

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BOUNDARY OF THE LOCAL ASSEMBLY

Tonight we will discuss the mutual relationship between the meeting in Gordon Lane and that in Wen-teh Lane. In other words, we will speak on the boundary of the local church or the extent of the border of the local church. Before we speak on this matter, there are a few things which we need to explain to the brothers from out of town. Our Bible study, at this moment, is designed especially for the local brothers. Therefore, many of the things that are covered are local in nature. However, we welcome the out-of-town brothers to come and listen.

I have mentioned three to five times already that the authority of the elders is for the local assembly. In other words, the elders are for the local assembly. Position is a matter related to the local church, and office is also a matter related to the local church. One can be an elder in Shanghai, but he cannot automatically be an elder when he goes to Nanking or Peking. A person who serves as an elder in the assembly in Shanghai cannot go to the assembly in Peking and assume the same eldership. God's gifts are for the whole church, while His offices are for the local churches. Hence, there is no such thing as a super elder who can control an out-of-town church. An elder can oversee only the church in his own locality.

THE BOUNDARY OF THE ASSEMBLY

The Bible study tonight is on the boundary of the assembly, and it is limited to the local assembly only. We hope that God will show us this truth. Because we are afraid of careless misunderstandings or forgetfulness, we will repeat once again what we have mentioned: gifts are for the whole church, while offices are for the local churches.

What is the extent of a local church? How big of an area constitutes the sphere of a local church? We would draw the brothers' and sisters' attention to the fact that in the Bible, the church is never divided into regions. The Bible never groups a few churches together under a regional organization. Although there were seven churches in Asia, we do not see the Bible appointing Ephesus or Philadelphia to rule over the other six churches. We only see *seven* churches, with *seven* lampstands. These seven lampstands represent the seven churches (Rev. 1:12, 20). In the Old Testament, one lampstand was divided into seven branches. In the New Testament, there are seven lampstands, not one lampstand with seven branches. This means that the seven different churches are shining *by themselves* and each one is responsible to Christ *by itself*. Every church is governed by Christ alone and is not under the control of any other church. In administration, every lampstand is independent and not under the control of any other lampstand. Every one of them is responsible to the Son of Man alone, who walks in the midst of the seven lampstands. They are responsible only to their High Priest. No church is responsible to another church. Although they are seven churches, they have not joined themselves to become one united church, and they are not responsible to some higher synod or convention. Each one of them is a so-called congregation, an assembly whose boundary is the locality. The Bible takes the city or the smallest administrative unit as the boundary of a local church. A local church is the basic unit of the church in the Bible. No

local church is joined to another church or regards another bigger church as the central church. In other words, in God's eyes, Rome has never been appointed to be the central church. God has never acknowledged one place as the center of all churches, with that place ruling over and controlling all the other assemblies. According to God's organization, there is no center on earth. Jerusalem was not the central church at that time.

This does not mean that there are no regions in the Bible. Some places have similar conditions and needs, and they are treated according to the same principle. In Acts 19 Paul "passed through the upper districts" (v. 1). In Romans 15 Paul said that he traveled "from Jerusalem and round about to Illyricum" (v. 19). These places belong to one region. Galatia was not an individual city but a province. This is why the Bible mentions "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2). Revelation mentions "the seven churches which are in Asia" (1:4). Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea were all in the region of Asia. Asia was a region, and Galatia was a province. We have to be clear that even though the needs and testimony of these local assemblies are peculiarly similar, no church possessed a higher organization or authority over the other local churches. The Bible never shows us that any local assembly possesses a higher authority than another assembly. Some have thought that Jerusalem was a mother church. Actually, there is no such thing. Every local assembly is local in its administration and responsible to Christ alone; it is not responsible to any other institution or assembly. Putting it another way, a local church is the only organization in that locality. To put it still another way, a local church is the highest organization and institution on earth; nothing is lower than it on earth, and nothing is higher. There is no court above the local church to which one can appeal. The highest organization is the local assembly. The smallest unit is also the local assembly. The Bible does not tell us of a center like Rome, which controlled everything of the churches, because Christ wants to retain His headship in heaven. Every local church should maintain the testimony of the Body and express the Body of Christ in a miniature way. However, every local church should be directly responsible to Christ and not to other churches. This means every local church should only be regulated by Christ and not be controlled by any other institutions or churches.

God dislikes the fact that man can be misled to think that there must be centers on earth. Therefore, He put Jerusalem aside and made Antioch the place from which the apostles set off for their work (Acts 13). It was not Jerusalem. This avoided the misunderstanding that the church in Jerusalem was the mother church, the headquarters church, and that all the other churches were subordinate churches and branch churches. Two hundred years ago the Brethren almost took London as their headquarters. This is a mistake. Therefore, brothers, please do not consider the assembly in Shanghai as the mother church or the headquarters. Our assemblies in the different localities are directly bound by Christ and are not controlled by any other assemblies.

