

WHEN PROBLEMS ARISE IN THE LOCAL CHURCHES: AVOIDING TWO ERRORS

When problems arise in the local churches, there is a tendency among some to ask, "If this ministry and the local churches are really a recovery of the Lord, how could such things happen?" To answer this question, we need to consider the record of the New Testament concerning the nature and function of the ministry and concerning the standing versus the condition of the local churches.

The Ministry and the Local Churches

The Bible recognizes only two ministries—the ministry of the old covenant and the ministry of the new covenant (2 Cor. 3:7-9). As their designations imply, these two ministries issue from two covenants, indicating that in the Bible the word *ministry* refers to man's service to God in co-laboring with Him to carry out His covenant. The content of the old covenant is the law, which places demands on man according to the attributes of God, such as His righteousness, holiness, and glory. The content of the new covenant is God's economy, in which He dispenses Himself in Christ as the Spirit into His chosen and redeemed people to constitute them the Body of Christ. Thus, the function of the unique New Testament ministry is to preach the unsearchable riches of Christ (2 Cor. 4:1; 1 Tim. 1:12; Eph. 3:8), to make known God's economy (v. 9), to minister the Spirit of life into people (2 Cor. 3:3, 6, 8), and to perfect others to do the same (Eph. 4:12) in order to afford God a way to accomplish His goal in His economy to build up the Body (vv. 4:15-16). This function becomes the measuring stick to evaluate whether a personal ministry is part of the New Testament ministry.

Whether or not a particular Christian group is a genuine local church is not a matter of condition but of standing. A local church is an expression of the universal Body of Christ in a particular locality. As such, it receives all believers and participates in the universal fellowship of the Body of Christ with all other genuine local churches. The different local churches will vary in their spiritual condition, and a local church's condition may vary over time. Moreover, in principle, a local church consists of believers at various stages of maturity in life. We will inevitably be disappointed if we expect all the local churches to be wonderful all the time. The church in Corinth had a multitude of serious problems, including gross sin, yet Paul called it "the church of God which is in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2). In Colossae the believers were in danger of being defrauded of Christ due to human philosophy and culture (Col. 2:18, 8). From Ephesus John wrote of a domineering one, Diotrephes, who would not even receive the apostle (3 John 9). Most of the seven churches in Asia John wrote to in Revelation were not in a good condition (Rev. 1:11; ch. 2—3). Nevertheless, these abnormal situations did not alter the genuineness of the standing of these local churches.

A Proper Assessment and Two Errors

If we assess the ministry among us in the Lord's recovery fairly, we will realize that it has opened up the Word of God, particularly along the line of the experience of Christ as life for the building up of the church to accomplish God's goal in His economy. Furthermore, this ministry has borne abundant fruit, as testified by the thousands of local churches and millions of lovers of Christ it has produced worldwide, as well as the large number of faithful servants of our Lord. In accord with the apostles' teaching, it strongly admonishes believers concerning the problems caused by sin, culture, and abuse of authority. In every respect the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee qualifies as part of the New Testament ministry (see David Yoon, "The Ministers in the Lord's Recovery—Genuine Ministers of the New Covenant," which makes this point much more thoroughly).

If we are not sober in our consideration of the New Testament, we may make two errors concerning the problems that we observe in a particular local church. First, we may generalize from isolated and limited observations and wrongfully assume that these problems are common to all the local churches. Second, we may blame the ministry for what are, in fact, local shortcomings caused by failure to closely follow the ministry's teaching and leading. Our assessment of the ministry in light of observed shortcomings in the churches should be consistent with what we see in the New Testament Epistles, most of which were written to address problems in certain local churches. In other words, those who took the lead in the ministry were laboring to bring those churches back to the line of God's economy from some manner of deviation. For example, to the Corinthians Paul pointed to Christ and His cross as the solution to all the problems and strifes in that church (1 Cor. 1:10-11; 2:2). Galatians was written to turn believers back from the law to Christ (2:19, 21; 3:1-5). Paul wrote to the Philippians, at least in part, because of strife among certain serving ones in the church (4:2); he asked the saints there to "make my joy full, that you think the same thing, having the same love, joined in soul, thinking the one thing" (2:2), that is, to pursue and gain Christ (3:8-14).

