

(Appendix III) A Critical Examination of the "Local Ground of the Church" (Caleb Huang)

I. My Views on the "Local Ground of the Church" Have Changed

It is an indisputable biblical fact that there is only one church in a given locality, and that the church in that place is designated by the name of that locality. Even toward the end of the first century, when the Lord Jesus instructed the Apostle John to write to the seven churches in Asia Minor, they were still addressed by their local names. For nearly fifty years after coming to faith, I firmly believed that the locality was the basis for establishing the church; I even authored a book titled *The Truth and Practice of the Church*, which included chapters discussing "The Ground and Conditions for Establishing the Church" and "Issues in Practicing the Church Ground," vigorously defending this belief. However, in the last ten or twenty years, through my interactions with those who insist on the "local ground," I have gradually discovered several problematic aspects that warrant critical examination, leading me to harbor reservations.

II. The "Local Ground of the Church" Is Not a Biblical Truth

A thorough search of the entire Bible reveals no teaching regarding the truth of a "local ground of the church." Brother Watchman Nee advocated the "local ground of the church," positing that having only one church in a locality was necessary to bear witness to Christian unity before the world; however, this view risks confusing cause and effect or putting the cart before the horse. Personally, I believe that the "brotherly love" taught by the Lord Jesus (John 13:24–25) and the "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit" taught by the Apostle Paul (Ephesians 4:3) are the true sources of unity. The concept of "one church per locality" is, at best, merely an outward manifestation of genuine unity; it cannot be regarded as the fundamental cause of that unity.

III. The "Local Ground of the Church" Is Merely a Factual Example in the Bible

Just like the practice of "having all things in common" (Acts 2:44–45), the pattern of "one church per locality" serves as a fine example from the early church. The issue, however, is that while the

example is excellent, the fallen and corrupt nature of the "old man" in believers makes it difficult to emulate. The fine example of "holding all things in common" was soon undermined by Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–3). Although the Bible records no further instances, the subsequent poverty and destitution of the Jerusalem church clearly demonstrate the failure of this practice. Similarly, despite the noble intentions behind China's "Jesus Family" movement, it too ultimately failed. Likewise, while the ideal of "one church per locality" is admirable, it has been corrupted by human nature. Two thousand years of church history confirm that this position is unsustainable.

IV. The "Local Church Ground" Is Not the Lord's Recovery

Today, a certain group of believers loudly proclaims "the Lord's recovery," using the "local Church Ground" as the hallmark of this restoration. In reality, however, they have merely restored the outward name of the church without recovering the inner reality of church unity. Among those who exalt the "local Church Ground," factionalism and divisiveness have grown increasingly rampant—leading to endless splintering—a truly lamentable state of affairs. Some in this group have registered with the government in various locations under the name "Church in [City Name]" without actually having a congregation to meet. What is touted as "the Lord's recovery" has devolved into a sectarian clique; it is no wonder many preachers mock them, saying, "They display a more sectarian spirit than the denominations they criticize."

V. The "Local Church Ground" Is, in Reality, an Administrative Stance

Ultimately, the "local Church Ground" is concerned with the church's governance structure—specifically, who (or which group) establishes and manages the church. On the surface, the rhetoric sounds appealing: merging various local church groups into a single church and allowing others to serve as elders. In practice, however, no one is ever willing to relinquish their established "power and position" to another. Throughout more than half a century of "local church" history—spanning mainland China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Europe, and the Americas—instances of existing "local churches" splitting apart have been incessant. The underlying cause is usually a dispute over which leader to follow; under the guise of the "local Church Ground," the real struggle is over control and allegiance.

VI. The Absurdity and Impracticality of Local Church Boundaries

In the early days of the church, apart from the Jerusalem church, local congregations rarely exceeded a few hundred members; their scope was defined by city walls, making gatherings and

fellowship among members relatively convenient. Today, however, metropolises often have populations in the tens of millions and cover areas ranging from hundreds to thousands of square kilometers; attempting to force believers into a single administrative system under such conditions is truly impractical. Even more absurd is the notion that the scope of the heavenly church shifts whenever worldly administrative boundaries are redrawn. Churches were originally established based on where people lived—even a single village could have its own church—yet today, constant restructuring and reorganization for the sake of a "name" is entirely unnecessary. Is it impossible for smaller administrative units—such as cities, districts, towns, neighborhoods, townships, or villages within a centrally administered municipality or a province-level city—to have a genuinely local church? It is baffling to see existing churches dissolved and merged into massive congregations simply to share a common name, only to be placed under a new team of elders who are too distant to provide effective oversight, resulting in a host of management problems.