The truth that I am speaking of tonight balances the truth that was mentioned last Saturday evening. Last Saturday night we mentioned the Body life and the relationship between an assembly and other assemblies. God will never tell one assembly to do something and another assembly not to do the same thing. The way God leads one

assembly is the way He leads other assemblies. We saw that the Gentile churches should imitate the churches in Judea. We also saw that, according to God's ordination, no church of God should act independently; rather it should pay attention to the move of the Body and seek for mutual harmony. Any person that one assembly excommunicates should be excommunicated by other assemblies. Today we are speaking on the responsibility of a local church; its responsibility is to God alone and not to any other local assembly. What we covered on Saturday shows us the strictness of the bondage and restrictions between one assembly and other assemblies; no assembly can act independently or make its own proposals. If an assembly acts independently or makes free proposals, these acts and moves are not of God. At the same time, we must see that every church is directly responsible to the Head for what it does. We can easily become biased. This is why we must maintain the balance in the truth.

Sometimes, we may act like the Roman Catholic Church. When Rome makes a decision to do one thing, all the Roman Catholics in every place have to obey. This is not being balanced in the truth. On the one hand, we should be bound by other assemblies so that we have the same footsteps and are the same as far as the truth goes. On the other hand, every assembly should be directly responsible to the Head for what it does. Every local church is responsible to God. Every church mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, like the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, and the church in Pergamos, etc., had its own golden lampstand. Each stood on its own stand, not on another stand. Every one of them kept their own position and was responsible to God. The Lord both rebuked and praised Ephesus. He did not lay the blame of Ephesus on Pergamos, nor did He credit the virtue of Ephesus to Smyrna. No church can take the responsibility of another church, and no church can stand on the merit of another church. All the churches are responsible to the Lord directly and are bound by the Lord. At the same time, the Bible says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says *to the churches*" (Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This is the balance in the truth. On the one hand, the Bible says that the words are spoken to the messenger of the church in Ephesus. But at the end of the speaking, it says that the words are for all the churches. At the beginning it says that the words are for the messengers of the church in Ephesus, the church in Smyrna, the church in Pergamos, etc., but at the end it says that every church should hear what God says to the other churches. The *Holy Spirit* is speaking to all the churches. This is why he who has an ear should hear. This proves that what is kept by one church should be kept by all the churches. The responsibility each church bears in a locality is before God alone, yet all the churches should have the same common move. Consequently, the epistle was written to Ephesus, but the words were for all the churches. This is the balance in the truth.

In the Bible God has ordained that the smallest unit of the church on the earth is the local assembly. The highest institution is also the local assembly. The local church is the ultimate and minimal organization. Every local church is a miniature to express the universal church. Nothing is bigger than the local church, and nothing is smaller than the local church. We should firmly grasp this truth. We should pursue and take care that what we do in the assembly in Shanghai, our move and footsteps, is the same as the move and footsteps of all the assemblies in China. Not only should we pursue having the same move and footsteps as all the assemblies in China, but we should also pursue

having the same move and footsteps as all the assemblies in the world. At the same time, what we do in the assembly in Shanghai and whether we are right or wrong is something for which we are directly responsible to God. We are not directed by any higher institution above Shanghai. In the assembly in Shanghai, no authority is higher than the authority of the elders. This is the boundary that God has set. Within each city, there can be a few elders. But these elders can oversee only the assembly in that city; they cannot oversee the assembly in another city. God's boundary is based on the fact that elders are appointed in every city. This is why the authority of an elder cannot extend beyond the boundary of the city. The local churches as depicted in the Bible are local in their administration. I hope that the brothers and sisters maintain these two aspects in a balanced way. On the one hand, we maintain a sameness with the other assemblies. On the other hand, each local assembly bears a direct responsibility to God.

THE BOUNDARY OF A LOCAL CHURCH

I would like you to pay attention to the fact that in the New Testament, the boundary of the local church is the city in which that church is located. Hence, the maximum reach of a local church is the city; *no* boundary can be larger than the city. In the Bible we cannot find a church that rules over one province or county. The Bible shows us that the city is the boundary of the church. In the beginning the city was the community where men aggregated. We should remember that in the complicated situation of our modern life, there are many towns and villages. At the beginning, when families bound themselves together and set up protection, there were cities (Gen. 4:17). Due to various reasons, men began to dwell in cities. In the first half of the book of Genesis, we see no unit smaller than the city. By the time of Joshua, men still lived in cities. Of course, by then, there were neighboring villages. When the Lord Jesus sent the disciples to preach the gospel, He charged them to go into the cities and villages (Matt. 10:11). This is because a city or a village is the smallest unit of human habitation in the Bible.

