

## **Selected Ministry on the Apostles' Ongoing Role in Established Churches**

### ***The Collected Works of Watchman Nee [CWWN], vol. 22: The Assembly Life & The Prayer Ministry of the Church***

p. 30:

The books of Timothy tell us, "Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses" (1 Tim. 5:19, KJV). In this matter, we should pay attention to two points. First, there must be a written accusation; words from the mouth do not count because many times words alone are groundless and can easily be denied or changed. Second, there must be two or three witnesses; the testimony of one is not reliable. In the Bible, two or three witnesses constitute the word of testimony. The apostles and those whom they have specifically assigned should be responsible for handling such accusations.

### ***CWWN, vol. 57: The Resumption of Watchman Nee's Ministry***

p. 74:

One local church cannot exercise supervision over another church. However, the work has the right to exercise supervision over a local church. The church in Antioch never exercised supervision over another church, but the apostles who went out from Antioch did exercise supervision over other churches. When a problem arises in a local church, the matter has to be brought to the attention of the workers. First Timothy 5:19 indicates that an accusation against an elder must be accompanied by the word of two or three witnesses. An accusation could not be based on rumors or hearsay; there had to be witnesses, and the accusations had to be presented to Timothy. Timothy was a worker. Therefore, he could deal with the problem of the elders in a locality.

### ***The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1965, vol. 4 ("The Way of the Lord's Recovery")***

pp. 185-186:

#### **After Establishing a Church and Appointing Elders for Its Administration the Apostles Still Being Responsible for and Having Authority Concerning the Church**

The elders, standing on the ground of the local church, are responsible for the administration of a church. Although this administration is independent of other localities, it is not independent of the apostles. At least two passages in 1 Corinthians demonstrate that the apostles' responsibility for and authority concerning the church. The first is in chapter 5, where Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to rebuke them for tolerating the sin of the evil brother and to tell them to remove him from their midst (vv. 1-5). The apostle Paul gave such a command to the church there because the church had failed to fulfill its duty. The second passage is in chapter 11, which Paul concludes by saying, "The rest I will set in order when I come" (v. 34). From this we can see that although the apostles commit the local administration to the elders, they will 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.

In Timothy 5:19 Paul said, "Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses." This was Paul's instruction to Timothy, a young apostle, concerning dealing with elders. 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.

**Because the Church's Administration Is Not Independent of the Apostles  
the Elders Needing to Administrate the Local Churches  
according to the Leading of the Apostles**

After the apostles establish a local church, they appoint elders and commit to them the authority and responsibility for the administration of the church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). However, although this administration is independent from that of other localities, the three portions of Scripture in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy mentioned above clearly prove that this independence is not also toward the apostles. For a church to stand independent of the apostles is equivalent to rejecting the apostles. This is an abnormal situation, not mere independence.

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.

**The Apostles Leading, Supporting, Adjusting, and  
Building Up the Churches Instead of Controlling Them**

First Corinthians 5 is a good example of the apostles' intervention. When Paul felt that the church in Corinth should remove the evil brother from their midst, he commanded them rather than simply fellowshiping with them. Paul even said that, in the name of the Lord, he had delivered the evil brother to Satan that he might be disciplined (vv. 4-5). If the elders in Corinth had not dealt with this situation according to Paul's leading, they would not have been a good pattern. This would have been equivalent to rejecting the leadership of the apostle. The elders in a local church should properly lead the church according to the work carried out by the apostles. If the elders fulfill their responsibility, it will be neither necessary nor appropriate for the apostles to intervene. However, if the elders in a certain church do not act according to the proper principle, refusing to lead the church according to the work of the apostles, the apostles have the position to intervene, because it is their work that leads the churches on. The apostles' intervention is not to control the churches but to lead, support, adjust, and build them up.

p. 189:

**NOT ALL FULL-TIME SERVING ONES BEING APOSTLES**

It is worth our attention to note that not all full-timers are apostles. A brother who has been saved only a few years and is only beginning to learn to serve the Lord as a "young Timothy" is not an apostle. Although many saints may be involved in the Lord's work, not every one is an apostle. Consider the co-workers of Paul. Although Luke, for example, was in Paul's company, we do not see from the Bible that he was an apostle, but the Bible does indicate that Timothy and Silas (that is, Silvanus) were apostles (Acts 17:14-15; 18:5; 2 Cor. 1:19; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2:6). This shows that among those who walk and work with the apostles, some are apostles and others are not.

