

## CONCERNING THE BOUNDARY OF A LOCAL CHURCH

The boundary of a local church is one of the basic principles upon which the practice of the Lord's recovery is based. From the beginnings of the Lord's recovery in China, it has been our practice to have one church with one eldership in a city. In 1934, after observing firsthand the confusion among Christian groups in the West, Brother Nee studied this matter thoroughly and gave a series of messages on "The Assembly Life." There he said:

I would like you to pay attention to the fact that in the New Testament, the boundary of the local church is the city in which that church is located. Hence, the maximum reach of a local church is the city; no boundary can be larger than the city. In the Bible we cannot find a church that rules over one province or county. The Bible shows us that the city is the boundary of the church. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Vol. 22: The Assembly Life & The Prayer Ministry of the Church, 114*)

The New Testament consistently identifies a church with a city (Acts 8:1; 13:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:11). It also speaks of appointing elders in every church and elders in every city, showing that the scope of an eldership's administration is the city in which the church is located (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). This means that while the elders in a church may seek fellowship from or may express concern about actions taken by elders in other churches, they should never interfere in the administration of another church. Brother Lee expressed particular concern that the elders in larger churches not overstep the administration of smaller churches. He said, "The elders of a local church should bear the responsibility for and serve in only one locality (Acts 14:23a; Titus 1:5). They should never interfere with nearby churches that are smaller; it is dangerous to do so" (*Crucial Words of Leading in the Lord's Recovery, Book 2: Leading the Saints to Practice the New Way Ordained by the Lord, 228*). Using the church in Taipei as an example, he said, "Due to this danger, the elders of the church in Taipei should stay within the boundaries of Taipei. Taipei is their sphere, their realm; they should never extend beyond their boundary" (228). Elsewhere he told us:

A small local church was told recently that they should submit to a larger nearby church. This is organization, which leads to hierarchy and insults the headship of Christ. This is a crucial matter. To think that one church should submit to another church is altogether in darkness. If we hear this kind of speaking, we should immediately rise up and declare that this is an insult to our Head, Christ. (*The Healthy Word, 24-25*)

The problem is even more serious if one among the elders in a cluster of churches in proximity is acknowledged as a leader of them all. This easily becomes hierarchy. One of the great degradations in the practice of the church came when the respected church father Ignatius taught that elders and bishops were two different people and that the bishops were above the elders and oversaw the churches in a region. The word for *bishop* in the original Greek is *episkopos*, which consists of *epi*, meaning *over*, and *skopos* meaning *seer*. In the Bible, both *bishop* and *elder* refer to the same person. *Elder* refers to a leading one's person; *overseer* refers to his function. The function of the elders is to watch over the flock of God (1 Pet. 5:1-2). Ignatius's error is evident from Brother Lee's careful exposition of Acts 20:

The overseers in Acts 20:28 are the elders in verse 17. This proves that overseers and elders are synonymous terms denoting the same persons. To make an overseer a bishop of a district to rule over the elders of various localities in that district is grossly erroneous. This is what Ignatius taught. His erroneous teaching gave the ground to rank and brought in hierarchy. (*Life-study of Acts, 464*)

The papal system with its hierarchy developed from the teaching of Ignatius, and many Protestant denominations have continued to employ hierarchical systems of administration. Brother Lee commented, "Both the hierarchy and the system are abominable in the sight of God" (464). While fellowship is needed, in order to avoid hierarchy a leading brother or co-worker with a strong disposition needs to exercise not to impose his views on others and the other brothers must not allow him to do so.

