrive. Every one of us should try our best to be here early, so that others will not have to wait.

There are negative effects in coming late to the meetings. First, it causes a meeting to start late and end late. The sisters who bear the responsibility for their household are late in returning home, and this delays their cooking or care for their children. Second, during the bread-breaking meeting, another brother may have called a hymn already. Because you are late, you may come in and call the same hymn again, bringing in repetition. Third, sometimes the meeting begins before you arrive. When you come in late, you start the meeting all over again. This can happen four or five times in a meeting, with four or five different beginnings. Although we can learn to remember the Lord by following the leading of the Spirit and start the meeting for the remembrance of the Lord in different ways, sometimes with His suffering, sometimes with the forgiveness of sins, and sometimes with the Lord's glory, a person who is late to the meeting will not know how the meeting has begun, and his prayer and hymn selection will not be in line with the meeting. Therefore, it is better to come earlier and wait for a while in the meeting place. This is always better than coming late.

(2) *Stand up to speak.* For the bread-breaking meeting and other general meetings, it is better for the brothers to stand up to speak. According to Chinese custom, it is impolite for one to speak while sitting down. Moreover, one who speaks while sitting down cannot be loud, and it is difficult for others to hear him. In addition, his voice can easily conflict with the voices of other brothers. If you are sitting down with your head bowed and call a hymn, you cannot see if another brother has stood up to pray or call a hymn at the same time. At any rate, our ears are not as sharp as our eyes. If you stand up first, you can avoid the confusion of two people opening their mouths simultaneously. If two people open their mouths simultaneously, it is because both of them have not stood up before they opened their mouths. Therefore, we would like the brothers to remember that whenever they want to say something, whether it is praying or calling a hymn, they should first look with their eyes to see if anyone else has stood up before them. If no one has stood up, then it is all right for them to speak. Although these are small points, they are nevertheless things that the brothers should pay attention to.

THE BREAD-BREAKING MEETING

The first point we should emphasize is that we are at the bread-breaking meeting to remember the Lord. Therefore, the Lord should be the center. It is unsuitable to offer prayers and supplications at the bread-breaking meeting. Of course, we

can thank and praise the Lord through our prayers, but we should not remember our own needs during the bread-breaking meeting. The meeting on the Lord's Day evening is purely for thanksgiving and praise.

According to the light of the Bible, there should be two sections to the bread-breaking meeting. Before the breaking of bread, we have the Lord Jesus before us; after the breaking of bread, we have the Father before us. Before the breaking of bread, the Lord leads us to remember Himself. Therefore, all thanksgiving and praise should have the Lord as the center; everything should be centered upon the Lord. Before the breaking of bread, we see the Lord Jesus as the only begotten Son; He is the only Son. After the breaking of bread, we see the Lord Jesus as the firstborn Son; we have a share in the Son of God and have become God's many sons. Before the breaking of bread, the Lord Jesus is one grain of wheat; after the breaking of bread, He is the grain that has fallen to the ground and died and brought forth many grains. By discerning the Body of Christ, we see the Lord as the firstborn Son, as depicted in Hebrews 2. He is leading many sons into glory, and in the assembly He is leading them to sing praises to the Father. This is what is described in Hymn No. 183 in our *Little Flock Hymnal*. But this should not be legal; it does not mean that every time we meet we should act this way. If we are willing to learn and follow the Lord's leading, we will be very clear that this kind of spiritual guidance always leads us step by step, onward to the Father. The Lord Jesus first led the disciples to eat the Feast of the Passover. Then they sang a hymn and went to the Mount of Olives. The Songs of Ascents recorded in the Psalms (see the headings of some psalms) were songs the Israelites sang at the Feast of the Passover after they ate the Passover dinner. They sang these songs while they were ascending the stairs. Therefore, after we partake of the Lord's body, we should ascend to the mountain to praise God. We should allow the Lord to lead us and draw us to the Father. All of our hymns are hymns of ascent. Our hymns should climb higher and higher after the breaking of bread. This is not just the teaching of the book of Hebrews. The Lord's word, the teaching of the Psalms, and our experience all testify to this. After our salvation, we always thank the Lord first, then praise Him, and then worship God.

The second point of emphasis is on learning to follow whatever has begun in the bread-breaking meeting. We are remembering the Lord, but there are many different beginnings for this kind of meeting. Some beginnings emphasize the Lord's sufferings, others emphasize the Lord's glory, and still others emphasize what the Lord has passed through. We have to pay attention to the way a meeting begins and follow the same line. No hymn or prayer should come up with another line of emphasis, but they should strengthen and advance the existing line until the end. There should not be three or four beginnings. Furthermore, we should never seek for an opportunity to squeeze into the bread-

breaking meeting the interesting passages that we have come across during our morning Bible study time or the hymns that we like to sing at other times. These are things that are related to us personally and should not be things that we do as brothers. We are not in the meeting to take care of our personal relationship with the Lord but of the going on of the meeting in oneness. This is a precious thing. Therefore, the bread-breaking meeting tells us who the good brothers are. Do you care only for your own things, or do you care for the move of the meeting? Sometimes a meeting is about to end, and the thanksgivings and praises are adequate, but a brother suddenly stands up to pray or call another hymn. This becomes redundant.