pp. 189-190:

**Only the Serving Ones Who Are Able to Raise Up Churches  
and Assume an Overall Leadership in the Churches Being Apostles**

In God's administration it is incumbent upon the apostles to appoint elders. Who then are qualified to be called apostles? The principle is clear that apostles are those who are able to raise up and lead the churches. Whether a full-time co-worker can be an apostle depends solely on whether or not he has the ability to lead the churches. If he is not capable of leading the churches in an overall manner, he is only a full-timer who participates in the work; he is not qualified to stand in the position of an apostle. This kind of full-timer has a share in the work, but he should not intervene to touch the elders in the affairs of a local church, as an apostle does.

p. 191:

**Respecting the Arrangement of the Senior Brothers and Not Making Independent Decisions**

In 1932 I began to have a share in the work, and in 1946, after the conclusion of the war with Japan, I went to Nanking. Prior to that time I had appointed elders only in Chefoo. The initial arrangement of responsibilities in Nanking was carried out under the direction of Brother Watchman Nee. During the war, when communication was interrupted, the church had enlarged, and its needs had increased. It was only then that I sought the Lord's leading and appointed several other brothers to be elders. That was the only occasion up until 1946, other than in Chefoo, in which I appointed elders, and I did this in no other place. Moreover, it was under Brother Nee's assignment that I participated in that responsibility.

We need to know that not everyone who is a full-timer in the work may appoint elders or intervene in the elders' affairs. We must learn this lesson, because the appointment of elders is not a simple matter. In my own experience, I was not able thirty years ago to discern who could bear specific duties in the church. If I had appointed elders at that time, I might have appointed the wrong ones. Since this responsibility is placed in our hands, we need to be experienced to a certain degree. Some insurance companies do not insure persons who have only recently obtained a driver's license, and those that insure such persons charge high fees, having little confidence in the new drivers. This is not unreasonable. We must admit that experience is valuable. Simply that we love the Lord, are zealous for Him, have some growth in Him, and are willing to consecrate ourselves to serve Him full time does not mean that we are competent to be co-workers and apostles who appoint elders in the churches.

p. 194:

Based on *The Normal Christian Church Life*, some claim that it is permissible for elders to reject the apostles. This is not noble, and it was not Brother Nee's intention in writing this book. If certain elders take the matters spoken of in this book as a basis for rejecting the apostles, they have lost their genuine position as elders before the Lord. We must realize that even the Bible is not an organizational code of laws for the churches. It simply gives us a lane in which to "drive," or a pathway for our going on. We must all learn to live in spirit. Everything is a matter of being in spirit, of having a proper motive, and of fearing the Lord.

If someone is doing a work with the intention of controlling the churches in every place, his work will be rejected by the Lord. The work of the co-workers is to support rather than to control the churches. However, if certain ones misbehave in the churches, the co-workers should correct them. The apostle Paul is our example. In dealing with those who created problems in the church, his attitude was firm and serious. For the benefit of the church he could not allow people to divide and damage the Body of Christ as they wished. However, Paul had no intention to control the churches. He simply rendered support, leading, and teaching to the churches.

**1986, vol. 3 (“Elders’ Training, Book 9: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way (1)”)**

pp. 63-64:

There is another aspect to the apostles’ relationship with a local church, which Brother Nee talked to us about, in 1 Timothy 5. First Timothy 5:19-20 says, “Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses. The ones who sin reprove before all that the rest also may have fear.” Timothy was instructed by the apostle Paul on how to receive an accusation against an elder. This indicates that the apostles have authority to deal with the elders even after they have been appointed by the apostles to be elders. If there is a problem among the elders, this case should go to the apostles, and the apostles have to judge. The apostles have the authority to rebuke a sinful elder in front of others. The apostles’ hands should be off of the church in its administration, but this does not mean that the apostles have absolutely nothing to do with a local church after its elders have been established.

The wrong and sinful elders can be accused by the saints, and this accusation should go to the apostles. Eventually, the apostles become a small law court to judge the situation. According to 1 Corinthians 6, even the saints can form a small law court to judge cases among themselves (vv. 1-3). The apostles should make a judgment in cases regarding the alleged wrongdoing of certain elders. It is up to the apostles to justify or condemn them. According to 1 Timothy 5:20, if an elder is judged to be sinful, he can be reprovved before the others. A sinning elder should receive public reproof because of his public position. Based upon Paul’s word to Timothy in this matter, how can we say that the apostles, who appointed the elders and handed over the church to them, have nothing to do with the church or the elders once they have been appointed?