The scriptural boundary of a local church is the boundary of a city. Ephesus, Corinth, and Thessalonica were all cities. The boundary of a local church cannot be larger than a city. Asia was a big area, and it had *seven* churches. Galatia was a region, and it had *churches*. Corinth was one city, and therefore, the Bible mentions the whole church coming together *in one place* (1 Cor. 14:23). The church in Corinth was one church. All the other local churches mentioned in the Bible had the city as their boundary. This is God's wise way to preserve the believers from much confusion. If God were to make the nation the boundary of the church, such a boundary would be changing all the time because nations often fall. If a nation fell, the boundary of the church would be changed. If God made a province the boundary of the church, the provincial boundaries would change often also. If the boundary of a province changed, the boundary of a church would have to change as well. Would this not cause some problems? This is why God has not made a province the unit of the church, nor has He made a nation or other political units the boundary of the church. Dynasties, nations, and provinces all change easily. God has made the city or village the boundary of the church because the names and boundaries of these places do not change easily. National boundaries constantly change, and the names of provinces constantly change. But the boundaries and names of cities and villages are least likely to change with political shifts. They are least affected by

political changes; we can almost say that they are never affected by political changes. In many instances, a village was called by a certain name a few hundred years ago, and it is still called by the same name today. Many cities change hands from one nation to another, yet the cities themselves remain the same. The city (and to a greater extent the village) is the most stable unit politically. This is why God ordained the city to be the boundary of a local church.

There are advantages to God making the city the unit of a local church, separating the churches by the cities, and not establishing higher, supervisory institutions above the cities. If one local church becomes sinful or has failed, the sin and failure will not affect other churches. If God placed seven or eight churches under the rule of a few people, as soon as one or two of these few people fell, the seven or eight churches would fall as well. If God had established a headquarters in Asia to rule over the seven churches, as soon as the headquarters failed, the seven churches would have failed also. The seven churches in Asia were directly responsible to the Lord. Although five of them failed and fell, Smyrna and Philadelphia, who served as God's remnant, did not fail. God did this in order to avoid such danger. It protects weak and good churches from infiltration by sin and improper things.

THE DETERMINATION OF BOUNDARY BY THE CITY

The concept of the city was not originally in the Bible. In the beginning God created the garden of Eden, but it was not a city. In the end God will gain the New Jerusalem—a city. Hence, the concept of a city came in after man's fall. Before man fell, everything, including the tree of life and all the fruits, was in the garden of Eden. The living water flowed out of the garden of Eden. After man fell, God's work was changed from a garden to a city. A garden does not seem to have a boundary; there is no protection. God made the city for the purpose of protection, so that there were city walls for its boundary and it could be separated from other things. This separation keeps sin out. Not only does God care for the city today, in the millennium His concern will be only for the city. In the future, some will rule over five cities, while others will rule over ten cities. Not only will God care for the city in the millennium, but He will care for the city even in the new heaven and new earth. Then there will be the New Jerusalem. God exalts the city because a city has a boundary which separates it from other places. This distinction has less likelihood of confusion, and it is easy to manage.

Although we have said that the church sometimes takes a village as its boundary, a village is a miniature city in reality. God's concept is still the city. When there are a few believers meeting in a city, that meeting becomes the local church in that locality. Another church from another city cannot come and interfere with this meeting. The boundary of the church in a city is the boundary of the city. The boundary of a local church is determined by the political boundary of the city. God has not left the decision of the boundary of a local church to the brothers or the elders. The responsibility of the church is to follow the division of the government and to take the political boundary as the boundary of the church. The sphere of a local church is as big as the political boundary of the city. There are big cities and small cities. A city as big as Nineveh took three days to circle once (Jonah 3:3). But a city like Jerusalem is only six miles in radius.

Bethany is a place which does not belong to Jerusalem. Jerusalem is next to Bethany (John 11:18). Jerusalem is a city; it has its boundary. Bethany is a village; it also has its boundary. This is the way the Bible distinguishes the churches—according to the political boundary. Although some places are big and some places are small, the church cannot mark its boundary according to its own idea; it must mark it according to the political division. God has not given the church the liberty to have its own way. God uses the boundary established by the government. This is the basis that the church should accept today. There is no need to have another way.

