

ASSAILING THE GROUND OF ONENESS (3): WAS THE CHURCH IN JERUSALEM A “REGIONAL” CHURCH?

Some have argued that the church in Jerusalem was a regional church, that is, a single church that has jurisdiction over an area much broader than the boundary of a city. But how is this proposition arrived at? Does it accord with Scripture? And if not, why is it being promoted?

The Church in Jerusalem: a Regional Church?

This curious interpretation depends on Acts 9:31, which speaks of “the church throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria.” According to this view, *church* here refers to the persecuted saints scattered from Jerusalem following Stephen’s martyrdom (8:1). Those scattered saints, it is contended, were still recognized as the church in Jerusalem, even though they no longer resided in Jerusalem. But does *church* in Acts 9:31 refer to a regional church that exercises administrative authority beyond the boundary of locality, in this case the city of Jerusalem?

Footnote 1 in the Holy Bible Recovery Version on the word *church* in Acts 9:31 explains:

Since at that time the church had spread only to the provinces of Judea, Galilee, and Samaria, and since the word *whole* covers all the places where the church existed, *church* in singular is used here in the universal sense, although there must have been churches in the local sense in a number of the cities of these three provinces.

Concerning this verse Witness Lee commented:

The Jews considered Galilee a despised region and Samaria a region full of mixture. Nevertheless, [Acts] 9:31 speaks of the church throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria. This indicates that no matter how much Galilee was despised and Samaria was rejected by the Jews in Jerusalem, the churches raised up in those regions were all considered one church. In the local sense, they were the churches, but in the universal sense, all these churches are the church. Here we have a basic revelation concerning the oneness of the church universally. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 189-204, 2126-2127*)

The phrase *the church throughout the whole of Judea and Galilee and Samaria*, then, refers to the universal church, which is one in existence but is expressed in many localities on earth. Further, the New Testament refers to the churches in a region, or province, of the Roman Empire, such as “the churches of Asia” (1 Cor. 16:19), “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1), and “the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor. 8:1), but it never designates a local church as extending beyond the boundary of a city. The extra-biblical notion of a regional church violates the scriptural precedent and leads to hierarchy by promoting the centralization of authority in one church over and above other churches.

An Administrative Authority Beyond Locality?

Accompanying this teaching is the strange, forced argument that the elders in Jerusalem had an administrative authority that extended beyond Jerusalem itself based on the fact that aid from the Gentile churches was sent to the elders of the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:28-30). However, this interpretation goes beyond the explicit teaching of Scripture into pure speculation. According to the clear biblical pattern of the apostles’ appointing “elders...in every church” (Acts 14:23), every church had its own eldership, its own local administration. Moreover, the apostles’ appointing of “elders in every city” (Titus 1:5) indicates not only that “every church” equals “every city” (cf. Rev. 1:11) but also that the administration of the eldership in a local church is limited to the city in which the church is located.

According to Acts 11:28-30, the disciples in Antioch sent material offerings “to the elders [i.e., of the church in Jerusalem]” for distribution “to the brothers dwelling in Judea” in anticipation of “a great famine.” The arrangement described here does not prove that the elders in Jerusalem possessed any administrative authority that reached beyond the city of Jerusalem; rather, it shows that “in the early days the finances of the church were under the management of the elders” (Holy Bible Recovery Version, Acts 11:30, footnote 1). However, to claim that Acts 11:29-30 substantiates the idea that the church in Jerusalem was a regional church that exercised administrative authority throughout Judea and possibly beyond is a leap in logic based on assumptions and conjecture.

The scriptural precedent demonstrated in Acts 11:29-30 is practiced by the local churches today. Often the churches send material aid to saints in regions throughout the earth to assist with recovery efforts following natural disasters. Sometimes that aid is directed to the elders in one locality for distribution to saints and churches throughout a broader region. As a case in point, in 1998 many local churches sent funds to the elders of the church in Taipei to assist the saints throughout the island of Taiwan with recovery following a devastating earthquake. As a practical arrangement, sending funds to the elders in Taipei for distribution to the saints and churches on the island met critical needs in a timely way. The elders in Taipei did not supplant the elders in the other churches, nor did their administrative authority extend beyond Taipei proper. Rather, there was a sweet and blessed coordination among the churches. The needs of the churches and the saints were met through much fellowship among the elders and co-workers in Taiwan. It would have been impossible for the overseas churches to allocate the funds to meet the needs. The church in Taipei functioned as a conduit through which the holy offerings of the saints and the churches could practically and speedily reach their destinations. In this way, the churches enjoyed fellowship in the handling of the saints’ material offerings without any control by a so-called regional church, as the promoters of this deceptive interpretation imagine to be necessary (2 Cor. 8:4; Phil. 4:14-15). The churches in Taiwan were not under the jurisdiction of the church in Taipei. Neither is there evidence to support the claim that the churches in Judea or Galilee or Samaria were under the jurisdiction of the elders in Jerusalem.

Conclusion

The proper practice of the church life on the local ground, the ground of oneness, is the biblical foundation upon which the Lord’s present recovery was raised up through Watchman Nee. Witness Lee faithfully continued Watchman Nee’s teaching and work, and the fruit of their labor is seen today in thousands of local churches established throughout the earth.

The contrived teaching of a regional church assails the ground of oneness and is not substantiated by Scripture. It produces a hierarchical system in which a central church exercises control over smaller churches. It invents a regional administration that replaces the biblical pattern of local churches practicing oneness in fellowship. Those who advance this teaching seek to be free to do what is right in their own eyes (Judg. 17:6; 21:25) by rejecting the uniqueness of the standing of the local churches on the ground of locality. Such selective citation of Scripture to support an errant view of the biblical record exhibits no care for the testimony of the one true God or the affirmation of His Word.