The entire book of 1 Corinthians is a “bothering book.” The writing apostle bothered the church in Corinth. The entire book may be considered as a commandment to the local church. First Corinthians 11:34 says, “If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, that you may not come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come.” Even after charging the church to take care of so many things, Paul says that he will set in order the rest when he comes. We need to come back to the Word. The Word is our highest authority, our constitution. This verse tells us that some things were not set in order by the apostle Paul. In his Epistle to the church in Corinth, many things were set in order by Paul’s charges, such as the matters of marriage, the eating of sacrifices to idols, head covering, the Lord’s table, etc. Paul charged the Corinthians to deal with at least eleven problems in his fellowship with them. He charged the church to do many things. As the apostle, he did not have the position to administrate the church, but he did have the position, right, and responsibility to charge the elders to do it.

**1988, vol. 3 (“The Local Churches and the Body of Christ”)**

pp. 120-121:

According to Ephesians 4:11-12, the gifted persons—the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers—labor to perfect the saints to do the work of the ministry, which is not merely the building up of the local churches but the building up of the Body of Christ. The local churches cannot be completely autonomous, for the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers are gifts to the universal Body of Christ. Although they labor in the local churches to perfect the saints, their work is for the building up of the one universal Body. Verse 16 refers to the gifted ones as joints of the rich supply to the Body. Thus, neither of the Brethren teachings concerning the church is right. The local churches should not be organized into a federation, but merely to build up autonomous local churches neglects the building up of the Body of Christ.

p. 126:

*The Normal Christian Church Life* says that after the apostles appoint the elders in a locality and hand over the church to them, the apostles have no part in managing the church's affairs. After this book was published in 1939, some saints misused this word to say that apostles have no right to interfere with the churches. In 1948 Brother Nee had a formal training for co-workers and elders at Kuling Mountain. There he said that some misunderstood his word in *The Normal Christian Church Life*. As recorded in the book *Church Affairs*, Brother Nee said, "After the meeting in Hangkow [referring to messages published in *The Normal Christian Church Life*], some brothers misunderstood. They thought that though the elders are appointed by the apostles, they did not have to listen to the apostles. This is impossible" (p. 143). This relates to today's church life.

p. 136:

The care of the apostles for the churches is another strong indication that the local churches are not autonomous. In Acts 14:23 Paul appointed elders in several churches that he had recently established. Because those churches were less than one year old, the ones appointed as elders could not have been mature. Thus, for the churches to go on, there was the need of continued care from the apostles. All the writings of the apostles were for the care of the churches. The apostles never stopped caring for a church, even after establishing its elders. When Paul was put into prison, he still took care of the churches.

p. 140:

Once the apostles had established the churches, appointed elders, and placed the churches in the elders' hands, the apostles did not keep their hands off the churches. To teach that the apostles should leave the churches alone is the wrong teaching of autonomy. In Acts the apostles continually cared for the churches. In 2 Corinthians 11:28 Paul speaks of his anxious concern for all the churches. He stayed in Antioch to perfect the saints. After the apostles established the churches and appointed elders, the apostles continued to visit and teach the saints in these churches. They also wrote Epistles to teach the saints.

In 1937 in Hangkow Brother Watchman Nee spoke the messages that were published in *The Normal Christian Church Life*. Eleven years later, in 1948, at Kuling Mountain, he said, "After the meeting in Hangkow, some brothers misunderstood. They thought that though elders are appointed by the apostles, they did not have to listen to the apostles. This is impossible" (*Church Affairs*, p. 143). The thought of the local churches being autonomous comes from the British Brethren. Brother Nee corrected this misunderstanding in a definite way. He said that the apostles stay with the elders, teach them, and train them. This is to perfect the saints. The apostles are not finished dealing with the elders after they have appointed them.

### **("The Apostles' Relationship with the Churches and Their Perfecting of the Saints")**

pp. 165-166:

Some Saints may feel discouraged and disappointed because of the negative situation of a church, as indicated by things such as arguments or opinions among the brothers. However, in the New Testament the apostles exhort us to love one another and to forgive one another. Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ also forgave you." Actually, it is precisely because the church will inevitably be involved in negative situations that it cannot be separated from the apostles but instead needs the apostles' enlightening, instructing, reproofing, and correcting.