THE WAY TO SUBDIVIDE MEETINGS WITHIN A CITY

We have seen that the Bible takes a city or a village as the unit for an assembly. In Shanghai, we now have a meeting in Wen-teh Lane and another in Gordon Lane. What is the relationship between these two meetings? This is the question we have to study tonight. But we have to set this question aside for the moment and consider how the Bible divides the believers when the number meeting in a city becomes too large. At Pentecost, three thousand and then five thousand people were saved in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41; 4:4). The number was large. Jerusalem was different from Corinth. There were not many saved ones in Corinth. First Corinthians 14 mentions the whole church coming together. This means that its number was small and could come together. The church in Jerusalem could not have the whole church come together. If the whole church were to come together, they would have three thousand plus five thousand plus many other saved ones. The number was too large, and they would not have an adequate facility. Hence, we see that in Jerusalem, although the believers were together, they broke bread in the homes. There is a slight difference between the assembly in Corinth and the assembly in Jerusalem. The number meeting in the city of Corinth was small, and the believers could come together in one place. The number meeting in the city of Jerusalem was large, and the believers could not meet in one place; they could only meet from house to house. Hence, when the number in a local assembly becomes large, the one assembly can have meetings in many “homes.” This is what is shown in Acts 2:46.

A church can have meetings in various “homes,” but there is still just one church. Suppose there were a few dozen meetings in the city of Jerusalem. Was there one church in Jerusalem, or were there a few dozen churches? The biblical answer is “one church” because God has made the city the sphere of the church. The unit of the church is the city. In the city of Jerusalem, there was only one church. Although there were a few dozen places where the church met, the administration of the church in Jerusalem was the same among all the dozens of places. They had the same elders and deacons. An elder in the church in Jerusalem could serve as an elder in one home or in another home. He was an elder in all the meetings in Jerusalem. But he could not go to Samaria to be an elder, because the church takes the city as its boundary. This is the situation of our meetings here in Shanghai.

Politically speaking, as long as the ceded territories in the city of Shanghai exist, including the French Concession, the British Concession, and the Chinese territory, these could be considered as three cities because the three areas were under three different sets of laws. But now that all these concessions have been reclaimed, the whole of Shanghai is one city again. Although there are still different police authorities in the former French Concession and the Common Concession, legally speaking there is no further distinction. The whole city of Shanghai is now

considered as one city. As such, there is only one church. Hence, the meetings in Wen-teh Lane and Gordon Lane belong to one church; there is only one table, not two tables.

When the number meeting in a place becomes large, the meetings can be held in several places. Some brothers and sisters may ask how large the number has to be before they should subdivide. What are the limitations? I have mentioned the story of the Lord distributing the loaves to the brothers. Before the Lord distributed the loaves to the four thousand and the five thousand, He ordered the disciples to divide the crowd into fifty a row or one hundred a row. After that He had the disciples distribute the loaves (Mark 6:40). According to my personal view, we all are the Lord's flock. In order to feed the Lord's flock, it is easier if we divide the sheep into fifty or one hundred per group. There are a few additional advantages to this kind of subdivision.

First, the apostles at that time did not have the money to build big meeting halls. They could only practice according to the principle of meeting in the homes, though they might not have divided into fifty a group or one hundred a group. To subdivide themselves in this way would not pose any problem as far as the place of meeting was concerned. We would rather not have a great central place of meeting and would rather meet separately in groups of fifty and one hundred.

Second, if a few thousand or a few hundred people gathered together in one place, we would not have much time to break the bread at the bread-breaking meeting on the Lord's Day evening, and there would not be a large enough cup or bread. This shows us clearly that, at the beginning of the church age, saved ones were not breaking bread in one place. Sometimes when we have two or three hundred people breaking the bread together, we have to wait for one or two hours before we can have the bread. Some can wait, but others may not be able to wait that long. This is not a question of whether or not we should wait. It is a question of some not having the energy to wait for that long.

Third, if two or three hundred people gathered together in one place, some brothers would find it difficult to come to the meeting because of the limitation of time. If all the brothers tried to know one another, they could communicate with only one or two brothers each time. If they wanted to have more opportunity to know each other and communicate with each other, they could do it only once every few months. If that was the case, the meeting would not be able to advance. If there are only fifty or a hundred meeting in a place, it is easy for the people to communicate with each other and for the meeting to go on. It is also easy to care for the members, and the care will be adequate. If the number is too large, it is difficult to care for one another, and there is the danger of negligence. This is why we should maintain this principle.

It is for this reason that we started another meeting in Gordon Lane. The reason for starting that meeting is based on this ground. Please remember that the meeting in Gordon Lane and the meeting in Wen-teh Lane are not two churches but one church with one fellowship. We are merely subdivided into two "home" meetings. The responsible ones in Wen-teh Lane and the responsible ones in Gordon Lane are the same group of people. The serving brothers here and the serving brothers there are the same brothers. If a brother meeting in Shanghai wants to go to the meeting in Nanking, he has to have a letter of recommendation. But if he goes from the meeting in Wen-teh Lane to the meeting in Gordon Lane or vice versa, there is no need for a letter of recommendation. We hope that in the near future, there will be another meeting in Bao-shan.

