

## GENUINE LOCAL CHURCHES, PART 1: NEITHER AUTONOMOUS NOR INDEPENDENT

Some have taught that any fellowship or intervention by the apostles or any fellowship of concern from other local churches is improper interference in a church's local administration; this has no basis in Scripture nor in the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. Some who promote this errant teaching try to draw a distinction between *independence* and *autonomy*. They acknowledge Brother Lee's biblical teaching that the local churches are not autonomous, but they promote a model in which a local church is absolutely independent in its administration and that this is a faithful representation of the teaching of our brothers. However, the distinction between *autonomy* and *independence* is spurious and grossly misrepresents the teaching of Brother Nee and Brother Lee concerning genuine local churches.

On at least two occasions during his later ministry Brother Lee used the terms *autonomy* and *independence* in apposition to each other:

It is impossible for any of the local churches to be autonomous, to be independent from the other churches. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1988, vol. 3, 284*)

For anyone to stress the autonomy or independence of a local church is too much. It destroys the oneness of the Body of Christ. (*The Perfecting of the Saints and the Building Up of the Body of Christ, 24-25*)

He also defined *autonomy* as "independence":

The word *autonomy* denotes self-government or independence with respect to local affairs. (*CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 289*)

Autonomous means "self-governed, independent." (*CWWL, 1989, vol. 1, 377*)

Independent, autonomous self-government in the administration of a local church separates that local church not only from the apostles but also from the other local churches. It erects an organizational boundary that separates the churches and nullifies the supply and correction in the organic fellowship the churches share with the apostles and with one another.

The errant teaching of the independent self-government of the churches has been promoted by appeals to the following statement from *The Testimony and the Ground of the Church*:

The administration of every local church is local; it is independent in each locality. This is the local administration. This principle absolutely must not be violated. (179)

Much has been made of this statement, implying that it sets forth the principle of absolute, independent self-government by the elders, such that for the apostles or other local churches to touch the local affairs of a church is to cross boundaries and improperly interfere. However, Brother Lee uses the term *independent* in this chapter to indicate that the local churches are independent from an "organizational union," not of their organic relationship (183). He said, "On one hand, the Bible says that the local churches do not have any relationship according to administrative organization; that is, there is no head church or federation, and every church carries out its administration locally. On the other hand, the Bible says that the churches in all the localities should be the same in their actions" (183). This balancing word clarifies that when Brother Lee spoke of the administration of a church being local, he was not intimating the erection of rigid organizational boundaries that cannot be crossed. If the churches were entirely self-governed or independent with respect to their local affairs, unable to be supplied and corrected by the apostles and other local churches, according to Brother Lee's definition, there would be no means for the churches to be the same in their actions. The New Testament churches all had the same customs (1 Cor. 11:16), all having been instructed in Paul's ways (7:17) and having been taught the same teaching by the apostles (4:17; Acts 2:42; cf. Col. 4:15-16).

Genuine local churches are organically related to each other in the one Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23). For the local churches to be administratively united is something outward and denies the inward reality of the organic relationship the churches share with one another in the Body. In the same manner, for the local churches to be autonomously divided from one another through the erection of supposed jurisdictional boundaries is also an organizational concept. Just as it is wrong for genuine local churches to be organizationally united, so also it is wrong for them to be organizationally autonomous from one another, as both practices damage the oneness and vitality of the churches.

While the teaching of autonomy claims the independent jurisdiction of the local elders in matters involving the administration of a local church, Paul, in his function as an apostle, was not constrained by any notion of organizational boundaries. He gave a command to the elders in Corinth and further stated that he would come in person to set other local affairs in order (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 11; 11:34; CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 439). That the church in Corinth listened to the apostle and obeyed his charge demonstrated that they were not independent in their administration of the church. Although the elders failed initially in not addressing the situation of gross immorality in the church, they faithfully carried out the apostle's judgment and charge (2 Cor. 2:6-9). In this matter, like others in his Epistle, Paul intervened in the local affairs of the church in Corinth.

While Brother Lee recognized that the local churches were necessarily distinct in their business affairs, he found no basis for their being independent of one another in the administration of local matters and even in their business affairs. Brother Lee also recognized that from time to time a church may need to "interfere" with the local affairs of another church if a correcting word was necessary:

But some may argue by saying, "Brother Lee, didn't you say that the administration of the churches should be local and independent?" I may have said that many years ago, but if you asked me to repeat such a saying today, I would not do it. We may think that the local churches are independent, but in the Bible I cannot find the thought of independence....

The churches may be different in their business affairs, but even in this matter they should not claim that they are independent. What if the church in Anaheim made a decision to meet at two o'clock in the morning? The leading ones there may claim that the local church has its own jurisdiction and that no one can interfere with them. But the church in Santa Ana may ask, "Why have you brothers in Anaheim made such a decision to meet at two o'clock in the morning?" The brothers in Anaheim may say that those in Santa Ana should not interfere with them, that this is not their business, and that the church in Anaheim is independent and has its own jurisdiction. But to meet at two o'clock in the morning is peculiar and odd to the uttermost. In this matter the church in Anaheim needs the helpful advice from the church in Santa Ana. It is not wise to make a decision to meet at two o'clock in the morning. This illustration shows that we need the advice and help from the other churches even in business affairs and practical things. (*The Issue of the Dispensing of the Processed Trinity and the Transmitting of the Transcending Christ*, 86)

As Brother Lee has aptly stated, "Yes, we do stress the local churches, but we do not stand for the autonomy of the local churches" (*The Practical Points concerning Blending*, 22). The local churches stand on the local ground, having no organizational relationship with other local churches and having one eldership for one city, to whom the administration and business affairs of the local church are entrusted by the apostles (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). However, to advocate for the independent self-government of the elders with respect to all local affairs and insist on any impermeable jurisdictional boundaries causes a local church to become a local sect, which, contrary to the intrinsic nature of the Body of Christ, is organizational rather than organic (CWWL, 1993, vol. 1, 54; *The Problems Causing the Turmoils in the Church Life*, 29, 35). To say that "no one should interfere with the affairs of their local church" is in error, and to claim that this view is supported by the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee is to abuse their ministry and to stand outside the teaching of the Scriptures (CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 253).