

**ASSAILING THE GROUND OF ONENESS (2):
DILIGENTLY KEEPING THE ONENESS REQUIRING A LOCAL GROUND**

Ephesians 4 speaks of one Spirit and one Body and of our need to keep the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace (vv. 3-6). Some Christians ask whether the oneness of the Spirit and of the Body mentioned in Ephesians 4 are not sufficient in themselves for Christian oneness, and they thereby question the need to speak of the ground of locality—the ground of one city, one church, of one church in one city—as being necessary for the preservation of the oneness of the church. Some have gone further to claim that to speak of the ground of locality is to add an additional and unnecessary requirement to the testimony of oneness and therefore constitutes a divisive teaching in and of itself. However, the practice of the church on the ground of locality is the divine and necessary prescription for keeping the oneness of the Spirit and of the Body practically.

Keeping the Oneness Practically

Those who have advanced this line of criticism do so based upon a strictly universal view of oneness. By appealing to Ephesians 4:4, “one Body and one Spirit,” they argue that the oneness we share as believers is a universal oneness in the one Body of Christ through our receiving the one Spirit. To this we surely say Amen. The oneness of the Body and of the Spirit is a universal oneness that joins all believers and is based upon our having received the Spirit through regeneration and our being made fellow members of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:25; Rom. 12:5). However, in Ephesians 4 Paul speaks of the spiritual fact that there is one Body and one Spirit in the context of a charge to “walk worthily of the calling with which you were called” (v. 1). The first requirement in that walk is to diligently keep the oneness of the Spirit (v. 3), not merely in the abstract, mystical, and universal Body of Christ but among actual believers concretely, practically, and locally, as evidenced by the phrase “with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, bearing one another in love” (v. 2). Paul was writing to “the saints who are in Ephesus” (1:1), that is, the unique church in Ephesus (cf. Rev. 2:1). Paul’s word surely means that we must practice the virtues in Ephesians 4:2 not merely in the universal Body but among all the believers in the city in which the Lord has placed us. This indicates that the universal oneness that all believers share should have a corresponding practice in the believers’ living and gathering together locally.

Some misuse “one Body and one Spirit” in an attempt to negate the ground of locality and justify an alternative and divisive church ground that suits their subjective view and preference, doing what is right in their own eyes (Deut. 12:8). This is to abuse the divine oneness that they claim to uphold. Today we may have a walk that is worthy of God’s calling and that honors the Body of Christ by being diligent to keep the oneness, or we may have another kind of walk, a walk that is according to our own opinions based on certain ways of living and worship, certain traditional or self-made ordinances. This latter kind of walk dishonors the Body and creates divisions among believers. Through the work of Christ, God has removed every hindrance to the oneness of the believers, crucifying the divisive old man (Rom. 6:6) and nailing the ordinances that divide men to the cross (Col. 2:14). Moreover, Christ has created all the believers in Himself into one new man (Eph. 2:15), in which there are no natural persons, but Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11). Therefore, the divisions that exist among believers today are the result of man’s requirements above and beyond the oneness believers share in the Spirit. In Christendom today the failure to diligently keep this oneness has issued in the practical annulling of Christ’s work on the cross.

Those who insist on a merely universal concept of oneness discount the need to practice that oneness with believers in their own locality. We must see that it is only by the believers standing on the ground of locality that the oneness of the Body can be testified and can be kept practically. After charging the Philippians to think the same thing, have the same love, be joined together in soul, and think the one thing (2:2), Paul exhorted Euodias and Syntyche “to think the same thing in the Lord” (4:2), indicating that there was dissension between them that was affecting their local church and damaging the oneness. Paul gave these two dear sisters no ground to hold on to their own opinions. Today, such strife would often be used as a pretext for believers to separate from one another. Instead, Paul charged these two sisters to practice the oneness that is characteristic of the Body with one another in their local church. This shows that while the believers’ oneness is universal in nature, it must be diligently kept locally in the practical church life.

The Oneness of the Church Preserved by the Ground of Locality

Some even claim that the ground of locality constitutes a divisive teaching in and of itself. Our practice of gathering together as the church in the city in which we live is the unique biblical pattern for establishing churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11) and is based upon a wonderful divine reality. Christ's Body, which is the corporate Christ, is not divisible (Eph. 4:4; 1 Cor. 12:12; 1:13a); therefore, the church, which is Christ's Body (Eph. 1:22-23), is not divisible. The very nature of the Body, and thereby of the church, is oneness. When the universal church is manifested in time and space, it is manifested as many local churches; however, these churches are not separate divisions of the one universal church. The many manifestations of the one universal church in time and space are the same in nature as the universal church which they express. Hence, the church of God and the churches of God (1 Cor. 1:2; 11:16) differ only in their extent. While the church of God is universal, the churches of God are local. And while the church of God comprises all regenerated believers in all places and at all times (Matt. 16:18; 1 Cor. 10:32), the churches of God comprise only those regenerated believers in a particular city at a given time (Rom. 1:7; 1 Thes. 1:1). The geographic dispersion of believers necessitates the establishing of many churches and constitutes the physical limitation that makes assembling by geography inevitable. Therefore, the New Testament basis for the "division" of the church of God into the many churches of God, each encompassing all believers in its own locality, is solely geographic, and any other basis for division is man-made and contrary to the church's nature.

The Oneness of the Spirit and of the Body Applied and Practiced on the Ground of Locality

Actually, the application and practice of the divine oneness requires the ground of locality, as it is the locality that forms the only basis of distinction which does not circumscribe a fellowship of believers smaller than that part of the Body present in a given locality. In the local churches all whom Christ has received must be received (Rom. 8:9; 14:1, 3; 15:7). The wisdom of God is manifested in the New Testament pattern of local churches, as the ground of locality allows no other factor of separation apart from that necessitated by the practical effect of geography. All preferences which form a basis for parties among the believers are disallowed by the ground of locality in order to preserve the oneness of the church as the manifestation of the one Body. When the believers in Corinth formed parties among themselves according to preference (1 Cor. 1:12-13), Paul reminded them that all the believers in Corinth together constituted the church of God in Corinth, thereby correcting their inclination to form parties (v. 2). Moreover, although the ground of the church is local, the fellowship of each local church is not merely local (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:3, 7). A fellowship that is only local is sectarian. There must be one fellowship among all the local churches that overcomes the necessary separations created by geography. The oneness that we enjoy must be both local, among the believers in our city, and universal, inclusive of all the local churches.

The church is one, but the practice of oneness in the church requires that the churches be established on the ground of oneness, which necessarily includes the ground of locality. To impose any conditions for fellowship, such as adherence to particular doctrinal positions, insistence on a particular form of baptismal practice or on certain Charismatic experiences, preferences regarding a particular minister or worship style, or even withdrawal from other Christian groups, is to establish an alternative ground for "fellowship" that inevitably excludes genuine believers, causes a division in the Body, and is thereby sectarian. Keeping the oneness of the Spirit and of the Body requires that we stand on the ground of locality. The local ground is not only the sole ground that is inclusive of all the members of the Body in a given city; it is also the sole ground presented in the New Testament for establishing churches. To establish a "church" on any ground but the ground of locality is to divide the Body of Christ in practice, to lose the expression of the oneness of God in nature, and to become a sect. Through regeneration we all received the one Spirit and were made members of the one Body, yet our diligently keeping the oneness of the Spirit in practice requires that we stand upon the unique ground of the oneness of the church, which in practice must include the ground of locality.