

ASSAILING THE GROUND OF ONENESS (6): THE GROUND OF THE CHURCH BEING FOR THE BUILDING UP OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

Matthew 18:20 contains a wonderful promise: "For where two or three are gathered into My name, there am I in their midst." However, some have misused this verse to discount the need for local churches established and built up on the proper ground. They claim that the gathering of two or three in the Lord's name is the unique qualification to be a genuine church. This errant understanding has excused division, opened the door to the proliferation of independent "churches" and free groups, and frustrated the building up of the Body of Christ. In contrast to this misinterpretation, we need to see what Matthew 18 actually says and that the ground of the church is the basis for the building up of the Body of Christ according to the New Testament.

A basic problem among Christians is emphasizing only the universal aspect of the church while neglecting its local aspect. Seeing only that believers are fellow members of the Body of Christ, some argue that any gathering of believers in the Lord's name is sufficiently qualified to constitute itself a "church." However, 1 Corinthians 10:32 mentions the unique church of God, while 11:16 speaks of the many churches of God, which are the manifestations of the church of God locality by locality, indicating that apart from local churches the unique church of God could not have a practical expression on the earth. Witness Lee captured this thought when he stated, "Without local churches, the church only becomes a kind of term; it becomes something in the heavens, something in the future, something for us to look forward to, but not so real and practical today on this earth" (*The Practical Expression of the Church*, 25). In neglecting the New Testament revelation concerning the local aspect of the church, the practical basis to build up the church as the expression of the Body of Christ is forfeited.

A Deficient View of the Church

The claim that two or three gathering in the Lord's name in Matthew 18 are a "church" is belied by the fact that the two or three mentioned by the Lord there were not the church themselves, but only part of the church. In verse 16 an offense that could not be resolved between two parties caused the offended party to bring with him "one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established." When the problem could not be resolved by the two or three, the Lord directed them to "tell it to the church" (v. 17). Thus, the two or three in Matthew 18 are not the church but must instead go to the church, despite their being gathered into the Lord's name.

Matthew 18 outlines the steps to deal with an offense before taking it to the church. Misapplying the twos and threes in Matthew 18 to accommodate one's preference in forming a "church" has opened the door to the proliferation of division and confusion among believers. The New Testament revelation concerning the church's ground of locality is a God-ordained restriction and limitation to the believers. If we are willing to submit to this restriction, we will not be able to "escape" by joining another group of Christians when we encounter problems with others. As Brother Lee explained:

If I am in a certain city, regardless of how I feel about those who are meeting there as the unique local church and regardless of how they treat me, I have no choice. I have to learn the lesson of the cross. I must learn the lesson of brokenness and self-denial. I have no ground, no right, and no standing to start another church in that locality as long as a unique one is there already. I must be restricted and limited. This is the real lesson.
(*The Practical Expression of the Church*, 29)

We should gladly accept the ground of locality as a limitation and restriction because it keeps us in the oneness of the Body of Christ. It requires us to reject our natural thoughts, opinions, preferences, and offenses to preserve this oneness. Thus, this limitation aids our knowing of the cross and, through the cross, the resurrection life of Christ.

The Ground of the Church Being the Practical Provision to Know the Cross to Keep the Oneness

Underlying all the divisions among the members of the Body of Christ is the self with its opinions and preferences. The self always seeks to avoid the cross. In Matthew 16 the Lord responded to Peter's word forbidding Him from going to the cross, by showing him his own need to deny the self and take up his cross (vv. 21-24). To deny the self with its natural thoughts, concepts, opinions, preferences, and choices requires us to take up the cross.

Unwillingness to deny the self and bear the cross when differences arise prevents believers from being reconciled to God and to one another (2 Cor. 5:20; Matt. 5:24) and results in a self-centered and individualistic Christian pursuit.

The local church in Corinth suffered from such a self-centered “spirituality” by caring for gifts over the building of the Body, appreciating the knowledge that puffs up over the love that builds up, and preferring one servant of the Lord over another (1 Cor. 14:4; 8:1; 1:12). As a result, they lacked the genuine growth in life. Hence, Paul called them infants, fleshly, fleshy, and divisive (3:1, 3; 1:10; 11:18-19; 12:25). Paul's prescription for the problems in this local church was not to countenance divisiveness but to stress the need for an experiential knowledge of the crucified Christ, the mingled spirit, being blended together, loving one another, and speaking Christ to one another for the building up of the church locally and the Body universally (1:18; 2:2; 6:17; 12:24; 13:2-14:1; 16:14; 14:3, 5). Such a prescription preserves the testimony of the oneness of the church and allows for the building up of the members as one Body. As we deny the self by applying the cross through the power of the indwelling Spirit, we take Christ as our life in resurrection to practically build up the Body of Christ in oneness (Eph. 4:1-6; Rom. 8:13; 1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Tim. 4:22; Gal. 5:16-25).

The Building Up of the Body of Christ Carried Out in Local Churches through the Functioning of the Members

In speaking of the building up of the Body of Christ, Paul addresses both the universal and local aspects of the church in Ephesians 2. In verse 21 he speaks of “all the building being fitted together” and “growing into a holy temple in the Lord.” In saying “all the building,” Paul referred to the building of the church in its universal aspect. He then addressed the believers in the local church in Ephesus, declaring, “*You also* are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit” (v. 22, emphasis added). The dwelling place in verse 22 corresponds to the temple in verse 21, indicating that the building of the temple, the universal aspect of the church, takes place among the local churches under the vision of the universal oneness of the Body of Christ.

The building up of the Body of Christ is carried out through the harmonious functioning of its members. According to Ephesians 4:16, the Body is not built up by Christ as the Head directly; rather, the Body is built up directly by the functioning of all the members. Our functioning as members for the Body's building up requires that we put off the individualistic old man and put on the corporate new man (Eph. 4:22, 24; Col. 3:9-10a). Like a garment, the former manner of life of the old man must be put off and the new man must be put on through the renewing of the mind (v. 10b; Eph. 4:23). “If we have never learned how to put off,” spoke Witness Lee, “we may be very active in the church, yet we are not functioning” (*The Practical Expression of the Church*, 126). By putting off the old man with its individualism and self-centeredness, the functioning that is out from the Head is released for the “growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love” (Eph. 4:15, 16).

We should have the same love toward every member of the Body. The apostle charged the members of the local church in Philippi to “think the same thing, having the same love” (Phil. 2:2). Those who use Matthew 18 as an excuse to form a division fail to exercise the same love toward all the believers and instead exercise a preferential love. In Ephesians 4 Paul reminded the believers in the local church in Ephesus that they needed to bear “one another in love” and that their function was for the Body, being “unto the building up of [the Body] in love” (vv. 2-3, 16). Today believers also need to have the same love for all their fellow members in the locality where the Lord has placed them and function to minister Christ for the growth and building up of the Body.

When problems arise among believers, the response is all too often the beginning of another fellowship based on a misinterpretation of the “twos and threes” in Matthew 18. According to the New Testament, it is in the context of a local church that problems among believers are resolved. In returning to the ground of the church and applying the cross by the Spirit, the believers are supplied to function as members to build up the Body in love. In this way the functioning of the members locally builds up the Body of Christ universally.