Bao-shan is in a different county than the county that Shanghai is in. If some brother goes to the meeting in Bao-shan, he must have a letter of recommendation because Bao-shan is another city, and the church administration in that city belongs to another unit. This situation is different than the meetings in Wen-teh Lane and Gordon Lane, which are only one unit. The offering from these two places is distributed by the same group of people, and all affairs are considered to be under one unit. The ones received by either place are approved by the same brothers and announced in both places.

THE BOUNDARY OF THE MEETINGS IN GORDON LANE AND WEN-TEH LANE

How should we designate the boundary line between the meetings in Gordon Lane and Wen-teh Lane? Which brothers and sisters should go to the meeting in Wen-teh Lane? And which brothers and sisters should belong to the meeting in Gordon Lane? The responsible brothers among us who serve as the elders have discussed this and have made the decision to make the Soochow River the boundary line. All the brothers and sisters who reside to the north of the Soochow River should meet in Gordon Lane, and all the brothers and sisters who reside to the south of the Soochow River should meet in Wen-teh Lane. This designation does not mean that the brothers and sisters residing to the north of the Soochow River cannot meet in Wen-teh Lane or that the brothers and sisters residing to the south of the Soochow River cannot meet in Gordon Lane. It means that those residing to the north of the Soochow River should consider the meeting in Gordon Lane their meeting, and they should bear special responsibility and have special care for that meeting. Those who reside to the south of the Soochow River should consider the meeting in Wen-teh Lane their meeting, and they should bear special responsibility and have special care for that meeting. Therefore, we hope that the brothers and sisters residing to the north of the Soochow River will meet separately from the brothers and sisters residing to the south of the Soochow River. We hope that in the future, there will be meetings in the French Concession, Yang-shu-pu, and Kiang-wan also. Then we hope that the ones who are serving as elders will survey the land and decide who should break bread in each place. Presently, we have only two meeting places, and the Soochow River is the boundary. We should conduct our practice in an orderly way according to this principle.

THE BOUNDARY BEYOND THE CITY

As to the boundary line between the city and the suburb of the city, we have not yet delved into this subject. But let us consider Joshua 21:3: "And the children of Israel gave unto the Levites out of their inheritance, at the commandment of the Lord, these cities and their suburbs." This verse mentions the city and the suburbs of the city. Deuteronomy 28:3 says, "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field." This verse mentions the city and the field. According to the Old Testament, every city has its suburbs, and every city has its fields. These suburbs and fields surround the city and sustain the city. The vegetables and staples of the city come from the suburbs and fields around it. The city cannot survive by itself. That is why there are four gates at the four sides of the city. The Bible also shows us that each city should bear the responsibility of its suburbs and fields. Therefore, the church in a city should be

responsible not only for the city but for its suburbs and fields. Whether it is gospel preaching or any other kind of work, the church in the city should care for the need of the suburbs and fields around the city. The suburbs and the fields are there to support the city and increase the number of those meeting in the city. In other words, those in the church in the city should care for those living in the suburbs of the city. If anyone is saved in the suburbs, he cannot meet in the suburbs but should be brought to the meeting in the city and should support the meeting in the city so that the meeting in the city can become bigger, stronger, more prosperous, and more developed. Among us, there are brothers from Kiang-wan. Kiang-wan is like a suburb. When they come to our meeting, they are supporting the assembly in Shanghai. I am merely giving you an example. At the beginning, the assembly in the city is the center. By the time the number from the suburbs becomes large, these ones have learned to meet. When they are strong enough to set up another meeting, they may become a “home” meeting and may start meeting in the suburbs. Before that, they should come to the city for their meeting and support the meeting in the center.

THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN ONE ASSEMBLY AND ANOTHER

At times, there are problems between two assemblies concerning their boundaries. Some people may live close to the border of two assemblies. Who should meet in Bao-shan, and who should meet in Kiang-wan? Who should meet in Wen-teh Lane, and who should meet in Gordon Lane? Who should make the decision regarding these things? We should decide according to the principle in Deuteronomy 21:2-3 and 6 concerning the slain. “Then your elders and judges shall go out and measure the distance to the cities that surround the slain man. And the city that is nearest to the slain man, that is, the elders of that city, shall take a heifer of the herd which has not been worked and has not drawn the yoke....and all the elders of that city that is nearest the slain man shall wash their hands over the heifer whose neck was broken in the river valley.” The elders of the city have to come forth to measure and find out which city is closest. The responsibility will then fall on the closest city. Hence, the boundary of the assemblies is very simple. If there are clear political marks, we can mark the boundaries clearly. If there are no clear political boundaries, the elders should measure and decide to which assembly a certain area should belong. In this way, everything will become clear. Those brothers who live close to one assembly should meet with that assembly, and everyone should submit to authority in a proper way.