VII. The "Local Church Ground" Disregards the Sovereignty of the Holy Spirit

The "Church Ground" advocated by Brother Watchman Nee encompasses not only local boundaries but also the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit; in fact, the latter is far more important than the former. Yet, the vast majority of church leaders who insist on the "local Church Ground" prioritize the "local position" while disregarding the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Within the churches they control, they act with shocking audacity—arbitrarily ostracizing those they dislike, suspending their ministries, barring them from partaking of the bread and cup, or outright expelling them from the church—without the slightest regard for whether they are grieving the Holy Spirit. This behavior is prevalent among the co-workers and elders under Witness Lee, as well as among those who have left his circle; the latter are no better than the former. Alas! The "local Church Ground" has become a pretext and a shield for these individuals to act however they please within their own churches.

VIII. Those who uphold (or appropriate) the "local Church Ground" assert that they alone constitute the church

In the early stages of the "local Church Ground" movement, it was still acknowledged that the church encompassed all true believers in Christ, and that the group itself was merely a part of the church—standing on the correct position on behalf of all Christians. Unfortunately, within just a few decades, a mindset was imperceptibly introduced holding that *they alone* were the church.

Meanwhile, the multitude of other so-called Christian churches and believers were viewed as having degenerated into a pitiful "Christianity"; ordinary Christians were regarded as merely nominal believers, treated with less warmth than even pagans or non-believers. These adherents of the so-called "Local Church" viewed themselves as the "Church of Philadelphia," while regarding other Christian churches as having fallen into the state of the "Church of Laodicea." They believed that simply by remaining within the "Local Church," one became an overcomer destined to reign with Christ for a thousand years. Such an attitude—exalting oneself while despising others—is perhaps even worse than that found among the people of the world.

IX. Church unity lies not in labels, but in reality

The original motivation behind the "local Church Ground" was to bear a testimony of "unity" to the world. In reality, however, non-believers have long since ceased to be surprised by the proliferation of churches and their myriad names; they certainly would not conclude that a group is the "united church" simply because they name their church after a specific locality. In the eyes of non-believers, the unity of the church depends not on its name, but on the actual unity demonstrated among its members. Based on my personal visits to churches worldwide over the past thirty years—spanning mainland China, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, Japan, Europe, and the Americas, and covering diverse groups such as the "Assembly Hall" (Juhui Chu), "Local Church" (Zhaohui), "Christian Home," and various denominational bodies—I have observed a distinct pattern. Groups emphasizing the "local Church Ground" tend to have leaders who are quite insular and exclusionary, even if the rank-and-file believers are less sectarian. In contrast, other Christian groups are relatively more open; believers from different backgrounds often meet like old friends, accepting one another with great warmth and virtually no barriers.

X. Abandoning Any Church "Stand" Is the Way to Unity

About a dozen years ago, my wife and I visited a church in Europe. We met with a couple who were elders there: the husband was of German descent and the wife of French descent (both white), while my wife and I are of Asian descent—I am Chinese and she is Japanese. That white couple then took us to visit a Black couple: the husband was of Indian descent and the wife of Ceylonese descent. Three couples, three skin colors, and six ethnic backgrounds—yet during our fellowship, the so-called "stand" was never once mentioned. We enjoyed wonderful fellowship and parted ways in tears, reluctant to say goodbye. Based on my own experiences over the past thirty years, I have reached a conclusion: regardless of the church "stand" you take—whether it is the "local ground" (or local stand), an attachment to a revered spiritual leader,

or a specific biblical truth—the more you emphasize that position, the more you become separated from others, creating a chasm so wide it becomes impossible to bridge. For nearly fifty years, I was stubbornly fixated on the "local ground of the church," only to finally have a sudden realization in the last decade or so. My experience has also made me deeply aware of how difficult it is to break free from the narrow confines of the "local ground" mentality. I feel deep sympathy for brothers and sisters who still hold to this position, yet I also feel powerless to help them; I can only entrust the matter to the Lord through prayer, earnestly asking for His mercy and grace. — Caleb Huang