

GENUINE LOCAL CHURCHES, PART 2: FOLLOWING THE TEACHING AND LEADING OF THE APOSTLES

The teaching of the autonomy of the local churches claims that apostles who touch the affairs of a local church improperly interfere in that church's local administration. This error, which was covered in the first article in this series, is rooted in the mistaken thought that elders independently self-govern the affairs of a local church apart from the leading of the apostles.

First Corinthians 11:16 says, "But if anyone seems to be contentious, we do not have such a custom of being so, neither the churches of God." Here "churches" is plural, pointing to the fact that each local church has its own administration. In that limited sense we could speak of them as being "independent." However, Paul's emphasis is not on their separateness but on their oneness, in that they all shared the same custom, that is, not to be contentious concerning the apostles' teaching. Brother Lee followed Paul's emphasis in this verse when he commented that while "the local churches are independent of one another, yet they all act in the same way according to the apostles' teaching" (1 Corinthians 11:16, footnote 2). Though the churches are not organizationally united, they could "all act in the same way" because they all received the apostles' teaching. Regarding his practice among the churches Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "I have sent Timothy to you, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, who will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, *even as I teach everywhere in every church*" (1 Cor. 4:17, emphasis added). It was not by outward organization that the churches everywhere acted in the same manner, but in their receiving the apostles' teaching. Thus, 1 Corinthians 11:16 indicates that the churches were not independent of the apostles and their teaching.

While the churches are distinct in their business affairs, being directly administrated by their respective elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), the apostles still bear responsibility to train, oversee, and even discipline the elders whom they have appointed and to address disorder in a church (1 Tim. 5:19-20; 1 Cor. 11:34). In 1 Corinthians 5 Paul rebuked the elders for tolerating the gross immorality of a brother in the church. Paul even charged the elders to remove him from their midst (v. 1-5, 13). Then, after having dealt with so many other local affairs in the church, he wrote, "The rest I will set in order when I come" (11:34). These verses indicate that once the elders were appointed, the apostle did not leave the elders to administrate the church without his perfecting and oversight (*A Timely Trumpeting and the Lord's Present Need*, 15-18). Rather, when the elders failed to act properly in overseeing the administration of the church in their locality, Paul "interfered" with the local affairs to correct and set matters in order (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1988, vol. 3, 254*). Commenting elsewhere on this verse Brother Lee said:

From this we can see that although the apostles commit the local administration to the elders, they still bear a responsibility toward the church and have authority concerning it. If the local elders were independent of the apostles, Paul could not have spoken to them as he did. That Paul was able to say, "The rest I will set in order when I come" is proof that he still bore a responsibility in Corinth. (*CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 185*)

Upon placing the administration of the church in the hands of the elders, the apostles did not abandon their ongoing responsibility and authority among the churches. Because the churches were not independent of Paul in his apostleship, he could charge the elders in Corinth by his writing to them concerning the local affairs of the church, and he could also come to them personally to set other affairs in order. In 2 Timothy 2:3 Paul commended Timothy for closely following his teaching, conduct, and purpose, among other things. This surely included following Paul's pattern in caring for the churches. To criticize those who serve as apostles today for following the same pattern is to misaim.

Paul charged his young co-workers Titus and Timothy concerning the appointment and reproof of elders (Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:19-20). In 1 Timothy 5:19 Paul wrote, "Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses." Concerning this verse Brother Lee taught:

Here we can see that problems with elders in a church should be presented to the apostles and decided by them. By this we can see that the local churches cannot declare independence from the apostles. After a church has been established and its elders had been appointed, if the church became independent to the extent that the apostles could not intervene in its affairs, Paul would not have charged Timothy as he did here. (*CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 185*)

Although responsibility for the administration of a church is placed in the elders' hands upon their appointment, that church does not thereby become independent of the apostles. Rather, the apostles continue to exercise care over the elders by teaching and leading them and, when necessary, by reproof, or even removing, them (vv. 19-20).

What then is the proper relationship of a genuine local church to the apostles? Brother Lee took up this point when he said:

Under normal circumstances a local church acts according to the leading of the apostles, and the elders administrate the church according to this principle. In this case the independence of administration is not a problem. The basic work of the church is carried out by the apostles; the churches are established by the apostles and go on according to the apostles' leading. When a local church acts in a proper manner, there is no need for the apostles to intervene, but this is not to say that the apostles cannot intervene. Although a local church is under the leading of the elders, if the elders or the church do not act according to proper principles under the leading of the apostles, the apostles still have the right to intervene. (*CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 186*)

The proper administration of a local church by its elders involves not only closely following the apostles' teaching but also being one with the apostles' leading. Although the local administration of a church has been placed into the elders' hands, if deviation from the teaching and leading of the apostles occurs, the apostles may need to intervene to address the situation. Doing so does not mean that the apostles take over the elders' function to lead the local church. Rather, the apostles take the action needed, including disciplining or removing one or more elders, but leave the church in the hands of the local saints. Such intervention is one responsibility that the apostles bear toward the churches. As Brother Lee stated, insofar as a local church is in one accord with the apostles who supply and care for the church, "the independence of administration is not a problem." The question of *independence* becomes an issue only when the standing of a local church toward the apostles becomes improper. "For a church to stand independent of the apostles," Brother Lee shared, "is equivalent to rejecting the apostles" (185-186). Proper elders exercise no independence toward the apostles whose teaching they receive and whose leading they follow.

Genuine local churches act in the same way not because they are outwardly organized but because they are under the teaching and leading of the apostles. Promoting the thought of autonomy to the extent of disallowing intervention by the apostles nullifies the biblical means of correcting and adjusting a church that has departed from the proper way. Such a stand violates the organic relationship that exists between the apostles as joints of the rich supply and the churches that are being supplied (Eph. 4:16). To claim that Watchman Nee and Witness Lee taught that local churches are governed independently by their elders apart from the apostles and the other local churches is a gross abuse of their ministry. On the contrary, while allowing for the distinctiveness of the churches in the administration of their respective business affairs, Brother Lee sets forth the proper condition of a local church wherein the elders bear a responsibility to follow the teaching and leading of the apostles, by whom they were appointed, and the apostles bear a responsibility to care for the churches that have been produced and supplied through their ministry. This is consistent with the organic relationship that exists between the churches and the apostles.