THE RESTRICTION OF SUBDIVIDING ONE ASSEMBLY INTO TWO LOCAL MEETINGS

When can one assembly be subdivided into two “home” meetings? It must wait until the number becomes large before subdividing into two meetings. Moreover, after the subdivision, both meetings must remain strong. It is better to have a hundred, or at least fifty or seventy-five, in each meeting after the subdivision.

We want to mention the brothers’ request for a meeting in Bao-shan. At present, the brothers in Bao-shan are an outgrowth of the meeting in Gordon Lane. These brothers

wrote to the brothers in Gordon Lane and wanted to start another meeting in Bao-shan and break the bread there. What should they do in order to be scriptural? They should not merely realize that it is scriptural for brothers to meet together, but they should make sure that they have the leading of the Holy Spirit and consider the condition of their meeting. They should take care of the meeting in Gordon Lane. First, they have to consider the number meeting in Gordon Lane and see whether that number is becoming too large for everyone to meet together and whether the time is ripe for them to subdivide. If the meeting in Gordon Lane is a weak meeting, a subdivision will further weaken the situation and make it even more difficult to go on. Second, we should not think that we can set up the Lord's table recklessly just because we want to break bread and remember the Lord in a place. Actually, the minute we set up the Lord's table in a place, the question of the church immediately comes up, and we have to bear the responsibility of the church. Can these brothers deal with the problem of receiving and excommunicating people? Can they be responsible to take up other burdens? Therefore, we have to pray much concerning this matter before we can have the proper answer.

Suppose it is time for the brothers in Bao-shan to start their meeting. What are the procedures? They should inform the assembly in Shanghai (both the meeting in Wente Lane and the meeting in Gordon Lane) and tell it of their intention to start a meeting. Those brothers who intend to meet in Bao-shan should pray much, and the brothers in Shanghai should also pray much. If in their prayer, both sides feel with one accord that this can be done, the brothers in Bao-shan can then have their own meeting, and they will have the blessing and the laying on of hands of the brothers. This shows that the brothers in Bao-shan have received the approval of all the brothers and are not acting according to their own will. This is like bees multiplying their hives into smaller colonies. This kind of move is done in a happy way because it is done through much prayer and much fellowship with the brothers. This way is the way of the laying on of hands; it is not the way of an independent move. I have to add a few words. Even though we may meet separately in this way, it does not mean that Shanghai does not need a meeting place that is bigger than what it now has. In Shanghai we still need a meeting place that can hold five hundred or more because every year people come to our conferences from everywhere.

QUESTIONS

Question: In Taichow someone asked about the matter of the laying on of hands. Should we practice the laying on of hands today?

Answer: There is such a thing as the laying on of hands in the Bible. But it is not the so-called laying on of hands (or ordination) that men know of today. Today it is always those who are greater who lay hands on those who are smaller. But in the Bible, we find both the greater ones laying hands on the smaller ones, and the smaller ones laying hands on the greater ones. Acts 8 mentions Peter and John going to Samaria. They laid hands as the greater upon the smaller. But Acts 13 tells us that the teachers and prophets laid hands on the apostles. This is clearly a case of the smaller ones laying hands on the greater ones. In the church in Antioch we see some prophets and teachers. While they were serving the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit told them that they should

send Barnabas and Saul out for the work which He had called them to do. They laid hands on the two and sent them out. We know that Paul and Barnabas were apostles, but the prophets and the teachers were the ones who laid hands on them. Ephesians 4 clearly puts the apostles first and the prophets and teachers second (v. 11). Acts 13 shows us that the ones who were second laid hands on the ones who were first. This shows that the laying on of hands is not an act of the greater upon the smaller, as some have imagined. In the Bible, the laying on of hands merely signifies fellowship, sympathy, and mutual union. The laying on of hands in Acts 8 indicates that the Samaritans were joined to the Body of Christ in the same way that baptism signifies one's union with the death of Christ. The laying on of hands in Acts 13 signifies that the church was joined to, sympathetic with, and in fellowship with Paul and his companion. Their going was the whole church's going. This laying on of hands shows that it was not just Paul and Barnabas who went on their missionary journey, but the whole church in Antioch went with them. It shows that their work and move were not just related to the two of them; they were related to the whole church in Antioch. The laying on of hands did not only signify their fellowship with those who laid hands on them; it also signified fellowship between the ones on whom the hands were laid and the whole church in Antioch. If any person goes out from us for some kind of work, it is best if he goes out after we lay hands on him.