### The Boundary between the Apostles and the Local Churches

It is also important to understand the boundary between the apostles and the local churches—both what it is and what it is not. The elders in a locality are appointed by the apostles under the direction of the Holy Spirit (Acts 14:23; 20:28) and are responsible for the leadership and administration of a local church. The apostles are commissioned by the Lord and bear responsibility for all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28). We should first note that not all workers are apostles. In *The Elders' Management of the Church*, Brother Lee clearly stated, "The Bible shows that the elders are appointed by the apostles. The apostles are the workers. But we must know clearly that not all the workers are apostles" (138). He continued:

There is a difference between one worker and another. Some are commissioned, as the apostles were. Others may not have the apostolic commission. Therefore, there must also be a distinction in the relationship between the elders and the workers. With some workers, you can consider them as apostles and can take their leadership. Some other workers are young and are just learning to serve the Lord. They should still be under the leading of the elders. There is a further distinction of boundary here. If one is not clear about this boundary, there will also be confusion in the church. (138)

The apostles do not supplant the elders in the administration of a local church. The responsibility for the administration of a church always remains with the elders in that locality. An apostle may stay in a locality and serve as an elder in the church there. Peter served in such a dual capacity—as an apostle in the work and as an elder in the church in Jerusalem (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1). In such a case, the brother's participation in the eldership is not on the basis of his being an apostle but an elder.

Moreover, a co-worker should not consider a group of local churches as his territory.

All the churches around the globe are part of the one recovery of the Lord. There should not be any boundaries of separation among the churches. Some co-workers in the past did have the feeling that a certain area was their territory. But we need to see that it is not healthy or profitable in the Lord's recovery for anyone to have a boundary for his work. The only boundary is the boundary of the recovery. We should not say, "That's my church. That's the work in my territory." We have only one work. That work is the work of the recovery based upon the teaching of the apostles. The remedy to the problem of so-called boundaries and territories among the churches is the fellowship. We should not have the thought that others coming to our place may disturb our work. We do not need to defend our work. Our work is the Lord's work, which is the recovery's work. We need the adequate fellowship among all the churches in all the nations, and we need a clear vision concerning the apostles' teaching and the apostles' fellowship. (*A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery*, 42-43)

Four further points are important. First, the leading co-workers, functioning in their apostolic capacity, have both the right and responsibility to respond to problems brought to them by saints, even by those who are not elders. This is evident from Paul's response to the reports he received from the household of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11) and his instruction to his younger co-worker Timothy concerning receiving accusations against elders (1 Tim. 5:19). However, in doing so, the apostles address the problems without themselves assuming the leadership of the local church. Second, the latter verse also shows that apostles, not local elders, must deal with problems involving an elder. Third, when a matter becomes extralocal, adversely affecting saints in other churches, it is no longer solely the purview of the elders in the locality in which the problem originated; it must be brought into the fellowship of the apostles (Acts 15). Fourth, if a co-worker becomes involved in a situation, that co-worker should willingly receive fellowship from other co-workers. Otherwise, by definition he is no longer co-working but working independently.

### **Misuse of the "Boundary" of a Local Church**

The "boundary" of a local church can be misused if these biblical principles are ignored. For example, to claim an absolute and unchallengeable right irrespective of the fellowship of concern of other churches or of the responsibility of the leading co-workers to respond to pleas for help is to abuse the local church "boundary." To buttress such claims by circulating excerpts from the Word or the ministry that present only one side of the truth compounds the error. Appealing to proximity as grounds to claim greater clarity regarding a situation affecting the churches is to set up a de facto territory and also fails in light of Scripture. Paul was physically removed from the situations in Corinth, Galatia, Philippi, and Colossae, yet he had a deeper understanding of God's economy, a broader view of God's work, a clearer grasp of the principles of God's government, and a better sense of the mind of the Spirit, so he was able to render great help to the churches in those places. A look at Paul's epistles to the churches shows the vast scope of his perfecting fellowship. In Ephesians alone he ranges from an unveiling of God's eternal economy (1:10; 3:9) to the believers' practical daily life and church life (4:17—6:9). Any leading one—co-worker or elder—who through pride or self-confidence spurns fellowship has already left the principle of the Body and is sure to lead saints astray.

The truth always tests our purity before the Lord. The goal of the boundary of a local church is to bear a testimony of oneness, not to provide a pretext for divisiveness. Proper opening in fellowship is a great protection against hierarchy and organization. We must be faithful to uphold all the truth in a balanced way and not just use selected parts for self-vindication or to bolster views according to our own taste or agenda. These principles, as with all matters, must be applied in life by the Spirit, in a way that matches the nature of the Body of Christ as an organism, not an organization.