In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul said to the Corinthian believers, "What do you want? Should I come to you with a rod or in love and a spirit of meekness?" (v. 21). Actually, when Paul wrote to the Corinthian believers, he hoped to come to them in love and a spirit of meekness, not with a rod. In

1 Corinthians Paul dealt with many problems in the church in Corinth. In chapter 1 through 4 he dealt with the matters of divisions among the Corinthians; in chapter 5, with the matter of a sinful brother by charging the saints to remove the evil person from their midst; in chapter 6, with the matter of lawsuits among the saints; in chapter 8, with the eating of things sacrificed to idols; and in chapter 11, with head covering and the Lord's supper. Then at the end of chapter 11 Paul still had many other things to charge the church in Corinth, but he could not write them at the time; thus, he said, "The rest I will set in order when I come" (v. 34). Paul's word here shows that he not only cared for the matters of the church in Corinth but also desired to personally set them in order for the church. I believe that when Paul wrote this Epistle, there were already elders who were administrating the church in Corinth. Nevertheless, Paul still desired to personally set things in order for the church. This proves that the apostle did not take his hands off the church after he appointed the elders; on the contrary, the apostle still bore the responsibilities of teaching, nurturing, and overseeing the church on the spiritual side.

### **("The Need for Revival in the Lord's Recovery Through Prayer")**

p. 213:

Because of certain misunderstandings, some have improperly spoken of the autonomy of the local churches. In the New Testament there is no mention of either autonomy or federation. First Corinthians demonstrates that after establishing elders in the church, Paul did not stay away from the church. This Epistle is full of instructions, showing that the church in Corinth was still under the teaching and building hand of the apostle Paul, who established that church. Paul even gave a command to the church concerning an evil member (5:1-5, 11). This was a matter of the administration of the church, and in this matter Paul intervened in the affairs of the church. Therefore, it is not correct to say that the apostles never intervene in the affairs of a local church. In 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul says that he taught the same thing "everywhere in every church." This shows that Paul strongly intended for all the churches to be the same in teaching. After giving explicit instructions to the church, in 11:34 he says, "The rest I will set in order when I come," showing that when he came to Corinth in person, he would continue to intervene in the church's affairs.

Most of the Epistles were written to local churches; even those to Timothy and Titus were concerning the church. All these matters are a strong proof that after establishing elders in a local church, the apostles did not stay away. Otherwise, how could the apostles perfect the saints (Eph. 4:11-12)? Acts 16 shows that Paul was busy with the churches in Derbe and Lystra. If the apostles stayed away from the church, they could not have been nursing mothers cherishing their own children, and fathers exhorting and consoling them (1 Thes. 2:7, 11). The local churches are not autonomous. Moreover, the totality of all the churches is not a federation but an organism, the one organic Body of Christ. No part of such an organism could ever be autonomous.

### **("Building Up the Body in Oneness")**

p. 254:

At the end of the Epistle to the Colossians, Paul said that when his letter was read among them, they should cause it to be read in the church in Laodicea, and the Colossians should also read the letter that he wrote to the Laodiceans (4:16). Many of Paul's Epistles were written to a specific church, yet eventually they were written to all the churches. Eventually, what Paul wrote to every church specifically was written to the entire Body of Christ without regard for space and time. Thus, what we should do is not merely build up our own church locally but build up the Body of Christ universally. Every local church is a part of the Body of Christ, which is indivisible. If we divide the Body, it will cease to be in a practical way. Therefore, we must practically keep the oneness in and among the local churches. If all the saints say that they are the church in a particular city and that

they have nothing to do with the other churches, this will divide the Body. Then there may be many local churches, but there will be no Body in reality. The Body will be cut to pieces.