We should brush aside or wipe away the dust of human tradition from biblical teachings as dust is wiped away from a mirror. Many people do not wipe away the dust. Instead, they think that the mirror is too dusty and break the mirror altogether. Many people think that talking about elders, deacons, and the laying on of hands will make us the same as the denominations. Actually, the original thing was not wrong; what was added later is wrong. Our goal is not to destroy the work of the denominations but to recover what God has ordained in the beginning. We cannot throw away the examples in the Bible just because all the other things are wrong. Our aim is to ask whether God has commanded something. When I go out to work, many times I wish that the brothers would lay hands on me. This shows that I am not going out alone but being sent by the whole assembly, and the whole assembly is sympathetic to what I am doing. I hope those who serve as elders among us would practice the laying on of hands in the future.

Question: Paul imparted gifts to Timothy through the laying on of hands (2 Tim. 1:6). Does this not mean that gifts come from the laying on of hands?

Answer: What is a gift? It is the capacity of a member in the Body. In other words, if you are an eye in the Body, your gift is your capacity to see. If you are an ear in the Body, your gift is your capacity to hear. When a man is joined to the Body of Christ, he immediately receives a gift. The laying on of hands by the apostles is their acknowledgment of a person as being a member of the Body of Christ on behalf of the Body of Christ. It pleases God to manifest man's gift after such an act. Acts 13 also signifies a union with the Body of Christ. In Acts 13 the laying on of hands was not to manifest a gift but to express that they were all co-workers together. There was never a case in which prophets and teachers imparted gifts to the apostles. As to the miraculous gifts in the Bible, they should be present with us and should not be something of the past. I do not understand why there are no miraculous gifts today. The practice of the

laying on of hands should not stop with us. Paul told Timothy that he should not lay hands on others quickly lest he partake of their sins (1 Tim. 5:22). Hebrews 6 tells us that we do not have to lay a foundation again. Such a foundation includes baptism and the laying on of hands (vv. 1-2). Hence, if we neglect the matter of the laying on of hands, we must have erred in the foundational matters. Of course, we cannot impart gifts by our laying on of hands as it was practiced in the days of the apostles; today we are merely practicing the principle. We admit that we are like the church in Philadelphia; we do not have much strength. All we have is a little strength (Rev. 3:8).

Question: At present, we have two meetings. How should the responsibility and work be distributed between the two meetings?

Answer: In the meetings in Gordon Lane and Wen-teh Lane, we should have two or three elders take charge of everything. There should also be a few deacons or deaconesses in the meeting in Gordon Lane, just as there are some in Wen-teh Lane. We mentioned the work in the brothers' meeting last Saturday. We will have prayer meetings in Gordon Lane the same way that we have prayer meetings here. For the sake of the work in the future, we hope that the brothers meeting in Gordon Lane can rent a larger place. If we want to start any work there, the present rented place is too small. In the future, we may separate the Lord's Day morning and afternoon meeting. We may meet in Gordon Lane in the morning and in Wen-teh Lane in the afternoon. We may even have the two places take turns holding the brothers' meeting and the sisters' meeting. Perhaps we will have them in one place one week and in another place another week. Otherwise, some will think that the meeting in Gordon Lane is the branch church of the meeting in Wen-teh Lane. Some have asked me if the meeting in Gordon Lane is a branch of the meeting in Wen-teh Lane. I told them it is not. The meeting in Wen-teh Lane is the same as the meeting in Gordon Lane.

Question: Should we not say "the meeting *in* Gordon Lane" and "the meeting *in* Wen-teh Lane" instead of saying "the Gordon Lane meeting" and "the Wen-teh Lane meeting"?

Answer: Yes, we should.

Question: If in the future we decide to start a meeting in Bao-shan, should we inform all the other brothers?

Answer: We should inform both meetings. First we should inform the meeting in Gordon Lane. Then we should inform the meeting in Wen-teh Lane. We should ask the brothers and sisters in both meetings to pray for this matter until they have the full assurance after their prayer. Then the brothers in Bao-shan can be given a definite answer. This is the best and most proper way.

Question: Concerning the matter of receiving others for the bread-breaking meeting, if the brothers in Gordon Lane are not clear about receiving a brother, can they ask the brothers meeting in Wen-teh Lane about this?

Answer: The elders in both places are the same group of elders. Therefore, Wen-teh Lane does not have anything more than what Gordon Lane has. When we receive a person, the “elders” in Shanghai, together with all the brothers, receive such a one; there is no difference whether the person is received in Wen-teh Lane or Gordon Lane. Concerning the matter of receiving a person, we have to practice it in a proper way in the future. Romans 14:1 says, “Now him who is weak in faith receive,” and 15:7 says, “Therefore receive one another, as Christ also received you to the glory of God.” Receiving is only part of the procedure. The question is whether or not a man has the faith. We ask whether a person has faith; we do not ask whether his faith is strong or weak. Moreover, the question is whether or not God has received him. Therefore, we have to be clear whether God has received such a one. If God has not received him, we cannot receive him either.