In a meeting, you should cease from your personal activity and follow the move of the Body. If you are in a room by yourself, you can sing or pray at will. But in a meeting, you are not the only one who is present. Therefore, please do not bring feelings that are peculiarly your own into the meeting. Of course, all our thanksgivings and praises are personal; if they are not personal, they are not real and are a speaking before others only. However, even though the meetings are very personal, we should care for the feeling of the whole Body as well. This is why we have to follow a line of emphasis.

The same is true with our preaching at the bread-breaking meeting; we should have the Lord as the center. It is all right for a brother to read a passage of Scripture which leads others to the Lord or to remember the Lord. But there is no need to read other unrelated passages of Scripture. There is no meeting that is as important as the bread-breaking meeting. When we hear a message, we are merely listening to others speak about the Lord, and the goal is for our own benefit. But the bread-breaking meeting is the time when we meet the Lord and remember Him; it is a time reserved for the Lord Himself.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BOUNDARY OF THE LOCAL

ASSEMBLY

Tonight we will discuss the mutual relationship between the meeting in Gordon Lane and that in Wen-teh Lane. In other words, we will speak on the boundary of the local church or the extent of the border of the local church. Before we speak on this matter, there are a few things which we need to explain to the brothers from out of town. Our Bible study, at this moment, is designed especially for the local brothers. Therefore, many of the things that are covered are local in nature. However, we welcome the out-of-town brothers to come and listen.

I have mentioned three to five times already that the authority of the elders is for the local assembly. In other words, the elders are for the local assembly. Position is a matter related to the local church, and office is also a matter related to the local church. One can be an elder in Shanghai, but he cannot automatically be an elder when he goes to Nanking or Peking. A person who serves as an elder in the assembly in Shanghai cannot go to the assembly in Peking and assume the same eldership. God's gifts are for the whole church, while His offices are for the local churches. Hence, there is no such thing as a super elder who can control an out-of-town church. An elder can oversee only the church in his own locality.

THE BOUNDARY OF THE ASSEMBLY

The Bible study tonight is on the boundary of the assembly, and it is limited to the local assembly only. We hope that God will show us this truth. Because we are afraid of careless misunderstandings or forgetfulness, we will repeat once again what we have mentioned: gifts are for the whole church, while offices are for the local churches.

What is the extent of a local church? How big of an area constitutes the sphere of a local church? We would draw the brothers' and sisters' attention to the fact that in the Bible, the church is never divided into regions. The Bible never groups a few churches together under a regional organization. Although there were seven churches in Asia, we do not see the Bible appointing Ephesus or Philadelphia to rule over the other six churches. We only see *seven* churches, with *seven* lampstands. These seven lampstands represent the seven churches (Rev. 1:12, 20). In the Old Testament, one lampstand was divided into seven branches. In the New Testament, there are seven lampstands, not one lampstand with seven branches. This means that the seven different churches are shining *by themselves* and each one is responsible to Christ *by itself*. Every church is governed by Christ alone and is not under the control of any other church. In administration, every lampstand is independent and not under the control of any other lampstand. Every one of them is responsible to the Son of Man alone, who walks in the midst of the seven lampstands. They are responsible only to their High Priest. No church is responsible to another church. Although they are seven churches, they have not joined themselves to become one united church, and they are not responsible to some higher synod or convention. Each one of them is a so-called congregation, an assembly whose boundary is the locality. The Bible takes the city or the smallest administrative unit as the boundary of a local church. A local church is the basic unit of the church in the Bible. No local church is joined to another church or regards another bigger church as the central church. In other

words, in God's eyes, Rome has never been appointed to be the central church. God has never acknowledged one place as the center of all churches, with that place ruling over and controlling all the other assemblies. According to God's organization, there is no center on earth. Jerusalem was not the central church at that time.

This does not mean that there are no regions in the Bible. Some places have similar conditions and needs, and they are treated according to the same principle. In Acts 19 Paul "passed through the upper districts" (v. 1). In Romans 15 Paul said that he traveled "from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum" (v. 19). These places belong to one region. Galatia was not an individual city but a province. This is why the Bible mentions "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2). Revelation mentions "the seven churches which are in Asia" (1:4). Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea were all in the region of Asia. Asia was a region, and Galatia was a province. We have to be clear that even though the needs and testimony of these local assemblies are peculiarly similar, no church possessed a higher organization or authority over the other local churches. The Bible never shows us that any local assembly possesses a higher authority than another assembly. Some have thought that Jerusalem was a mother church. Actually, there is no such thing. Every local assembly is local in its administration and responsible to Christ alone; it is not responsible to any other institution or assembly. Putting it another way, a local church is the only organization in that locality. To put it still another way, a local church is the highest organization and institution on earth; nothing is lower than it on earth, and nothing is higher. There is no court above the local church to which one can appeal. The highest organization is the local assembly. The smallest unit is also the local assembly. The Bible does not tell us of a center like Rome, which controlled everything of the churches, because Christ wants to retain His headship in heaven. Every local church should maintain the testimony of the Body and express the Body of Christ in a miniature way. However, every local church should be directly responsible to Christ and not to other churches. This means every local church should only be regulated by Christ and not be controlled by any other institutions or churches.