Therefore, it is wrong to teach that the local churches are autonomous. The truth is that not one church is absolutely autonomous. By writing two letters to the church in Corinth, the apostle Paul surely “interfered” with that church. In his first Epistle he told the Corinthians that it was wrong for them to say, “I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ” (1:12). If we say that we belong to a certain gifted member of the church, we divide the Body of Christ. Paul not only interfered with the church in Corinth; he also gave a command to the church to remove a sinning brother (5:13). After rebuking the saints for their disorderly conduct related to the Lord's supper, at the end of chapter 11 Paul said, “The rest I will set in order when I come” (v. 34).

pp. 280-281:

In 1 Timothy Paul instructed Timothy who represented Paul in the apostolic work, not to receive an accusation against an elder except based upon two or three witnesses (5:19). He also instructed Timothy to reprove a sinning elder before the whole church (v. 20). To whom should an accusation against an elder be made? The answer is clearly that it should be made to the apostles. This is another strong proof that after an apostle has appointed elders, the elders are still under the apostle's authority and management. After they have appointed men as elders, the apostles still have the authority to deal with the elders, even to judge, condemn, and reprove the elders. This is the clear word of the Bible.

pp. 282-283:

According to the teaching of the New Testament, the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers cannot stay away from the churches. These gifted ones must perfect the churches continually. New ones are being added to the churches constantly, and these new ones need to be perfected by the gifted members. After a class of students graduates from a university, the professors do not retire, and the university does not close its doors. Semester after semester a new group of students enter the university, and these students must be educated by the professors in the university. Likewise, a local church, including the elders, needs the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers to perfect them year after year.

In the future, if a storm comes into the church life and some say that after the elders are appointed, the apostles can no longer touch the church, we should all be clear regarding the truth. We should be clear that after the apostles appoint the elders, they can go back to visit the churches again and again and can even write letters to the churches. While they are staying in one locality, they can write letters to the churches in other localities. The apostles can not only contact the churches and the elders, but can even charge them, command them, and in some matters come personally to set things in order. There is no such thing as an end to the apostles' involvement with the churches.

Ephesians 4:11 and 12 make it very clear that Christ, the Head of the Body, has given apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers not to do a temporary work but to do a long-term work to perfect the saints. At a critical juncture Paul stayed in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). In 1 Corinthians 4:21 Paul wrote, “What do you want? Should I come to you with a rod or in love and a spirit of meekness?” When the Lord was on the earth, He used a whip of cords to cleanse the temple (John 2:15). The apostle's speaking of his coming with a rod indicates that he had his apostolic authority.

### **(“Being Perfected to Build Up the Body”)**

pp. 292-293:

Some claim that after the apostles establish a church and appoint elders, they should keep their hands off the church. Such ones claim that each church is an autonomous entity that should have

nothing to do with the apostles or other churches. This claim contradicts the teaching of the New Testament. According to the New Testament, the apostle Paul visited and wrote Epistles to the churches that he had established (Acts 18:18-21a, 23; 19:1-7; 20:13-38; Eph. 1:1). For instance, in his first Epistle to the church in Corinth, Paul instructs and rebukes the Corinthians concerning a number of matters (4:14; 6:5; 15:34). In 4:21 Paul indicates that he could come to the Corinthians with a rod for discipline. In this Epistle he exhorts the church in Corinth to deal with many problems in the church, including division (1:10-13), and evil brothers (ch. 5), lawsuits among believers (6:1-11), and the abuse of freedom (vv. 12-20). In 11:34 Paul says, "If anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, that you may not come together for judgment. And the rest I will set in order when I come." It is significant that after charging the saints in Corinth to take care of many matters, Paul says that he will set in order the remaining matters during his next visit to them. This demonstrates that after establishing a church, the apostle Paul continued to care for that church by visiting and by writing to it.

p. 294:

Some who read Brother Nee's book *The Normal Christian Church Life* hold the concept that once the apostles have appointed elders in a particular local church, the apostles do not have the right to intervene with the affairs of that church under any circumstances. However, this is a misunderstanding of Brother Nee's word. In 1948, eleven years after sharing the messages in *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Brother Nee released the messages contained in the book entitled *Church Affairs* in order to correct this misunderstanding. In this book Brother Nee points out that after the elders have been appointed by the apostles, the elders should take the lead in the church according to the apostles' teaching. If the elders lead others astray or are wrong in a certain way, the saints can bring accusations against them to the apostles. If the leading brothers in the churches do not see the truth concerning the apostles' continuous care for the churches and insist that the churches are fully autonomous, they will bring in confusion and division. We should practice the truth concerning the apostles' continual care for the local churches. Since the Lord's recovery has been built upon truth and life, in order to be preserved in the recovery, we need to practice the truth.