CONCERNING RECEIVING

Concerning the matter of receiving, I have to mention a few things.

Those Recommended by Letters from Another Locality

Those from another locality who come with a letter of recommendation should be received by us. But we have to know from where the letter of recommendation came. If it is a letter of recommendation from the denominations, we will not know whether he is clear about the truth and whether he is saved. Hence, those who are recommended by places that we do not know cannot be received by us based on a letter. But if it is a letter written by an assembly such as the one in Hangchow, we can trust in such a recommendation and receive the recommended person. We should trust that what Hangchow does is the same as what we do.

Those Recommended by the Testimony of Two or Three

If two or three brothers testify for and recommend a certain brother to the bread-breaking meeting, we can receive this one. There is a problem among us today of how to receive transient visitors. They pass by us on their way to other places and intend to break bread only once with us. This is difficult to handle. There are also members of some denominations who break bread with us but return to the denominations to break bread there. This is also difficult to handle. In my opinion, it is best to have two or three brothers talk with these ones immediately to check whether they are saved and then decide whether we will receive them for the bread. We cannot ask these people to wait until the next week before we answer them. They are not like those who intend to have long-term fellowship with us, whom we can ask to wait a little.

Three Kinds of Letters of Recommendation

The letters of recommendation which we send out should be of three kinds: (1) those that recommend a brother as one who has not left the denominations yet; (2) those that

recommend a brother as one who is standing on the ground of the church; and (3) those that recommend a brother as one who has some gifts.

A Few Things One Should Know in Recommending Someone to Break Bread

(1) We should ask whether such a one is saved or not. (2) We should know whether he commits the sins worthy of excommunication as recorded in 1 Corinthians 5. (3) We should show him that the breaking of bread is not only for the remembrance of the Lord, but for the discerning of the Body of Christ and for taking a stand in the Body of Christ. The first two matters are the conditions; a man must be saved and must be clean. The third is the teaching; a person must be able to discern the Body of Christ and must take the stand of the Body of Christ. If he does not discern such things, in God's eyes he eats judgment for his sins to himself (1 Cor. 11:29). If he does this, the breaking of bread will not be of much benefit to him.

If a man is saved and has not committed the sins of 1 Corinthians 5 but does not see the truth about discerning the Body, we must still receive him because we have to receive those who are weak in the faith. I think we have not been faithful to those who visit us from the denominations. We have not told them the importance before God of discerning the Body. We should show them this point. However, if we make the discerning of the Body a condition for receiving a person, we become a sect. This is why we have to be careful. However, we should not forget the teaching of Titus 3:10.

Questions

Question: After a person is saved, does he have to wait until he is baptized before he can break the bread?

Answer: It is best for a saved person to be baptized before taking the bread. In the Bible, there is no such thing as believing first and then waiting for a long time before being baptized; believing and baptism are always linked together. There is no such thing as putting a man aside for a few months after he is saved and then baptizing such a one. Such a practice is not found in the New Testament. But we should not make baptism a condition for partaking of the bread. Some have only been sprinkled and do not know that baptism is a testimony. We should still receive them for the bread-breaking meeting. Those from the Salvation Army do not believe in baptism at all, and none of them are baptized. The Quakers, particularly those who are in China, do not have baptism and bread-breaking at all. There are other smaller denominations which believe the same way as the Quakers. If these people come to us, we should receive them. Since God has received them, we should receive them also. We should receive those who are weak in faith. We can receive them because they belong to God. We cannot make baptism a condition for receiving a person; we can only consider baptism a teaching. Neither should we excommunicate those who are not baptized. When a person sees the cross, he will spontaneously be baptized and obey this truth.

Question: The meetings in Gordon Lane and Wen-teh Lane are actually one assembly and are one. In receiving a visitor, should one meeting inform the other of such?

Answer: If it can be done practically, one should inform the other concerning the receiving of a visitor. But if it cannot be done practically, there is no need to inform the other meeting. If anyone wants to remain with us for a long time, those who serve as elders in either meeting should stand on the ground of the church and discuss the matter properly before making a decision. This is why the announcements made in the prayer meeting in Gordon Lane should also be made in the prayer meeting in Wen-teh Lane and vice versa so that there can be prayers in one accord. I hope that the meeting in Gordon Lane can install a telephone. When this happens, it will be easier to discuss matters between the two places.