

NO THOUGHT OF INDEPENDENCE IN THE BIBLE

Recently the promotion of the independence, or autonomy, of a local church's administration has reemerged. This mistaken concept is not new. For example, in the late 1980s some brothers pointed to earlier published statements referring to the administration of a local church being independent from that of other local churches and from workers, ignoring qualifiers that such independence was limited to its business affairs. These dissenters pressed the independence of the local eldership much further. In 1993, looking back over our history, Brother Lee commented:

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. Who is independent from whom in the Body of Christ? (*The Issue of the Dispensing of the Processed Trinity and the Transmitting of the Transcending Christ*, 86, emphasis added)

If we would take this word before the Lord, He would surely enlighten us to see that any attitude of independence is contrary to the Body of Christ. On the one hand, a local church does have a limited measure of independence in its business affairs. However, to promote the attitude or thought of being independent such that an eldership can make decisions irrespective of the Body is to mislead the saints. The Bible shows us that elders are appointed in every church and in every city and that the boundary of a church is the city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11). Thus, the seven local churches in Revelation 1 through 3 are identified by the city in which they are located. Further, there are references to both the church universal and the churches located in a region (Acts 15:41, 16:1; Rev. 1:4). These points are biblical. Those who promote the independence of the local churches say that because elders are appointed in each church, the churches are independent in all their affairs. It is true that each local church has its own eldership that is responsible before the Lord for the business affairs of the church, for the care of the local saints, and for following the teaching and fellowship of the apostles (Acts 11:30; 1 Pet. 5:1-2; Titus 1:9). However, this does not mean that the churches are independent of one another. Further, the thought of independence fades in consideration of the local churches as local expressions of the one Body of Christ. The thought of independent local churches is not found in the Bible and is contrary to the nature of the Body of Christ, in which not only the individual members are dependent on the other members but even the churches are dependent on one another. Concerning independence and the local churches Witness Lee stated:

If we claim to be independent, we damage ourselves. We should never forget that God has only one church. The church in Anaheim is just a small part of the church of God. We should not think that there is the church of God plus the church in Anaheim. When we speak of the church of God, we imply the local church. Through the years I have learned the following lesson. The more we honor the uniqueness of the church, the more blessings we will receive. The church in which you are meeting today may be in Spokane or in Anaheim, but we have to remember that these are just parts of the church. They are not independent. We are dependent upon one another. All the churches need the help of the other churches because we are one Body. We have to see the Body. (87)

This word matched what he said in 1988, when the rebellion began, concerning independence, first related to the believers and then among the churches:

In God's economy and in the Body of Christ *independence* is a devilish word. We Christians should never be independent. We should not be independent of God or of one another. We cannot go on in the Christian life if we isolate ourselves from one another. Furthermore, no local church can be absolutely independent from the other local churches. The local churches should be dependent on one another. The church in Seattle should be dependent on the church in Spokane, and the churches in the United States should be dependent on the churches in England. We must be careful concerning the creeping in of different teachings related to matters such as autonomy and federation. (*The Body of Christ*, 18, emphasis in original)

The Bible shows us that the church began to degrade near the end of the first century as some began to teach different things and that the church continued its downward course as some turned away from Paul and the

teaching of the apostles (1 Tim 1:3; 2 Tim 1:15; cf. Acts 2:42). Church history affirms that the degradation continued until it was brought under the centralized, hierarchical system of the Roman Catholic Church. Beginning roughly from the Reformation, Protestants adopted differing organizing principles, such as state churches, free churches, denominations, and independent assemblies, with differing forms of church government, such as episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational. Yet none of these took the organic Body of Christ as its basis. For example, of the independent assemblies of the Brethren movement, Witness Lee said:

The Brethren were raised up in Great Britain a century and a half ago. They were very good, and we received much help from them. However, they made some serious mistakes. One of these mistakes was placing too much emphasis on the independence of the local assembly. It seems that the Brethren either did not see or forgot that a local church is a part of the unique Body of Christ. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, (Msgs. 189-204), 2179*)

Without the Body of Christ there could be no genuine local churches. Without the local churches, there would be no practical way to experience and enjoy the Body of Christ. Each local church expresses, however incompletely, the one Body of Christ in its locality, but it does not do so independently from all the other local churches. Moreover, a local church is not a "local body of Christ," as that would mean that there were many bodies of Christ, a great heresy (Eph. 4:4). The earth has only one moon that shines in every city; no matter how many cities it shines upon, it is the same moon. Brother Lee used this metaphor to illustrate that the local churches are the expression of the universal Church, the Body of Christ:

When we say that we are the church in a certain locality, such as the church in Los Angeles, this is not a name but a description of a fact. We are just the church. The church does not have a name, just as the moon does not have a name. Once in the Far East, someone was so impressed with the United States that he said even the moon was bigger there. But there is no such thing as an American moon or a Chinese moon. Just as there is one moon, there is only one church. When the moon appears in London, it is the moon in London; when it appears in Los Angeles, it is the moon in Los Angeles. Regardless of where the moon appears, it is still the same moon. Just as there is the moon in Los Angeles and the moon in London, there is the church in Los Angeles and the church in London. There is one church, and this church is manifested or expressed in different localities. (*The Satanic Chaos in the Old Creation and the Divine Economy for the New Creation, 110*)

Consider the following statement by Witness Lee:

...the management of a local church is, on the one hand, local in its administration yet, on the other hand, not isolated in its communication. Not only is there the mutual sharing of finances; even in other practical affairs we see the same thing. The churches in the various localities are managed separately, yet they are not separated absolutely. They are still the universal, corporate Body of Christ. 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*)

Stressing independence is against the realization and practice of the Body of Christ, and contending for independence damages the oneness of the Body of Christ. Although they are overseen locally, the local churches are not separated organically from one another. Together they manifest the corporate Body of Christ.

The local churches are neither independent from one another nor federated together; they are neither an organization nor an affiliation. The harmonious relationship among the local churches and with those who labor among the churches is not a matter of an organizational system. Rather it is wholly a matter of life in the organic Body of Christ with Christ Himself as the Head and as all in all (Eph. 4:15; Col. 3: 10-11). Although practically limited by geographic location, the local churches are governed by the vision and realization of the Body of Christ, a living organism that is transcendent of time and geography. May we all realize to a greater extent that the local churches are not united by organization nor merely independently associated but are organically related in the unique Body of Christ.