### **("Caring for the Church According to the New Way in the Organic Union with the Lord")**

p. 439:

Because of certain misunderstandings, some have improperly spoken of the autonomy of the local churches. In the New Testament there is not mention of either autonomy or federation. First Corinthians demonstrates that after establishing elders in the church, Paul did not stay away from the church. This Epistle is full of instructions, showing that the church in Corinth was still under the teaching and building hand of the apostle Paul, who established that church (5:1-5, 11). Paul even gave a command to the church concerning an evil member. This was a matter of the administration of the church, and in this matter Paul intervened in the affairs of the church. Therefore, it is not correct to say that the apostles never intervene in the affairs of a local church. In 1 Corinthians 4:17 Paul says that he taught the same thing "everywhere in every church." This shows us that Paul strongly intended for all the churches to be the same in teaching. After giving explicit instructions to the church, in 11:34 he says, "The rest I will set in order when I come," showing that when he came to Corinth in person, he would continue to intervene in the church's affairs.

Most of the Epistles were written to local churches; even those written to Timothy and Titus were concerning the church. All these matters are a strong proof that after establishing elders in a local church, the apostles did not stay away. Otherwise, how could the apostles perfect the saints (Eph. 4:11-12)? Acts 16 shows us that Paul was busy with the churches in Lystra and Derbe. If the apostles stayed away from the churches, they could not have been nursing mothers cherishing their

own children and father exhorting and consoling them (1 Thes. 2:7, 11). The local churches are not autonomous. Moreover, the totality of all the local churches is not a federation but an organism, the one organic Body of Christ. No part of such an organism could ever be autonomous.

### **1988, vol. 4 (“The Perfecting of the Saints and the Building Up of the Body of Christ”)**

p. 95:

The first wind of teaching says that after the apostles appoint the elders, they can no longer be involved with the matters of a local church. This kind of speaking is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. The New Testament shows that after the apostles appointed the elders, they entrusted to the elders the responsibility of caring for and leading the church, yet they themselves never removed their hands. On the contrary, the apostles continued to perfect the saints and even to teach the elders. According to the record of Acts and the Epistles, after the apostles appointed the elders, they did their best to visit and strengthen the churches (Acts 15:36, 40-41; 1 Cor. 4:17; 11:34b). Paul even stayed in Corinth for a year and a half and in Ephesus for three years. During his last preaching journey, on his way back to Jerusalem, he sent for the elders in Ephesus to come to him that he might remind them, charge them, admonish them, and teach them. In his first letter to the Corinthians he rebuked and instructed the Corinthians again and again. He even said that the remaining matters he would set in order when he came (v. 34b). This clearly shows that in order to perfect the saints, the apostle cannot give up the church and takes his hands off after he appoints the elders. To say that the apostles cannot henceforth be involved with the church is a wrong teaching. Some are blowing this wind and are even practicing this openly. As a result, this has become a problem among us.

### **(“Messages in Preparation for the Spread of the Gospel”)**

pp. 209-210:

As a matter of fact, the apostles never abandoned the churches after they established the elders. Paul not only wrote letters to the churches and visited them, but he also stayed in Ephesus for three years. According to the record in Acts, during Paul's last journey to visit Jerusalem, in the midst of his busy schedule, he sent men to Ephesus to invite the elders; he spoke to them, telling them that from the first day that he set foot in Asia he taught them publicly and from house to house (vv. 18-20). Within Paul's charge there were also exhortations and warnings. He did this not only to the church in Ephesus but to the church in Corinth as well. Actually, every letter of Paul's was written to churches where elders were already established.

After Paul appointed elders in every place, even though he might not have been able to visit those places personally, he wrote letters to fellowship with them. He said to the church in Corinth, “The rest I will set in order when I come” (1 Cor. 11:34). If the apostles took their hands off the churches after the elders were appointed, to whom then were all the Epistles in the New Testament written? Paul said that “the anxious concern for all the churches” pressed upon him daily (2 Cor. 11:28). Some among us have misapplied the words of Brother Watchman Nee in his book *The Normal Christian Church Life*, claiming that the apostles should not touch anything in a local church after they have appointed the elders. Those saying these kinds of things have not read Brother Nee's book *Church Affairs*, written ten years later. In that book Brother Nee says that after the apostles have appointed the elders, they still have to stay there to teach and to lead the elders, showing them how things should be done. If we do not check with the Bible and do not verify the facts, we will easily take in all kinds of hearsay.

