

The Church And The Churches

by Richard A. Nelson

If Christ is the central figure in the Bible, the church is the primary focus of Christ. The church is the spiritual and practical issue of His life imparted into, mingled with, and expressed through the lives of those who believe. More particularly, the biblical vision of the church makes evident that it is the composite purpose of eternity that the church be birthed and matured on the earth; further, that the church is the precise, practical, visible yet mysterious, expression of the “manifold wisdom of God” (Ephesians 3:8-12).

Although Ephesians unveils to us seven aspects of the church, one aspect is prominent. Paul speaks of “the church, which is His body” (Ephesians 1:22-23). It is in this aspect we see the body of Christ ought to match Christ her Head, her source being the divine life and the divine nature of Christ (II Peter 1:3-4). His body composed of all the members makes the church practical, tangible, experiential to all, and a testimony to a watching world (I Corinthians 12-14).

Paul explains that the body of Christ is composed of two essential, formerly divided parts: the Jews and the Gentiles made one through the cross. Here oneness of the believers is oneness of the body, and oneness of the body equals the church which is His body, and these components must be built together by and in the Spirit as the church. (Ephesians 2:16-22).

To build the church is the unique thing that Jesus said He would do on earth (Matthew 16:16-18; 18:10-20). As Eph. 1-2, I Cor. 12-14 and Rom. 12-16 make so clear, there is one body, which is his church, universally. However, that one universal church is too large to meet under one roof due to geographical constraints. There are saints in Ghana I know and love, as well as in Taiwan, China, Australia, Canada, Germany; in San Diego, California; and in Antioch, Tenn. etc. Every time there is a meeting it is impractical for us all to gather together.

Due to the geographical practicalities, then, while maintaining the one body and the spirit of unity in the one body, after opening to Ephesus the truth of oneness (Ephesians 2:14-21), Paul opens the matter of the church being practiced locally even while it is in the universal oneness. To them he says, “...in whom all the building being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom *you also* are being built together into a dwelling place of God in spirit” (Ephesians 2:21-22; 4:1-6).

The principle in the Bible is that the unity of the church is fact, it is reality, it can be practiced, and at the same time this unity and practice can be violated. The biblical, universal church is one, but requires effort to practice it. The assembling and practice of that unity are in the localities where believers meet. Hence, except when it refers to the entire church as in Matthew 16:16-18, without exception, the “church” when mentioned in the singular refers always to the saints in a certain city, and the “churches” always refer to a plural number of cities or a region or a country in which the churchlife is practiced in more than one location.

Although many Christians use the term “local church”, in the Bible that concept denotes all the saints in that locality, whereas many believers today speak of it as meaning any and all denominations, free groups anytime and everywhere. Although there consequentially seems to be a lessening of the walls between denominational boundaries, there is still much to be learned about the biblical view of this matter and the accurate definition and practice of a “local” church.

Oneness ought not to be defined as a toleration of each others’ walls: it ought to be a practical expression of the person of the Christ who indwells us both individually and collectively, where there are no walls (Ephesians 4:2-4). If we as believers are caught up with a love affair with our Jesus the Christ, differences will tend to recede, names that divide us ought to fall away as does rain on the feathers of a waterfowl.

May the Lord help us to love Him until He is the only name we own and the only name that defines us. Let any other name and designation be put away for the glory of His name, and for the expression of that universal and practical, local unity which is the triune God in His essence through all the members of His body made visible on this earth, here, now and in the city where we live. Such a forward standing and lifestyle on our part will enable Christ our Head to further synchronize His working in us with His moving in the saints in all His body over all the earth. Should we be enabled to realize this vision and this kind of personal and collective living, we will surely begin to see what is Ephesians 3:10, where the biblical church is “the manifold wisdom of God” on earth.