Because some of the Hebrew believers were drifting back to Judaism, the Epistle to the Hebrews uplifted Christ as being superior to everything in that religion (1:1-4; 2:9; 3:3, 5-6; 4:14; 7:25-26; 10:18; 12:2).

If we judge a ministry by the failures of others, then we have to condemn the Lord Jesus for Judas (Luke 22:47-48), Peter and the other original apostles for Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), Paul for all the problems in the Gentile churches and even among his co-workers (2 Tim. 1:15; 4:10, 16), and John for Diotrephes (3 John 9). That would not be fair. Neither is it fair to blame the ministry of Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, and those co-workers who continue to labor in the same line because some local church members, even leading ones, act in a disorderly manner, contrary to the ministry's teaching. Similarly, though sin, culture, or domineering men surely damage a local church and its testimony, the presence of these things does not alter a church's standing, nor should we assume that such things characterize all local churches. Moreover, we should not take the excuse of improprieties in a church to incite strife and division (2 Tim. 2:23; 1 Cor. 1:10).

The Source of a Local Church's Problems

The problems among the churches seen in the New Testament arose because the believers did not closely follow the teaching of the apostles brought to them by the New Testament ministers. In his first Epistle to his younger co-worker Timothy, Paul wrote, "If you lay these things before the brothers, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, being nourished with the words of the faith and of the good teaching which you have closely followed" (1 Tim. 4:6). In his Second Epistle to Timothy he wrote of those who had deviated from the apostles' teaching and then commended Timothy, saying, "But you have closely followed my teaching, conduct, purpose, faith, long-suffering, love, endurance" (2 Tim. 3:10). Both verses speak of closely following the ministry. This implies that some did not closely follow Paul's teaching. As a result, their Christian life had a different outcome. Paul also charged Timothy, saying, "And the things which you have heard from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, who will be competent to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). The words *to faithful men* indicate that among the believers some were faithful to the teaching of the apostles and others were not. Paul's word to the Colossians that in the new man "there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all" (Col. 3:10-11) would not have been needed if racial, religious, cultural, and social distinctions did not persist in the church in Colossae. In his first Epistle Peter wrote to the elders, "Nor as lording it over your allotments but by becoming patterns of the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2). Peter would not have needed to charge the elders not to lord it over the saints if there had been no such cases. Thus, the ministry is not to blame for failures in local churches. In fact, it is the leadership in the ministry and the work that is vitally needed to address the problems that cause those failures.

A Proper Response

What, then, should we do when faced with problems or a turmoil in a church? Above all we must seek to overcome by living and magnifying Christ (Phil. 1:19-21). The only way to be a factor in the building up of the Body of Christ is to closely follow the apostles' teaching brought to us by the ministers of the New Testament (Eph. 4:11-12). This requires that we be people of vision, not idealists (Acts 26:19), see the same revelation that the apostles saw (Eph. 1:17-23), become imitators of the faith of the New Testament ministers (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thes. 1:6; 2 Thes. 3:7, 9; Heb. 13:7), and take the way of life, not the way of rebellion or of fomenting contentions among the brothers over issues of right and wrong (1 Cor. 11:6; 1 Tim. 6:14; 2 Tim. 2:14, 23; Titus 3:9). As we have indicated in many articles, this does not mean that we overlook problems. Rather, as priests we follow the pattern of the apostles to bear before the Lord the problems in the churches and the saints who are entangled in them and to deal with those problems in a proper way and with a proper spirit (Eph. 4:2; 2 Cor. 11:28; Rom. 15:1; Gal. 6:1-2; Col. 3:13). This is our responsibility to the Lord, to the church, and even to those who cause problems (Matt. 18:15).

Furthermore, the Lord never tells us to abandon the genuine ground of the church, no matter what the condition of that church may be. Rather, in each of the seven churches in Revelation there is a call to overcome (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 26; 3:5, 12, 21). Such a call indicates that not all improper situations among God's people will be resolved in this age and that not all believers will overcome, whether they meet with the local churches or not. Only those who remain faithful to the Lord in the churches in the midst of all manner of circumstances will overcome. These maintain the testimony of Jesus as luminaries shining in the darkness of this age (Rev. 1:9; Phil. 2:15) and afford the Lord a way to advance in the accomplishment of His economy. For this they will be rewarded by Him at His coming (Rev. 22:12).