**1989, vol. 1 (“The Lord’s Present Recovery Concerning the Building Up of the Body of Christ”)**

p. 109:

We should not allow the teaching concerning the autonomy of the local churches to creep into the church life, for this erroneous teaching will damage the churches. Some dissenting ones insist that after the apostles establish a church and appoint elders, the apostles should keep their hands off of the church, leaving the church as an autonomy. Such a teaching of autonomy is not scriptural. For instance, after helping to establish the church in Ephesus and appointing the elders there, the apostle Paul did not keep his hands off of that church. Instead, at one point he remained with the church for three years, declaring to the saints there all the counsel of God, admonishing them with tears night and day, and teaching them both publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:18-38). This indicates that instead of taking his hands off of the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul stayed with the church in order to continue to perfect them. The teaching of autonomy is wrong, and we must reject it.

**(“Questions, Answers, and Fellowship Concerning the Organic Practice of the New Way”)**

pp. 400, 401:

*Question: Is the concept of the autonomy of the local churches contrary to the perfecting work of the gifted ones in different localities.*

*Answer: ...The different teaching of autonomy was secretly brought in among the churches in the Lord’s recovery to separate the local churches and keep them from being helped by the gifts. Some even say that once the apostles have appointed the elders in a local church, the apostles should leave the church alone and keep their hands off of it. If this were true, there would be no way for the perfecting in Ephesians 4:12 to be fulfilled. An apostle may remain in a locality or visit it for an extended period in order to perfect the saints. This is the New Testament revelation, and this has been our practice for many years (Acts 20:20, 27, 31). For instance, after Brother Watchman Nee moved to Shanghai in 1927 and helped establish the church there, he remained there for more than twenty-five years. He stayed until he was imprisoned. If a church insists on its autonomy and does not welcome gifted ones, its saints cannot be perfected, and it will experience spiritual poverty and scarcity.*

**1989, vol. 3 (“The Exercise and Practice of the God-ordained Way”)**

pp. 406-407:

There is a different teaching regarding “autonomy,” which originated with some of the Brethren teachers. The teaching of autonomy says that once the apostles establish a church and appoint the elders, the apostles should keep their hands off the church and not touch the saints. If this were the case, how could the apostles perfect the saints? This is altogether a strange teaching, a wind of teaching. How can saints be perfected if the perfecting ones stay away from them? By reading the New Testament you can see that the truth is that the apostles were always with the saints and contacting the churches. Paul established the church in Ephesus and appointed the elders there, but he never abandoned Ephesus. He visited Ephesus again and again; even once he stayed there for three years (Acts 20:31). Surely he did not keep his hands off the church. This teaching of autonomy was published in a book by one Brethren teacher, and we rejected it years ago.

Paul did not stay away from the churches. He not only visited the churches but also wrote many epistles to the churches. After establishing a church with the appointment of the elders, the apostles repeatedly went back to the churches they had established. When they could not go to visit for a period of time, they cared for the churches by writing letters. They never gave up their care for the churches.

In Acts 20 while Paul was going back to Jerusalem the last time, he could not forget about the church in Ephesus, having labored so much on them. He was very concerned about them. Therefore, when he came to Miletus, he sent word to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church (v. 17). He reminded them, saying, "I did not withhold any of those things that are profitable by not declaring them to you and by not teaching you publicly and from house to house" (v. 20). He also said, "I did not shrink from declaring to you all the counsel of God" (v. 27), and "for three years, night and day, I did not cease admonishing each one with tears" (v. 31). Surely the apostle did not take his hands off the church; rather, he continued to perfect them by teaching them, admonishing them, etc., all the time. The teaching of autonomy is a wrong teaching, and we must reject it.

**1991-1992, vol. 2 ("The Work and Warfare to Build Up the Body of Christ")**

pp. 120-121:

The dissenting ones also wrongly stressed that after the apostles appointed elders, they took their hands off and left the churches to the oversight of the elders. Their claim was an indication that they were lacking in the basic knowledge of the Bible. The New Testament record in Acts 20:17-31 shows that the apostle Paul did not keep his hands off the church in Ephesus after the appointment of elders in that city; rather, for three years he did not cease admonishing each one in Ephesus with tears (v. 31). When the dissenting ones had no way in the Scriptures, some among them pointed to Brother Watchman Nee's statement in *The Normal Christian Church Life* that after the apostles established churches, they left and went elsewhere. I pointed out in response that the messages in Brother Nee's book were given in 1937 and published in Chinese the following year. However, about ten years later he released the messages now published in *Church Affairs*. In the first chapter of *Church Affairs* Brother Nee emphasizes that the apostles should remain to train the appointed elders to bear responsibility.