God dislikes the fact that man can be misled to think that there must be centers on earth. Therefore, He put Jerusalem aside and made Antioch the place from which the apostles set off for their work (Acts 13). It was not Jerusalem. This avoided the misunderstanding that the church in Jerusalem was the mother church, the headquarters church, and that all the other churches were subordinate churches and branch churches. Two hundred years ago the Brethren almost took London as their headquarters. This is a mistake. Therefore, brothers, please do not consider the assembly in Shanghai as the mother church or the

headquarters. Our assemblies in the different localities are directly bound by Christ and are not controlled by any other assemblies.

The truth that I am speaking of tonight balances the truth that was mentioned last Saturday evening. Last Saturday night we mentioned the Body life and the relationship between an assembly and other assemblies. God will never tell one assembly to do something and another assembly not to do the same thing. The way God leads one assembly is the way He leads other assemblies. We saw that the Gentile churches should imitate the churches in Judea. We also saw that, according to God's ordination, no church of God should act independently; rather it should pay attention to the move of the Body and seek for mutual harmony. Any person that one assembly excommunicates should be excommunicated by other assemblies. Today we are speaking on the responsibility of a local church; its responsibility is to God alone and not to any other local assembly. What we covered on Saturday shows us the strictness of the bondage and restrictions between one assembly and other assemblies; no assembly can act independently or make its own proposals. If an assembly acts independently or makes free proposals, these acts and moves are not of God. At the same time, we must see that every church is directly responsible to the Head for what it does. We can easily become biased. This is why we must maintain the balance in the truth. Sometimes, we may act like the Roman Catholic Church. When Rome makes a decision to do one thing, all the Roman Catholics in every place have to obey. This is not being balanced in the truth. On the one hand, we should be bound by other assemblies so that we have the same footsteps and are the same as far as the truth goes. On the other hand, every assembly should be directly responsible to the Head for what it does. Every local church is responsible to God. Every church mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, like the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, and the church in Pergamos, etc., had its own golden lampstand. Each stood on its own stand, not on another stand. Every one of them kept their own position and was responsible to God. The Lord both rebuked and praised Ephesus. He did not lay the blame of Ephesus on Pergamos, nor did He credit the virtue of Ephesus to Smyrna. No church can take the responsibility of another church, and no church can stand on the merit of another church. All the churches are responsible to the Lord directly and are bound by the Lord. At the same time, the Bible says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says *to the churches*" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This is the balance in the truth. On the one hand, the Bible says that the words are spoken to the messenger of the church in Ephesus. But at the end of the speaking, it says that the words are for all the churches. At the beginning it says that the words are for the messengers of the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamos, etc., but at the end it says that every church should hear what God says to the other

churches. The *Holy Spirit* is speaking to all the churches. This is why he who has an ear should hear. This proves that what is kept by one church should be kept by all the churches. The responsibility each church bears in a locality is before God alone, yet all the churches should have the same common move. Consequently, the epistle was written to Ephesus, but the words were for all the churches. This is the balance in the truth.

In the Bible God has ordained that the smallest unit of the church on the earth is the local assembly. The highest institution is also the local assembly. The local church is the ultimate and minimal organization. Every local church is a miniature to express the universal church. Nothing is bigger than the local church, and nothing is smaller than the local church. We should firmly grasp this truth. We should pursue and take care that what we do in the assembly in Shanghai, our move and footsteps, is the same as the move and footsteps of all the assemblies in China. Not only should we pursue having the same move and footsteps as all the assemblies in China, but we should also pursue having the same move and footsteps as all the assemblies in the world. At the same time, what we do in the assembly in Shanghai and whether we are right or wrong is something for which we are directly responsible to God. We are not directed by any higher institution above Shanghai. In the assembly in Shanghai, no authority is higher than the authority of the elders. This is the boundary that God has set. Within each city, there can be a few elders. But these elders can oversee only the assembly in that city; they cannot oversee the assembly in another city. God's boundary is based on the fact that elders are appointed in every city. This is why the authority of an elder cannot extend beyond the boundary of the city. The local churches as depicted in the Bible are local in their administration. I hope that the brothers and sisters maintain these two aspects in a balanced way. On the one hand, we maintain a sameness with the other assemblies. On the other hand, each local assembly bears a direct responsibility to God.

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