**1991-1992, vol. 4 ("Southern California Elders' and Co-workers' Meetings")**

p. 308:

Some have utilized Brother Nee's book *The Normal Christian Church Life* to argue for local autonomy, but later books by Brother Nee clarify the relationship between the apostles and the churches. For instance, in *Church Affairs* he says, "You should cause the elders of the local churches to be capable of bearing responsibility. Paul did not leave Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus and tell them to return after they established elders. Rather, he told them to set up elders and to teach and train the elders how to be proper elders, helping them to an extent that they could bear responsibility before God" (ch. 1). In a chapter entitled "The Relationship between the Local Church, the Work, and the Apostles" Brother Nee says, "The apostles give the authority to the elders, and the elders administrate the local church directly. Therefore, everyone who is an elder, an overseer, must learn to listen to the apostles. Because their being elders is due to the apostles, they cannot overthrow the authority of the apostles" (ch. 9).

**1993, vol. 1 ("Miscellaneous Fellowship with the Church in Anaheim")**

p. 54:

In a recent rebellion among us, a teaching regarding autonomy was promoted. Some claimed that after the apostles establish a church and appoint elders, they should keep their hands off the church, leaving the church autonomous. Such a teaching concerning autonomy is contrary to the Scriptures and produces local sects.

**(“Southern California Elders’ and Co-workers’ Meetings”)**

pp. 268:

In the recent rebellion among us, some who had not been delivered from their natural man promoted a teaching regarding autonomy. These dissenting ones taught that every local church is fully autonomous. However, this is contrary to the revelation in the Bible. The church in Ephesus, for instance, was not absolutely autonomous. After appointing the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:17; cf. 14:23), Paul visited the church in Ephesus and remained with the church for three years (ch. 19; 20:31; 1 Cor. 16:8). Later, while journeying to Jerusalem, he sent some from Miletus to call for the elders in the church in Ephesus to come to him (Acts 20:16-17). Ephesians 4:11-12 says that Christ “gave some as apostles and some as prophets and some as evangelists and some as shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ.” The dissenting ones in the recent rebellion claimed that after establishing the churches, the apostles should keep their hands off the churches and the saints in those churches. However, if the apostles are not allowed to care for the churches by laboring on the saints in the churches, how can the perfecting of the saints in Ephesians 4 be carried out? It is wrong to teach that the apostles, after they have established a church and appointed elders, should keep their hands off the church, leaving it as an autonomy. The dissenters promoted the doctrine of autonomy in order to vindicate themselves, to make a name for themselves, and to terminate the ministry in the Lord's recovery. We must reject the teaching concerning autonomy and must care for the inner life and the Body of Christ.

p. 317:

The dissenters assert that after establishing a church and appointing elders, the apostles should keep their hands off the church and allow it to be autonomous. This teaching of autonomy is contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. According to the New Testament, the apostle Paul visited and wrote Epistles to the churches that he had established (Acts 18:18-21a, 23; 19:1-7; Eph. 1:1). After appointing the elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:17; cf. 14:23). Paul visited the church in Ephesus and remained with the church for three years (ch. 19; 20:31; 1 Cor. 16:8). During this time he admonished the saints in Ephesus with tears night and day and taught the saints publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20, 31). Later, while journeying to Jerusalem, he sent some from Miletus to call for the elders of the church in Ephesus to come to him (vv. 16-17). This indicates that the church in Ephesus was not absolutely autonomous. If the dissenting ones saw the Body of Christ, they would not dare to teach or practice absolute autonomy of local churches.

**(“Caring for the Church by Practicing the Vital Groups”)**

p. 514:

G. H. Lang, a teacher among the open Brethren, opposed John Darby's view of the church and taught that each local church should be autonomous. This was a wrong teaching. In *The Normal Christian Church Life* Watchman Nee taught that after establishing a church in a city and appointing elders, a worker should then travel to another city, but this was only one side of his teaching. A person's last words, not his first words, are the consummation of his speaking. After a number of years Brother Nee taught that the workers should remain in a city to help the church and teach the elders how to be one and how to care for the saints. Paul set up the church in Ephesus and appointed elders, and then he remained in Ephesus and appointed elders, and then he remained in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). It is wrong to teach that the local churches are autonomous and that the one who raises up a church should stay away from it. If this were true, all the apostles would eventually have no job.

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